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**Intellectuality, Rationality, and Awareness  
in the Poetry of the Mind: An Exploration  
of Philip Larkin's Poetry**

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Thesis submitted for Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

Department of English Studies

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2016

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## Abstract

This thesis bases its argument on the notion that Philip Larkin's poetry addresses intellectual and philosophical issues in a way that reflects a profound engagement of the poet's mind with the world around him. His poetry is often described as direct, transparent, and lucid, but it also harbours esoteric areas and obscurities of thought. The thesis argues that Larkin's work is preoccupied with fathoming out mental and psychological profundities, and that it tends to philosophise and theorise its own intellectual procedures as it handles and sifts the seemingly everyday commonalities. The poems do not confine themselves to the literality and immediacy of a particular theme, but strive to capture unanticipated contours of thought and contemplation. Larkin's poetry invokes and triggers a pursuit of underlying perception, enlightenment, and knowledge, and aspires to go beyond that to achieve a sense of wonder and discovery. Hence, a Larkin poem cannot be read linearly without sacrificing what stirs deep in the chosen vocabulary and in the rhetorical and syntactical twists and contortions through which the poems attain their intellectual and meditative impact. Logic and rationality are sometimes enlisted to aid the intellectual quests that Larkin's poetical personae find themselves engaged in. Imagination, dream, and speculation prevail throughout poems in which the poet seeks to develop an awareness of and understanding of our existential predicament.

The study traces the various elements and aspects of this involvement in thought and introspection in Larkin's poetry from the very early juvenilia through his first published collection *The North Ship* (1945), all the way across his mature collections, *The Less Deceived* (1955), *The Whitsun Weddings* (1965), and *High Windows* (1974), to his later and posthumous poems. Each of the above collections is researched in depth across six chapters. The thesis includes an introduction in which the notion of the poetry of the mind is profiled, and the ways it applies to Larkin's poetry are delineated. It concludes with a coda which reflects upon the main findings of the study.

## **Declaration, Statement of Copyright, and Acknowledgements**

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*To My Family*

## Introduction

### I

One of the criticisms levelled against Larkin as a poet is his ‘empiricism, his unwillingness to probe beneath the surface’, which is indexical, according to Graham Holderness, of ‘the limitations of his world-view and of his poetry’.<sup>1</sup> In the late 1950s, Charles Tomlinson talked about Larkin’s achievement being ‘within its limits, a creditable one’ albeit ‘its intense parochialism.’<sup>2</sup> Soon, epithets like narrow, provincial, English, ordinary, anti-intellectual, not to mention genteel (after A. Alvarez’s ‘gentility’)<sup>3</sup> were the key terms in the critical assessment of Larkin’s poetry. His poetry was seen to demonstrate ‘the deficiencies of the British imagination’, which waived ‘the adventurous movements and developments in American poetry.’<sup>4</sup> Besides being too English, the poems themselves have been judged as explicit, transparent, and text-contained, probably in tribute to his ‘unwillingness to probe beneath the surface’, quoted above. Paradoxically, this alleged poetical opacity is almost self-earned for Larkin himself contributed to it, dismissing any attempt to read between the lines, affirming ‘when you’ve read a poem, that’s it, it’s all quite clear what it means.’ Likewise, with a Larkin poem, ‘no marginal annotation will help’ for ‘modern criticism thrives on the difficult – either on explaining the difficult or explaining that what seemed straightforward is in fact difficult’.<sup>5</sup> He further theorised: ‘I write poems to preserve things I have seen/thought/felt (if I may so indicate a composite and complex experience)... I feel that my prime responsibility is to the experience itself,

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<sup>1</sup> Graham Holderness, ‘Philip Larkin: the Limit of Experience’, in *Critical Essays on Philip Larkin: The Poems*, eds. Linda Cookson and Bryan Loughrey (London: Longman, 1989), 106-14, at p. 113. Holderness was discussing ‘Sunny Prestatyn’ (*The Whitsun Weddings*).

<sup>2</sup> Charles Tomlinson, ‘Middlebrow Muse’, *Essays in Criticism*, VII/ii (1957), 208-17, at p. 214.

<sup>3</sup> A. Alvarez, ‘The New Poetry or Beyond the Gentility Principle’, in *The New Poetry*, ed. A. Alvarez (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1962), pp. 21-32.

<sup>4</sup> Simon Petch, *The Art of Philip Larkin* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1981), pp.1, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Philip Larkin, *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), pp. 54, 83, 168.

which I am trying to keep from oblivion for its own sake.’<sup>6</sup> By sleight of hand, Larkin has managed to convey the ‘composite and complex experience’ with seeming simplicity and seeming effortlessness. And despite hostile criticism, he is pronounced as one of the ‘foremost representatives’ of ‘a canon’ of poetry that ‘had developed in the 1950s and 1960s’.<sup>7</sup> This study neither intends to make his poems look more difficult than they really are, nor strip them of their straightforwardness. Larkin’s poems are investigated as experiences processed through and remodelled by a mentality that happens to be volatile and sophisticated, even though its owner, being the central consciousness in the poem, is meant to look ordinary, common, naive, or stereotypical. Iceberg-like, the poems go deep and delve into experience. They do not merely scratch the surface or lightly submit their polemics, but rather operate intellectually and ingeniously.

The champions of twentieth-century modernism, Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, hailed a poetry of intellectual complexity and recondite obscurity, drawing on classical mythology, subliminal cogitations, foreign languages and cultures, and exotic environments. Larkin did not hide his views, dismissing modernism as an ‘aberration’ and ‘a loop-line’ that led poetry ‘away from the general reader.’<sup>8</sup> And it felt like it was his task, even his pleasure, to bring poetry back to the thresholds of the readers. The ‘prescribed’ poetical formulae, which equate ‘novelty’ with ‘obliquity’, to use Robert Conquest’s terminology, attracted Larkin less and less as his poetical self evolved.<sup>9</sup> For Larkin, ‘mystery means ignorance or hokum, neither fashionable qualities.’<sup>10</sup> By the same token, poetry as part of a ‘critical industry which is concerned with culture in the abstract’, as led

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<sup>6</sup> Philip Larkin, *Required Writing*, p. 79.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Crozier, ‘Thrills and Frills: Poetry as Figures of Empirical Lyricism’, in *Society and Literature 1945-1970*, ed. Alan Sinfield (London: Methuen, 1983), 199-234; ‘Resting on Laurels’, in *British Culture of the Postwar: An Introduction to Literature and Society 1945-1999*, eds. Alistair Davies and Alan Sinfield (London: Routledge, 2000), 192-204, at p. 193.

<sup>8</sup> Philip Larkin, *Required Writing*, p. 216.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Conquest, *New Lines II* (London: Macmillan, 1963), pp. xiii, xxi, xxiii.

<sup>10</sup> Philip Larkin, *Required Writing*, p. 84.



by Eliot and Pound, held no attraction for him.<sup>11</sup> He took to task poetry written to appeal to academic critical circles, which has to be over-abstruse to invite or indeed justify critical exegesis. The same applies to the modernist inclination to free verse, which he basically chose to ignore, for ‘Larkin is one of the most superbly talented practitioners of English poetry’ and his use of rhyme, metre, and stanzaic patterns ‘often surpasses the skills of his most esteemed Renaissance predecessors’ and ‘displays an inventiveness with form’.<sup>12</sup> In this respect, Larkin’s poetry can be described in terms of Eliot’s ‘auditory imagination’ which designates ‘the cultural depth-charges latent in certain words and rhythms’. However, ‘the cadences and vocabulary of his poems are tuned to a rational music.’<sup>13</sup> It is his ‘craftsmanship’ along with ‘accessibility’ and ‘aesthetic conservatism’ that secured his place among the Movement writers, whether he liked it or not.<sup>14</sup>

In all, Larkin seemed to have dispensed with modernist poetic models and made do with materials that may be judged, at face value, ordinary, common, and vernacular. He composed poems in the true spirit of ‘the laureate of the common man’, to quote Herman Peschmann.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, his poetry is stocked with individuals who possess no large-scale impact to recommend them to the bardic realm, but still he managed to spin quotidian legends out of them. It is a manifestation of the influence that Thomas Hardy exerted on ‘his poetry and poetic philosophies.’<sup>16</sup> However, philosophising the quotidian and indeed ‘the ordinary bloke’ was a vogue and an indulgence of ‘the Movement writers’ in ‘*literary* positivism’, the counterpart of ‘anglicized positivism’ being ‘the philosophical temper of the times’. It seems that the choice of commonality was consciously or unconsciously

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<sup>11</sup> Philip Larkin, *Further Requirements: Interviews, Broadcasts, Statements and Book Reviews*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Bradford, *First Boredom, Then Fear: the Life of Philip Larkin* (London: Peter Owen, 2005), p. 19; Alan Brownjohn, *Philip Larkin*, (London: Longman, 1975), p. 24.

<sup>13</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), pp. 155, 146.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Bradford, *First Boredom, Then Fear*, p. 14.

<sup>15</sup> Hermann Peschmann, ‘Philip Larkin: Laureate of the Common Man’, *English*, 24 (1975), 49-58, at p. 49.

<sup>16</sup> Gillian Steinberg, ‘Thomas Hardy and Philip Larkin: Influence, Anxiety, and Personae’, *The Hardy Review*, 17/1 (2015), 49-62, at p. 49.

triggered by and oriented towards new trends in western philosophy.<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, his choice of everyday casual situations on the ideational level in preference to international and colossal events (atomic bomb, concentration camps, gas chambers), popularised a belief in his insularity, political conservatism, and even intellectual mediocrity. His reservation regarding academic intellectual circles, which he worked close to as a librarian, gave the false impression that he detested intellectuality in the abstract, as if he was himself non-intellectual. Ironically, in this regard, Douglas Dunn tells how Larkin the librarian as a poet was rumoured to be unapproachable for ‘he lives the life of the mind’.<sup>18</sup> The intimidating librarian happens to be everyman’s poet!

These practices of his, along with his association with the Movement and his disbelief in ‘tradition’ and ‘myth-kitty’, have not only earned him, in the long run, an anti-modernist reputation, but also categorised his poetry as ‘middlebrow’ or inferior.<sup>19</sup> Misconstrued as lacking in required poetical convolutions, Larkin’s poetry was treated as if it made no or little use of intellectual and philosophical perspectives. Opting for demystification as the prevalent poetical code promulgated an attitude of slightness, disparagement, or even triviality with regard to the tenors the poems enclose. However, later criticism redressed the situation and set the record straight, for evidence from the poems proves the inaccuracy, if not indeed falsity, of the earlier assessments. Further, ‘since the 1950s’, Movement literature has been deemed as embracing ‘a more complex network of ideological, political, and cultural doctrines’.<sup>20</sup> Murphy reminisces about the poetry of the 1950s and outlines Larkin’s contribution:

In reaction against the modernist apocalyptic visionary obfuscation of the Forties, against the worst of Dylan Thomas, George Barker, David Gascoyne,

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<sup>17</sup> Colin McGinn, ‘Philosophy and Literature in the 1950s: the Rise of the “Ordinary Bloke”’, in *The Movement Reconsidered: Essays on Larkin, Amis, Gunn, Davie, and Their Contemporaries*, ed. Zachary Leader (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 123-38, pp. 131, 126.

<sup>18</sup> Douglas Dunn, ‘Memoirs of the Brynmour Jones Library’, in *Larkin at Sixty*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), 53-60, at p. 53.

<sup>19</sup> Philip Larkin, *Required Writing*, p. 79; Charles Tomlinson, ‘Middlebrow Muse’.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Bradford, *First Boredom, Then Fear*, p. 14.

or W S Graham, their [university wits] poetry at best asserted rigorous intellectual clarity, astringent wit, classical regularity in metre and rhyme, with blunt, disillusioned post-war common sense. It was a literary form of post-war reconstruction. Larkin stood out by combining those qualities with his original brand of metaphysical vision.<sup>21</sup>

Larkin's poetical worlds are far from being plain, simple, or mediocre; it is only that 'our recognition of the subjects he writes about renders the depths of the poet's perceptions accessible to us.'<sup>22</sup> This accessibility operates empathetically 'as if our own best thoughts had been given their most concise possible expression.'<sup>23</sup> The poems have a dangerous veneer of familiarity clinging to them, which may be mistaken for ordinariness. For Larkin, 'poetry is an affair of sanity, of seeing things as they are', but without sacrificing the sinuousness and intricacy which ensure that a poem does not cease to appeal to readers time and time again.<sup>24</sup> He seemed to be 'willing to see that art needs to be both immediate and profound, to have elements of obviousness as well as obscurity' operating simultaneously.<sup>25</sup> Practicing what he preached, Larkin composed poems with regard to what impinged on his consciousness and engaged his attentiveness, and he remained faithful to a doctrine of candour matted with perceptive shrewdness and wit.

Larkin is not as entirely anti-modern as he liked to claim; he 'is a more adventurous, challenging and provocatively "modern" writer than his critics, and some of his admirers, have been prepared to concede.'<sup>26</sup> From *The North Ship* to *High Windows*, Larkin developed a poetics that made full use of 'the devices associated with Modernist experimentation: linguistic strangeness, self-conscious literariness, radical self-questioning, sudden shifts of voice and register, complex viewpoints and perspectives, and

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<sup>21</sup> Richard Murphy, 'Crucial Collections: W. B. Yeats, *Last Poems and Plays*, and Philip Larkin, *The Less Deceived*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, 86 (2006), 70-2, at pp. 71-2.

<sup>22</sup> Simon Petch, *The Art of Philip Larkin*, p. 85.

<sup>23</sup> Clive James, 'On His Wit', in *Larkin at Sixty*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), 98-108, at p. 107.

<sup>24</sup> *Philip Larkin, Required Writing*, p. 197.

<sup>25</sup> Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 57.

<sup>26</sup> Andrew Swarbrick, *Out of Reach: the Poetry of Philip Larkin* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), p. 1.

symbolist intensity.’<sup>27</sup> Thus, Larkin’s indulgence in symbolism, as elaborated on by Barabra Everett and Raphaël Ingelbien, exposes a proclivity to one major modernist practice, which endorses esoteric and cryptic temperaments. Larkin’s ‘use of persona, speaker, or mask’ strengthens his link with ‘modernist technique’.<sup>28</sup> His poetry is found to lend itself to existential and deconstructionist readings to which John Osborne’s *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence: A Case of Wrongful Conviction* (2008) and *Radical Larkin: Seven Types of Technical Mastery* (2014) bear witness. Larkin’s poetry is even read through the lenses of ‘the philosophy and art of the Surrealists, including the work of some of the movement’s most renowned practitioners: André Breton, Salvador Dalí, and René Magritte.’<sup>29</sup> These and many other scholastic studies, such as Booth’s, Regan’s, Bradford’s, or Whalen’s, prove that Larkin’s poetry is not amiss in intellectuality, transcendence, or complexity.

Notwithstanding the profound and insightful analyses offered by Larkin scholarship, the workings of the mind as a central consciousness and poetical apparatus have not yet been traced. Therefore, the intellectual and introspective domains of Larkin’s poetry invite more systematic and detailed exploration. This study endeavours to investigate its ratiocinations, pinning down and identifying its pensive, rational, and philosophical contours. The poems are intellectually analysed as reflections on surreptitious ideological concerns, as well as the poet’s personal attitudes and life philosophies. In consequence, his poetry is probed as a rich and colourful source of perception, psychological expedition, and consciously constructed vehicle of thought, intended to provoke the mind and spur awareness and knowledge. Larkin wrote a ‘type of poem’, according to David Trotter, that ‘tries to define the relation between the actions and

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<sup>27</sup> Stephen Regan, ‘Philip Larkin: a Late Modern Poet’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry*, ed. Neil Corcoran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 147-58, at p. 149.

<sup>28</sup> Simon Petch, *The Art of Philip Larkin*, p. 9.

<sup>29</sup> Sam Perry, “‘Only in Dreams’: Philip Larkin and Surrealism”, *English*, 59/224 (2010), 95-119, at p. 95.

perceptions of a narrator, and the social and cultural significance of the events he witnesses'.<sup>30</sup> The retrospective, ruminative, and dialectical magnitudes of this poetry need to be pried open as Larkin's diverse speakers often experiment with potentialities, weigh possibilities, and pit adverse views and hypotheses against each other. The furtive and private signature has not failed to introduce arguments that bulk large in their appeal. A Larkin poem should be studied and interpreted for its ideational nodes around which tentative theories are constructed.

The poem may trespass on esoteric and equivocal territories of a mental and psychological nature which occasionally snap shut and remain beyond reach under the disguise of simplicity and straightforwardness. The polemic of a Larkin poem emanates from the impregnability of what seems to be simple and ordinary at face value. Behind the presumptuously average façade, there abide sophistication and profundity that surprise and puzzle at the same time. Though Larkin focalises the ordinary in his poetry, it is usually through the eyes of 'a provincial gentleman intellectual'.<sup>31</sup> Accordingly, the so-called commonality is processed through a complex and sophisticated mentality and reshaped via a subtle consciousness. In 'Dockery and Son', for instance, a tedious visit to his former dorms causes the narrator-traveller to philosophise on life and existence, reflect on culture and tradition, and pass a verdict against innate hereditary despotism to which humanity is yoked, all at one go. The physical, geographical journey goes hand in hand with an intellectual and subliminal one. The final outcome is that both the narrating persona and the reader grow wiser, more mature, and better informed about the world and the self.

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<sup>30</sup> David Trotter, *The Making of the Reader: Language and Subjectivity in Modern American, English and Irish Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 177.

<sup>31</sup> J. R. Watson, 'The Other Larkin', *Critical Quarterly*, 17 (1975), 347-60, at p. 347.

## II

Though Larkin was not inclined to theorise on poetry, he did not refrain from offering insights of a philosophical nature on the subject. On the one hand, Larkin wrote to D. J. Enright of his reservation in respect of ‘any abstract views on poetry’, which culminates in finding ‘theorizing on the subject’ of ‘no use’ to him ‘as writer’.<sup>32</sup> On the other, his criticism and reviews often introduce ideas that could have developed into theories had he not kept them in check. His comments on poetry show a ‘self-conscious attempt to write a new poetry where “every poem must be its own sole created universe”, is itself a literary manifesto.’<sup>33</sup> In ‘The Pleasure Principle’, for instance, he elaborated on the three-stage process of writing a poem which originates as ‘an emotional concept’, then becomes ‘a verbal device’, and then has readers ‘setting off the device and recreating in themselves’ the emotion.<sup>34</sup> Relevant to the genesis of the poem, he confesses to Sutton: ‘for me, a poem is the crossroads of my thoughts, my feelings, my imaginings, my wishes, & my verbal sense: normally these run parallel. . . . Often two or more cross ... but only when all cross at one point do you get a poem’.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, Larkin’s major poems, such as ‘Church Going’ or ‘The Whitsun Weddings’, are explorations of this blending and crossing of consciousnesses and mentalities. A poem of this calibre acts as a dynamic, mobile node of thoughts and philosophies; it constantly mutates and spills over into what comes across it. Larkin’s deliberations on poetry prove the vitality of his poetical intuition and awareness of the thought processes beneath creativity. His poetic achievement portrays a very meticulous and insightful practitioner for whom writing is ‘a process consciously controlled, while the function of rhetorical devices is seen as instrumental to the process

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<sup>32</sup> Philip Larkin, *Required Writing*, p. 79.

<sup>33</sup> Michael O’Neill and Madeleine Callaghan, ‘Post-War poetry: featureless morning, featureless night Philip Larkin and the movement’, in *Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poetry: Hardy to Mahon*, eds. Michael O’Neill and Madeleine Callaghan (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 149-54, at p. 151 .

<sup>34</sup> Philip Larkin, *Required Writing*, pp. 79, 80.

<sup>35</sup> Anthony Thwaite (ed.), *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin: 1940-1985* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), p. 173.

rather than of its essence', with 'subject, narrative, conscious thought, declarative statement and particular detail' all collaborating to attain the desired effect.<sup>36</sup> Larkin's poems pivot around that conscious thought; he 'not only seems very much aware of what is going on in his poems, but... he favours a type of writing in which this is the case', though he managed to disguise his 'very artful poetic constructs...to appear casual.'<sup>37</sup> Writing to an American student, Larkin dated what he described as 'a more rational approach, less hysterical and emphatic' to have asserted itself after *The North Ship* when he changed allegiances from Yeats to Hardy.<sup>38</sup> His approach relies heavily on creating 'centres of consciousness' typified by his many poetical personae through which Larkin explored 'the multiple concerns of his art.'<sup>39</sup> In this light, it is no wonder that Larkin is hailed as 'the poet of rational light, a light that has its own luminous beauty but which has also the effect of exposing clearly the truths which it touches.'<sup>40</sup> In Larkin's poetry, Bateson remarks, 'the emotional crises, the sentimental outpours, and the aesthetic titillations are all, one feels, under control. They have not been denied or repressed, they are still there – but included and co-ordinated in a rational system of human values and obligations.'<sup>41</sup>

Hostile to 'classical myth-kitty', Larkin had to create from scratch his own mythical pantheon. It is noteworthy that the lyric, though 'articulated in the first person', subsumes 'a complexity of the enunciative apparatus' and not a mere 'straightforward statement by the speaker.'<sup>42</sup> This is how Larkin probably constructed his masks, 'as the poetic expression of that feature in the personality which creates a temporary, conscious and artificial unity between the internal self and an external self, in the process of

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<sup>36</sup> A. T. Tolley, *Larkin at Work: A Study of Larkin's Mode of Composition as Seen in his Workbooks* (Hull: University of Hull Press, 1997), pp. 178-9.

<sup>37</sup> A. T. Tolley, *Larkin at Work*, p. 182.

<sup>38</sup> David Timms, *Philip Larkin* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1973), p. 55.

<sup>39</sup> Terry Whalen, *Philip Larkin and English Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1986), p. 10.

<sup>40</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations*, p. 164.

<sup>41</sup> F. W. Bateson, 'Auden's (and Empson's) Heirs', *Essays in Criticism*, 7 (1957), 76-80, at pp. 79-80.

<sup>42</sup> Jonathan Culler, *Theory of Lyric* (Cambridge and Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 16.

constructing the poet's own identity.'<sup>43</sup> William May designates this Larkinesque tactic as 'a lyrical mode where the self is a performance, a mask, or a process of public subterfuge.'<sup>44</sup> Creating his speakers, Larkin took to wearing 'masks', 'not in the self-conscious way of for instance, 'the existentialist thinker' Søren Kierkegaard 'with his use of various pseudonyms'<sup>45</sup>, but in a fashion that yields 'self-caricature' and displays his witty and satiric aptitude.<sup>46</sup> Despite his frequent use of the first person pronoun, Larkin is one of the poets who 'reposition or codify the speaking "I" in their poems, teasing us with or removing the possibility of authorial identification.'<sup>47</sup> To achieve the effect of natural grace, 'Larkin slid in and out of different verbal stances, taking on the mental attributes and bundles of attributes of different people if only for half a sentence, or a snatch of talk.'<sup>48</sup> His masks are as various as his poetical personae that capture attention and draw awe and admiration (Dockery, Bleaney, Arnold, to mention just a few) and they are cast dramatically for 'one has to dramatize oneself a little.'<sup>49</sup> Behind the diverse masks, even Alvarez detects a 'witty' though 'provincial outsider who was a good deal cleverer and more perceptive than those on the metropolitan inside.'<sup>50</sup> In the same vein, Gary Day finds Larkin's early poetry replete with 'an awareness of multiplicity, of a plethora of choice, and a wide range of identities.'<sup>51</sup> This very observation applies no less to the later poetry. The medley of voices, which Larkin's poetry embraces, may even be open to gender-neutrality, admitting both masculine and feminine perspectives, though this study discusses

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<sup>43</sup> István D. Rácz, 'Agnosticism, Masks and Monologues in Philip Larkin', *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)*, 1/ 2 (1995), 93-120, at p. 93.

<sup>44</sup> William May, *Postwar Literature 1950-1990* (Harlow: Longman, 2010), p. 82.

<sup>45</sup> Richard Palmer, *Such Deliberate Disguises: the Art of Philip Larkin* (London: Continuum, 2008), p. xiv.

<sup>46</sup> Charles Tomlinson, 'Middlebrow Muse', p. 214.

<sup>47</sup> William May, *Postwar Literature*, p. 82.

<sup>48</sup> Jenny Joseph, 'Larkin the Poet: The Old Fools', in *Philip Larkin 1922-1985: a Tribute*, ed. George Hartley (London: the Marvell Press, 1988), 119-25, at p. 124 .

<sup>49</sup> Philip Larkin, *Further Requirements*, p. 23.

<sup>50</sup> A. Alvarez, *Beyond All This Fiddle* (London: Allen Lane, 1968), p. 86.

<sup>51</sup> Gary Day, ' "Never Such Innocence Again": the Poetry of Philip Larkin', in *British Poetry from the 1950s to the 1990s*, eds. Gary Day and Brian Docherty (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), 33-47, at p. 44.



poems in terms of the masculine voice for mere convenience unless the poem states otherwise, as in 'Wedding-Wind' or 'Love Songs in Age'.<sup>52</sup>

Hence, claiming that 'myth is a fundamental property in Larkin's work' is not a far cry from reality, especially with the observation that the Larkinesque myth 'operates at a level and in a fashion utterly distinct'; and though labelled 'as the poet of the quotidian, Larkin composed poetry that 'is at root driven by a mythic determination to shape his identity as an artist'.<sup>53</sup> If Larkin is 'as manipulative as Pope', then his poems are indeed strategic arguments 'to *persuade* his reader into accepting a poem's moral point of view.'<sup>54</sup> In his own unaffected ways, Larkin created poems as loci of intellectual explorations which leave the door wide open before various interpretations and profound assumptions, a view he himself confirmed when he talked about the poem being read 'ad infinitum' and inexhaustible.<sup>55</sup> Rereading a poem, in consequence, is an experience of a new discovery, for 'Larkin was sly and perverse, and the poems that issue from his perversity are full of sly tricks.'<sup>56</sup> Therefore, Larkin's poetry is teleologically intriguing and its 'discovery', in Dawson's words, is found to be intellectually exciting.<sup>57</sup> Larkin's poems infiltrate intellectual worlds as they endeavour to hypostatise the mind; they synthesise and breathe life into oneiric and abstract thoughts, and approach or even capture cognition and thought processes. Each and every poem aspires to arrest a thought or set of thoughts, which may be simplified and condensed in a series of reflections or contemplations. In the thought process, the mind is duly engaged, experimenting with options and possibilities, reasoning, rationalising, and puzzling among many others.

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<sup>52</sup> See John Osborne's *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence: A Case of Wrongful Conviction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) and *Radical Larkin: Seven Types of Technical Mastery* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>53</sup> Richard Palmer, *Such Deliberate Disguises: the Art of Philip Larkin* (London: Continuum, 2008), p. xiv.

<sup>54</sup> Simon Petch, *The Art of Philip Larkin*, p. 85.

<sup>55</sup> Philip Larkin, *Further Requirements*, p. 106.

<sup>56</sup> James Fenton, *The Strength of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 47.

<sup>57</sup> S. W. Dawson, 'On Re-Reading *The Less Deceived*', in *Philip Larkin 1922-1985: a Tribute*, ed. George Hartley (London: The Marvell Press, 1988), pp. 178-83, p. 179.

Thus, the poem is endowed with evocative/provocative qualities that osmose to a far wider influence; 'if Auden was right about the test of successful writing being how often the reader thinks of it', as James postulated, 'Larkin passed long ago.'<sup>58</sup> Larkin's poetry exposes these thought processes and typifies the mind's inquisitiveness and its quest to find solutions, answers, and rationales to the kinds of intellectual predicament that thinking propagates and sustains. It matters very little whether the poem chooses, as its spring-board, to explore esoteric territories or locks itself within familiar or ordinary everyman's grounds since it does so by invoking philosophical and meditative moods and by turning the mind inside out. A Larkin poem does not stay bound in its swaddling clothes, but walks out into the inexhaustible, subliminal, and occasionally galactic infinity of a rich imagination. Even when the poem seems to be the least philosophical (as most of his poems would seem at first glance), still the conscious treatment of the subject and the subtle awareness that evolves and develops in consequence are indexical of the intellectual effort exerted, the perceptive and psychic areas skirted and chartered, and the knowledge gleaned. Further, his poetry endeavours to assess and reappraise through adopting 'a pattern of description-plus-evaluation' where 'it is nearly always the summarising argument which holds the poem together.'<sup>59</sup> A poem may polarise a theme that is presumptuously mundane or purely materialistic and hence does not make philosophical demands, yet it excels in exploring what lies behind secularity and physicality as happens in 'High Windows', which traverses a surreal, azure abstract and reaches for the ineffable.

If 'wit', 'irony', and 'ambiguity' according to Eliot, Richards, and Empson respectively, 'though not exactly equivalent concepts', are named as the basis of 'the intellectualist school' as Thurley intimates, then Larkin's poetry abounds in

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<sup>58</sup> Clive James, 'On His Wit', p. 107.

<sup>59</sup> Colin Falck, 'Philip Larkin', in *The Modern Poet: Essays from the Review*, ed. Ian Hamilton (London: MacDonald, 1968), 101-10, at p. 106.

intellectuality.<sup>60</sup> He rarely dispensed with wit, and in Larkin's mature poetry after *The North Ship*, 'the jokes on their own would be enough to tell you that wit is alive and working.'<sup>61</sup> On his part, Larkin trusted 'cynicism' as a vehicle that 'would stand him in better stead than the cloudy symbolism'.<sup>62</sup> He is acknowledged as 'a superb mimic on the paper witty with some of the old meanings of the word in it.'<sup>63</sup> He wears the mask of a 'witty and amiable snowman...with a clown's rueful sense of himself'.<sup>64</sup> Larkin wrote poems that vividly suggest 'the spoken language of the time with a remarkable and unemphatic play of wit, such as to remind one of Eliot's phrase: "a tough reasonableness beneath the slight lyric grace"'.<sup>65</sup> In dubbing Larkin's poetry as '*all witty*', Clive James argues that Larkin's linguistic choices evoke the readers' intelligence and comprehension. His poems contain 'fragments that make us laugh', but also those 'we constantly recall with a welcome sense of communion'.<sup>66</sup> Larkin's poetry emerges, according to Douglas Dunn, as 'vernacular in deadly earnest, but buoying its profundity on humour'.<sup>67</sup> Larkin is endowed with a 'passion to understand his experience without losing his sense of its oddity, its paradox and its particularity', a matter that earns him a place 'in the company of the "line of wit"'.<sup>68</sup> His intensive use of wit and irony is paired with his preference for metaphor and imagery not to mention his resort to allegory, and even symbolism. Poems such as 'Dry-Point', 'Absences', 'Toads', 'At Grass', 'The Whitsun Weddings', 'The Old Fools', 'High Windows', 'Aubade', and 'The Winter Palace', to mention a few, are rich in metaphorical/symbolic/allegorical dimensions, which give many a poem its unique

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<sup>60</sup> Geoffrey Thurley, *The Ironic Harvest: English Poetry in the Twentieth Century* (London: Edward Arnold, 1974), pp. 5-6.

<sup>61</sup> Clive James, 'On His Wit', p. 106.

<sup>62</sup> Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, p. 60.

<sup>63</sup> Jenny Joseph, 'Larkin the Poet', p. 124.

<sup>64</sup> Calvin Bedient, *Eight Contemporary Poets* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 70.

<sup>65</sup> S. W. Dawson, 'On Re-Reading *The Less Deceived*', p. 179.

<sup>66</sup> Clive James, 'On His Wit', p. 106.

<sup>67</sup> Douglas Dunn, *Under the Influence: Douglas Dunn on Philip Larkin* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1987), p. 12.

<sup>68</sup> S. W. Dawson, 'On Re-Reading *The Less Deceived*', p. 180.

signature. Larkin did not refrain from putting into use whatever served his purposes and helped the poem attain the targeted grace.

Larkin's choice of themes comes in line with his psychological and intellectual preoccupations, which are neither insular, nor purely personal. It is only that 'early affirmative critics' seemed 'to carve a poet of autobiographical directness out of highly ambiguous verse.'<sup>69</sup> This 'biographical fallacy' is pitted against Larkin's endeavour 'to develop a more sophisticated theoretical position' that embodies 'his verse practice, which was not essentially autobiographical.'<sup>70</sup> The questions of being and non-being seem to be handled via a personal, subjective perspective. On the surface, the voice is confiding, the argument introverted, and the contemplation private. But upon a closer look, the trajectory of the appeal is impersonal and far-reaching. The private tones with which 'I Remember, I Remember' or 'This Be the Verse' commence soon mutate to embrace universal and transcendental statements, not only about childhood and parenthood (the primary thematic catalysts of the two poems respectively), but also about human existence in its entirety.

Rowland argues that Larkin's writings expose 'his engagement with wider ideologies that go beyond the level of authorial intention— such as that of humanism' and that Larkin's poetry relies on a 'humanist dialectic', which reveals 'a more abstract notion of non-being.'<sup>71</sup> His anxiety in regard to existence betrays an almost scholarly existentialistic commitment. Within his own existentialist framework, 'Larkin is examining the various modes of existence of contemporary man and developing a philosophy of life.'<sup>72</sup> Considering that 'the period when Larkin was developing his mature style was one when Existentialism was hegemonic in philosophy and literary Modernism', it is by no

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<sup>69</sup> John Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, p. 19.

<sup>70</sup> John Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, p. 19.

<sup>71</sup> Antony Rowland, " 'All Is Not Dead': Philip Larkin, Humanism and Class", *Critical Survey*, 10/ 2 (1998), 1-14, at pp. 1, 5.

<sup>72</sup> Huafu Paul Bao, 'The Existential Aspects of Philip Larkin's Poetry', *University of Mississippi Studies in English*, 9 (1991), 42-54, at p. 42.

means far-fetched to read Larkin's poetry from existentialistic perspectives to the point that 'if we fillet his *oeuvre* in the appropriate manner, we can construct a Larkin as systematically existential as Kafka, Sartre or Camus.'<sup>73</sup> In a similar vein, Booth discusses many of Larkin's poems in terms of 'existential plight', 'existential antithesis', 'existential vision', 'existential despair' and so on.<sup>74</sup> His treatment of time in such poems as 'Next, Please', 'Vers de Société', 'The View', and 'The Mower' is existentialism proper. Death as the obliterator of being stands out as the unsurpassable, undeniable truth, which the mind bows before in despair and exasperation. 'Ambulances', 'The Building', 'The Winter Palace', and 'Aubade', for instance, relay the terror of dying and the mysteries of non-existence. Still within the existential domain, Larkin dives into the polemic of faith in 'Church Going' to resolve it in terms of existential and cultural arguments. The same applies to 'The Whitsun Weddings', in which marriage, being itself a source of scepticism, is endorsed as a cultural prerogative and mandate. Likewise, Larkin's preoccupation with selfhood, identity, and the multiple or dialectical consciousness runs deep in such poems as 'Mr Bleaney', 'Self is the Man', 'Maiden Name', and 'Dockery and Son'. Culture, tradition, and social heritage shape and enrich such poems as 'The Whitsun Weddings', 'Show Saturday', 'Afternoons', 'To the Sea', among many others. Old age and mental deterioration imprint on 'The Old Fools'; alienation and non-conformism storm 'Places, Loved Ones' and 'The Importance of Elsewhere'; work as a yardstick of being asserts itself in the 'Toads' poems and 'Livings'. Man's immature dreams of romance and amorous exploits rule over, for instance, 'Sunny Prestatyn', 'Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album', and 'Breadfruit'. Choice, decision making, indecision, and angst, all as one package, make their way to 'Mr Bleaney', 'I Remember, I Remember', 'The Life with a Hole in it', and many others. Larkin may be not a systematic existentialist

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<sup>73</sup> John Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, pp. 88, 89.

<sup>74</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: The Poet's Plight* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 31, 114, 117, 167.

practitioner, yet the arguments of his poems are basically about ‘being’ standing in the face of ‘non-being’, though the combat is intrinsically resolved in favour of the latter. On the whole, Larkin’s poetry offers furtive existential commentaries as it wanders into or even tiptoes around being, non-being, and nihilism via apparent digressions from the main line of thought.

### III

The mind is the origin and linchpin of creativity within whose territories thought takes root. A poem as an expression of thought and incarnation of creative imagination originates in the poet’s mind and aspires to cut across to other minds:

The poem is unique in that the matter of the poem comes from the poet, and the poem is held in the mind, unlike the statue or the painting that exists outside. The poetic artifact is not the written thing, but the written thing can produce the poem in the mind of the reader, though the poet’s penetration into the poem’s meaning can surpass that of the recipient because the poet (in approximation to the divine act of creation) formed the poem within.<sup>75</sup>

Poetry, as one subtle statement of aestheticism, is bound to many mental barometers or in other words finds medium in many intellectual facets, which foster and empower it. The experience which a poem traverses is subject to change and transformation under the influence of the operative aspects of the mental apparatus. Rationality, psychology, spirituality, logic, contemplation, speculation, imagination, and emotionality are all inventoried accordingly among the mind’s myriad and intricate spheres, which shape and model creative thinking. The creative intellect is engaged in all these and further superior latitudes, which are likely to find a fertile soil in creative productivity. It penetrates and sees through chaos, rationalises phenomena, imagines, visualises, works out and suggests solutions, and categorises, as well as recognises, psychological, mystical, spiritual, and emotional embroideries. Poetry mediates between the mind and the world, facilitates apprehension and absorption, whether concrete or abstract, and rivets attention on their

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<sup>75</sup> Raymond Barfield, *The Ancient Quarrel between Philosophy and Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 123.

impact. A poem may expose how the gnomic interiors of the intellect are defragmented and mapped onto more tangible arguments.

Quoting Tennyson's 'The Poet's Mind', where the analysts are warned not to vex the poet's mind with their 'shallow wit', Gregory Tate reports that to the Victorians 'the mind of the poet is too deep to fathom, an ineffable power that defies study and analysis.'<sup>76</sup> The poet's mind, oneiric and gossamer-like, does not lend itself to a one-to-one inspection, nor proves easy to investigate. And the list of what constitutes a poetry of the mind seems to be by no means exhaustive. Tate's introduction to his book offers some half dozen or so areas that summon up the mind as the most active and pivotal arbiter. He discusses the mind in relation to the psychological phenomena, thought processes, philosophical debates, imagination, emotions, introspective analyses, self-scrutiny, and self-analysis. Poetry, in conclusion, mirrors the mind's turbulence and agitation, as well as tranquillity and serenity, i.e., in its most vulnerable but also meritorious phases.<sup>77</sup> The inclusion of emotion reminds one of Wordsworth's identification of 'all good poetry' as 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'; the divorce of the meditative mind from emotion is no longer operative, especially as Wordsworth soon adds:

Poems to which any value can be attached, were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility had also thought long and deeply. For our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings...<sup>78</sup>

Feeling is monitored by thought, though not necessarily curbed, or the mind channels feelings and casts them in thoughts, which themselves take on various and numerous forms. In other words, Eliot's 'unified sensibility' is attained with both 'thought and emotion' operating hand in hand, escaping the notorious 'dissociation of sensibility' where

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<sup>76</sup> Gregory Tate, *The Poet's Mind: the Psychology of Victorian Poetry 1830-1870* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2012), p. 1.

<sup>77</sup> Gregory Tate, *The Poet's Mind*, pp. 1-22.

<sup>78</sup> William Wordsworth and S.T. Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, eds. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (London and New York: Routledge, 1963), p. 237.

‘poets either discoursed about feelings, so diluting their content, or did not think sufficiently about their own overflowing emotions.’<sup>79</sup>

If the unravelling of the poet’s mind is admitted to be a moot pursuit, its inner tapestries may be approached through fitting the available psychological, mental, and philosophical templates to its creative models. Poetry is one of these venues which affords an outlet into the interior sinews of the creative mind. Intellectual inquiries, mental processes, psychological analyses, knowledge, introspective contemplations, mystic questions, awareness, and philosophical arguments are among the coordinates of the poet’s mind that find a platform in poetry. Therefore, it is more convenient to turn the lights off the inner fabric of the mind and swerve towards poetry per se as one of the mind’s most intriguing mirrors. Poetry makes remarkable and intuitive demands on many a cognitive dimension and discipline, for poems and theories are alike, David Bohm pronounces, in that both ‘are insights, acts of perception, rather than hard and fast conclusions’.<sup>80</sup> Poetry, however, handles thoughts and perceptions rather differently in that it ‘deals with thought in a more sensuous and personal way than, for instance, philosophy.’<sup>81</sup> Hence, poetry is philosophy that is oriented towards sensuousness and subjectivity more than the virtual or metaphysical—if one takes sensual to be equivalent to *perceptive*.

Brennecke sums up the difference that sets philosophers apart from poets in that while the former act within the domain of ‘*abstract thought as primarily independent from spatial and temporal manifestations...the poet’s domain is concrete truth as underlying spatial and temporal manifestations.*’ To speak about poetry as a vehicle of truth locates it at the heart of philosophy. The poet and philosopher seem to perform adverse functions, adopting opposed approaches: ‘the philosopher’s usual way of reasoning is to find and

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<sup>79</sup> C. B. Cox & A. E. Dyson, *Modern Poetry: Studies in Practical Criticism* (London: Edward Arnold, 1963), p. 11.

<sup>80</sup> Quoted in John Danvers, *Picturing Mind Paradox, Indeterminacy and Consciousness in Art & Poetry* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006), p. 14.

<sup>81</sup> M. W. Rowe, *Philosophy and Literature*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), p. 165.



state a principle and to evolve from it synthetically a system of ideas; the poet's intellectual process is the reverse; to observe and to describe a concrete condition as the final result of a chain of causes and to resolve it analytically in order to find the underlying principle.'<sup>82</sup> Though poetry is not as speculative as philosophy for Hegel, yet it is 'the most universal teacher of the human race' and it teaches self-knowledge among other things. Lyrical poetry, in particular, detaches itself from 'prosaic consciousness' and 'creates a new poetic world of subjective mediation and feeling'.<sup>83</sup> It seems that subjectivity encompasses and entails imaginative vividness in opposition to desiccated banality. Heidegger, in *Poetry, Language and Thought*, offers cogent reflections on the inseparability of thinking and poetry, using poetry itself to illustrate his point:

The poetic character of thinking is  
still veiled over.

Where it shows itself, it is for a  
long time like the utopism of  
a half-poetic intellect.

But poetry that thinks is in truth  
the topology of Being.

This topology tells Being the  
whereabouts of its actual  
presence. (p. 12)

The opening line characterises thinking as poetry incognito. Once poetry and thought join forces, poetry, thought, and being intermingle. In explanation, Hofstadter formulates the argument that both the poet and the thinker 'of first rank' have essentially the same 'thinking to accomplish... a thinking which has all the purity and thickness and solidity of poetry, and whose saying *is* poetry.'<sup>84</sup> For Heidegger, poetry is stripped of its fanciful, unrealistic garments; it is not 'an aimless imagining of whimsicalities and not a flight of mere notions and fancies into the realm of the unreal.' Poetry and thinking operate hand in

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<sup>82</sup> Ernest Brennecke, *Thomas Hardy's Universe: A Study of a Poet's Mind* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1966), p. 17.

<sup>83</sup> Quoted in Raymond Barfield, *The Ancient Quarrel*, pp. 171, 172.

<sup>84</sup> Albert Hofstadter, 'Introduction', in Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language and Thought*, Trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: HarperPerennial, 1971), pp. x-xi.

hand for, ‘at this moment in the world’s history we have first to learn that the making of poetry, too, is a matter of thinking.’ As a result, the poem becomes ‘an exercise in poetic self-reflection.’<sup>85</sup>

Taking her cue from Japanese poetry, Jane Hirshfield writes, ‘we think, poetry comes out of emotional and intellectual experience, everyone knows that’. Hirshfield simplifies the process further by proposing that poetry is thinking in isolation: ‘since before the advent of literacy, poetry has served as a vessel in which solitary thought might occur’. The mind relapses into a compelling state of autism, so to speak, that fuels creativity and instigates the release of poetic revelations. Delving deeper, she illuminates the process of creativity: ‘art-making begins when the mind enters a condition different from everyday, discursive thinking’, a condition she refers to as ‘concentration’.<sup>86</sup> For Hirshfield, a poem is conceived and comes to light through concentration, a process so immune to description, that she equates it with ‘awareness, penetrating, unified, and focused, yet also permeable and open’, which is ‘the moment the doors of perception open’ to Aldous Huxley and ‘epiphany’ to James Joyce.

Poetry, being both ‘creative’ and ‘tropic (as opposed to iterative)’, according to Christopher Kelen, involves the ‘work of re-visioning the world. It is difference making’.<sup>87</sup> Hence, the poem may present an alternative version of the world as triggered by and filtered through the poet’s consciousness so that the experience, projected, looks freshly minted. Likewise, John Danvers discusses the process of poetry-making as one that entails ‘both a sustained interrogation and a celebration of all aspects of human consciousness, from the minutiae of everyday experience to the most profound ideas, beliefs, feelings and

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<sup>85</sup> Heidegger, *Language, Poetry and Thought*, p. 97.

<sup>86</sup> Jane Hirshfield, *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1997), pp. 83, 13, 37.

<sup>87</sup> Christopher (Kit) Kelen, *Poetry, Consciousness and Community* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2009), p. 9.

actions— which may, of course, be found in the most humdrum details of daily life.’<sup>88</sup> As such, commonality and ordinariness could plausibly be a source of poetry of an intellectual calibre. The workings of the poetic consciousness are typified in handling ‘information, sensations and memories in convoluted chains of images, linguistic patterns, moods and emotions.’ This processing of the input is both ‘layered’ and simultaneous, for ‘in our everyday thinking and “minding”, sequences of linear argument are interrupted by reiterations of phrase and word, detours of association and analogy, eruptions of unconnected images and changes of emotion or mood. This interweaving of many threads is what gives such resonance and richness to our sense of being and becoming.’ Humans are their ‘embodied’ minds that have a tapestry of mercury-like qualities. The mind’s topography is best mapped not by ‘single monological narratives or isolated images’, but by ‘collage, montage, dialogues, networks and layered structures’.<sup>89</sup> Thus, ‘the sensory, mental and imaginative’ are recruited as ‘dynamically interactive’ ‘spheres of consciousness’ so that the latter states are conceived of as ‘a function of our participation in, and interrelatedness with, the world, through our sensory and cognitive systems’.<sup>90</sup>

Paul Crowther stresses that ‘consciousness is not a purely mental phenomenon, but a function of the integrated operation of all the senses.’ Further, perception does not have ‘atoms of sensation or pure sense data, but nodes of “meaning” which emerge as a foreground (through their proximity to the body and its interests), against the background depth of the whole perceptual field.’<sup>91</sup> Danvers makes the point that ‘perception, memory, thinking and doing all contribute to the prospective and speculative activity of coming to know the world – exemplified in the arts as well as the sciences’, and in consequence ‘knowledge is inherently perspectival, an interpretation arising from our participation in

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<sup>88</sup> John Danvers, *Picturing Mind Paradox*, p. 13.

<sup>89</sup> John Danvers, *Picturing Mind Paradox*, p. 314.

<sup>90</sup> John Danvers, *Picturing Mind Paradox*, p. 145.

<sup>91</sup> Paul Crowther, *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 41.

the world.’<sup>92</sup> Consciousness captures experiences within its spinning, arcane matrix, breaks it down so that the patterns of experience fall in to a new mould and ‘being’. This is what Danvers further discusses as the ‘handling of the world’, a task art excels in and ‘which characterises our most intimate awarenesses – an improvisation of being and knowing’.<sup>93</sup>

Dwelling on Donne’s poetry, Louis Martz prefers to discuss the relation the mind and poetry share in the light of ‘the meditative poem’, drawing on Wallace Stevens’ characterisation of the poem of the mind.<sup>94</sup> Martz’s delineation of the meditative poem hinges on Donne’s practice of projecting ‘part of himself as an actor on a stage’. Privileged to meditate, ‘this projected self, the insatiable actor, merges with the whole, larger mind of the meditative man’, so that the two halves ‘actor and mind, or Soul and Self (to use Yeats’s terms)’ are reconciled to yield ‘the total self, the total mind’. This self-cleft makes it possible for Donne to orchestrate oracular arguments and speculate on themes like death and Doomsday which remain virtual and recondite for ‘the essential process of all true meditative poetry depends upon the interaction between a projected, dramatized part of the self and the whole mind of the meditative man.’ It is a schizophrenic model in which the poet–spectator steps aside to watch the meditative process unfold. The meditative mind presides as it excurses through the loci of the human world and the mediocre and defective version of love the world offers: ‘the fickleness, the instability, the treachery, of the physical existence’, along with jealousy, ‘the sense of decay and disloyalty’.<sup>95</sup> Martz, thus, sketches a host of themes and topics the meditative mind of the poet may tread upon as love-spurred meditations fracture and duplicate. The mind keeps tight reins on romantic exultations and uncorks philosophical reflections. The mind processes and realises poetical

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<sup>92</sup> John Danvers, *Picturing Mind Paradox*, pp. 24, 34.

<sup>93</sup> John Danvers, *Picturing Mind Paradox*, p. 47.

<sup>94</sup> Louis Martz, *The Poem of the Mind: Essays on Poetry, English and American* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 3.

<sup>95</sup> Louis Martz, *The Poem of the Mind*, pp. 4-9.

creativity in terms of a triple configuration that integrates, as well, awareness and thought/feeling:

firstly as an alert state of mind in which a subject is aware of her self and circumstances; secondly (and importantly, a critique of the previous perspective is implied here), consciousness is the scale on which self-awareness and awareness of the world at large might be notionally measured; thirdly styles of consciousness are implied by different modes of thought and/or feeling and for instance by different artforms and genres of literary work.<sup>96</sup>

To sum up, the mind, whether in the form of thought, emotion, vision, conscious perception, alert intimation, reflection, or philosophical/intellectual knowledge lurks within the world of the poem.

#### IV

To trace the workings of the mind and the formulation of thought, this study examines Larkin's *oeuvre* chronologically. Inspecting Larkin's poetry in its chronological order enables the thesis to track Larkin's strategies in selecting and developing his themes and poetical techniques. It showcases a persistent and constant commitment to certain mental and psychological visions and inspirations to whose various perspectives, usually more than one poem is devoted. The chronological framework in which the poems are located helps to identify potential intertextualities so that a poem may either contain interpretive keys that elucidate a previous poem or be itself a riddle whose parts may be pieced together from former or later poems. In addition, the temporal locales record Larkin's responses and reactions to the major events of his era, whether social, political, or aesthetical.

The study first inspects Larkin's juvenile poetry written between 1939 and 1945 before the publication of *The North Ship*. The early work is investigated here in search of the intellectual bases and knowledge resources which were later to grow and spiral upwards to form argumentative rationales and philosophical reflections. Juvenilia, which is

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<sup>96</sup> Christopher (Kit) Kelen, *Poetry, Consciousness and Community*, pp. 11-2.

often passed over in silence elsewhere, offers insightful and operative keys to gain a full understanding of Larkin's range of interests and concerns on the intellectual and poetical levels. The early poems display a reflective poetic mind in the making which has given attention, effort, study, and time to ponder on and cogitate issues and matters that impinged on the young consciousness at the time. Many of the themes that the early poems introduced rather tentatively were to emerge later as fully-fledged topical arguments which become known for their magnetic impact and profound bearings. Religion, death, loneliness, and alienation, pensive dialectics, cerebral quests, inquisitiveness, and the search for knowledge feature strongly in the early poems and are explored with subtle awareness, unobtrusive cynicism, and perceptive discernment.

Poems such as 'The days of thy youth', 'I should be glad to be in death', and 'The canal stands through the fields' carry a speculative atmosphere and nihilistic philosophy in which macabre hypothetical scenarios are woven and dramatised. The early poems expose a mentality that tends to set the young poet apart from the rest through creating non-conformist personae that find themselves intellectually at odds with their milieu, as in 'Chorus from a masque', 'The house on the edge of the serious wood', and 'So, you have been despite parental ban', to name a few. Introspective and visionary insights with their Prufrock-like flavour mark such an early attempt as 'A bird sings at the garden's end'. The prolificacy of questions proper, as well as rhetorical questions, portray a mind aware of its ignorance at times and its scepticism towards others, but also looking forward to filling in the knowledge gaps. Nature and romantic extravagance are symbolically employed in contemplative and metaphorical arguments relevant to the human journey from birth to death in 'We see the spring breaking across the rough stone' or 'Falling of these early flowers', which uses the natural cycle to comment on existence. However, the early poetry subsumes poems in which the mind is cerebrally and intellectually occupied. The thought

process and thinking are put to the test in such poems as ‘Lie there my tumbled thoughts’ and ‘For the mind to betray’. In all, Chapter One is devoted to unveiling the workings of the amateurish mind and the tactics with which it operates to assert the dialectical and unconventional calibre the young poet possessed. The energy and vigour with which the questions are deliberated reveal an intellectual potential and a critical precursor that excels at realisation, analysis, and appraisal.

Larkin’s first volume of verse *The North Ship*, published in 1945, is often dubbed as immature and a pastiche of many poetical influences, namely, Yeats’s and Auden’s. Therefore it is rarely researched fully or systematically. Yet, the poems lack neither sophistication nor intellectual profundity, which the present study embarks on uncovering and identifying. The collection is investigated in search of the intellectual springboards of the arguments posited and the rationales offered. Their symbolic and metaphorical mappings account for their esoteric and obscure airs and portray a mind engaged in philosophical and psychological questions. The analysis of intellectual clues demonstrates that the poems encompass a visionary and speculative outlook reinforced by sharp perceptive observations pertinent to Larkin’s reverberating themes. Therefore, though the poems, by themselves, add little to Larkin’s poetical career, they supply portholes into the generative aspects of his later meritorious poetry. In the poems, there are prominent mental and psychological strains in which Larkin’s personae confront nihilism, are seized by fears, anxieties and phobias, and wallow in wishful thinking and dreams.

Existence and non-being feature in II or ‘This was your place of birth’ where a mind in turmoil traces with tenderness a line of thought that is far from comforting. The opening poem, ‘All catches alight’, portrays a turbulent mentality and spins a surreal vision where the life-death dialectic is focalised. Alienation, death, and a mind apt to indulge in provocative thinking mark VI. In III, a similar vein reveals how the mind is gratified with

knowledge through a journey of agony and suffering. Likewise, the journey from childhood to adulthood and the sway from innocence/ignorance to remorse/awareness occupy XIV. Disillusionment and ennui mark XX, where a phlegmatic persona oscillates between indifference and longing. In XVI, time is philosophically dwelt upon as inductive to troubled thinking, where memory is burdensome and the past is both remote and immediate. Oblivion is counteracted by an acute awareness and wakefulness which keep the mind alert and vigilant. Insomniac and pensive, the central figure tosses and turns lest sleep should throw him at the mercy of appalling nightmares in XXI. However, Larkin's persona is so aware and disillusioned that he confesses the flawed and immature nature of his child-like thoughts in VIII.

'The North Ship' poems with their symbolic thrusts betray a far more complex and restless mentality that is fond of contraries. They expose a mind committed to exploration and experimenting, sailing into the unknown as the journey north indicates. The poems are strung like episodes on the highlights of the journey. Myths, fortunetelling, and superstitions feature in the marine saga where Odysseus-like voyagers sail further and further into the hostile depths of the icy north. Seeking to grow wider in knowledge, the crew combat the perils and risks which this challenging journey entails. Appended later to the collection is XXXII which dates a change in Larkin's style away from the Yeatsian influence. The poem discloses a theme which would haunt Larkin's later love poems. The mind weighs love and romance against art, using a series of arguments and a resolving rationale that has the scale always tip in favour of the latter. In all, the poems adopt symbolic tenors which run in a line with modernist tradition. Thereupon, immature and unoriginal as most of the poems must look, they still enjoy an air of obscurity and intellectual obtrusiveness which may be attributed to the reverie-like and dreamy atmosphere with which they are invested.



His second volume of verse, *The Less Deceived* (1955), introduced a different Larkin to the public, which the study endeavours to arrest. Barbara Everett reports how, on publication, the poems were hailed by the *Times Educational Supplement* as being a ‘triumph of clarity after the formless mystification of the last twenty years’.<sup>97</sup> It is the collection in which Hardy replaces Yeats and Larkin manages to find his own personal and individual signature. Between *The North Ship* and *The Less Deceived*, ten years elapsed during which Larkin moved to Ireland, published two novels *Jill* (1946) and *A Girl in Winter* (1947), the private verse collection *XX Poems* (1951), got engaged and broke off the engagement, and, in brief, matured and grew wiser about life and wider in experience. Going through these changes, which may be not inaccurately dubbed as existential, Larkin lent a stronger, more confident, and less pedantic voice to *The Less Deceived*.

The mind in this collection seeks to diagnose deception, including self-deception, break away from it, hence the title, and subsequently develop awareness. It is a collection in which ‘If, My Darling’ pivots on a hypothetical invasion of the shocking, even appalling, thoughts that populate the mind. Memory and introspection responsible for shaping or the unmaking of the adult and the consequent psychological impact of disillusionment are investigated in ‘I Remember, I Remember’. The poems are arranged to disclose private statements of intellectual and meditative calibre, which evolve into theories about time, as in ‘Next, Please’ and ‘Triple Time’, supplemented by attitudinal philosophies regarding ageing and looks in ‘Age’ and ‘Skin’. Romance takes a more definite and individualistic stand in poems like ‘Wedding-Wind’, with its female narrator, and ‘Maiden Name’, which discusses the depth of change a woman has not only to cope with, but also embrace. The courtly romance of the early poetry mutates to a candid discussion of sex through symbolism in ‘Dry Point’. The mind engages in questions of

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<sup>97</sup> Barbara Everett, ‘Philip Larkin: After Symbolism’, in *Philip Larkin*, ed. Stephen Regan (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1997), 55-70, at p. 55.

belonging and alienation in 'Poetry of Departures' and 'Places, Loved Ones'. The mysticism of religion is cleared in 'Church Going' and a secular philosophy pertinent to existential rituals of birth/marriage/death is offered in its place. The mind goes on to indulge in issues as various and practical as work in 'Toads', where the approach is both pensive and inventive. 'At Grass' weaves a tender allegory of an illusory life achievement set against the tranquillity of solitude and selective memory. A pacifist or even passive philosophy, along with furtive knowledge, pervades an Eden-like atmosphere of anonymity and oblivion, which also epitomise existence. Each poem typifies a facet of existence projected at peculiar temporal coordinates. A visionary or distinct intellectual/rational/logical approach is devised to enrich the arguments without damaging the lucidity which the title of the collection suggests.

When *The Whitsun Weddings* is approached intellectually, a rich harvest of philosophical/psychological/cultural/rational magnitudes crops up. Analogous to the previous collection, knowledge and ignorance make an eminent motif in *The Whitsun Weddings*. Like its title poem, the collection is a learning experience and also a journey of exploration into the labyrinths of existence. The mind is concerned with probing in more depth or from different viewpoints almost the same essential themes. On the spatial plane, a new philosophy of space emerges in 'Here' and 'The Importance of Elsewhere'. The mind's former discontentment and restlessness are resolved in the former, which ends in a surreal image of land meeting the infinite blue. The latter argues on behalf of foreignness; self-willed exile is painted in colours as a mind liberating change. In both poems, ontological questions are introduced from pensive perspectives with being as the main axle. In 'Ambulances', existence is considered, with non-being as the focus of the query. Within existentialistic nodes of thought, this collection is concerned with questions of identity. Larkin almost tried his hands in psychoanalysis, resulting in 'Mr. Bleaney',

‘Self’s the Man’, and ‘Dockery and Son’, which portray a sort of identity crisis, where selfhood seems to lose its footing and is even sacrificed to endorse social construction. The mind endeavours to land on logical arguments in support of certain life choices, such as staying single and childless. However, the arguments are not purely defensive, but intellectually enlightening and persuasive. The celebratory and carnival-like stance is reserved for the title poem, ‘The Whitsun Weddings’, in which a change of mind brews, then takes place, and epiphany is attained. The romantic phase is strongly present in *The Whitsun Weddings* in ‘The Large Cool Place’, ‘Sunny Prestatyn’, ‘Love Songs in Age’, and ‘An Arundel Tomb’. Again, romance is rationalised, philosophised, or psychoanalysed so that it takes unfamiliar turns. The notions of fantasy in opposition to reality or world practicalities versus hypotheses occupy the first two. In both the mind is engaged in spinning imaginative webs to be later shredded to pieces. ‘Love Songs in Age’ documents a mental journey through memory towards self-realisation, while in ‘An Arundel Tomb’, the mind weaves together contemplative scenarios on art and love as well as history.

*High Windows* takes the reader’s mind to surreal and hypothetical spheres that are challenging and unorthodox. Larkin intended the collection to provoke and disturb, as sensitive and/or delicate questions are probed. The Larkinesque perspective sways in ‘To the Sea’ from a contemplation of seaside holidays to the loftiness of an existentialist argument on behalf of tradition and continuity. The persuasive argument makes the shift to near-didacticism appear smooth and natural. ‘The Old Fools’, a stretched metaphor itself, provokes thinking and defies logic and regularised dogmas with its inquisitive outline. Old age, senility, and deterioration are treated via an approach that verges on the absurd. ‘The Building’, puzzle-like, invites the mind to a taxing Kafkaesque-like exploration of ontological questions. Perceptive and sophisticated rationalisations are offered to address death and perdition. The vocational three-fold model in ‘Livings’ is intellectually loaded as

it blurs boundaries of time and place to comment on the multi-faceted existence it portrays. 'High Windows' and 'This Be the Verse' transform banality to a surreal ascension towards the azure epiphany of the former and the catechistic review of humanity in the latter. The celestial air infects two more poems, 'Sad Steps' and 'Solar', where the mind is liberated from earthly concerns and negotiates the extraterrestrial. The two ode-like poems emerge as platforms to give voice to spiritual and psychological turmoil. In all, *High Windows* revisits and revises Larkin's most cherished intellectual tributaries, but invades new territories of thought and expression and breaks new ground.

To conclude the study, an investigation of Larkin's uncollected and later poems is conducted. On the one hand, the last chapter is intended to shed light on some poems which Larkin chose not to collect and/or publish; these poems bear thematic or even intertextual relations to some of his collected poems or treat related topics from different angles of vision. On the other, Larkin's last poems offer a glimpse of the poet's frame of mind at that stage and the intellectual strains that occupied it. 'Aubade', for instance, philosophises about death from an existentialistic approach and so does 'The Winter Palace'. In both, the mind is overwhelmed by nihilism and finds comfort and consolation in nothing at all. However, while the mind jerks back to reality at the closure of the former, it remains marooned in the icy territories of nothingness in the latter. In 'The View', an eye-opening climb throws its reflecting persona into a turmoil of thoughts. The mind perceives the deterioration that comes with age in terms of ascending a mountain with the view getting clearer and the feet less sure with every step towards the top. While his mental faculty is degenerating with age, the climber gets more self-reflective, self-critical, and more aware of personal flaws and miscalculations to the point of pronouncing the past as waste. The existential strain persists in 'The Life with a Hole in it' with romance and self-deception as major concerns. Wasting life takes on the form of clinging on to dreams,

which are never meant to come true. 'Continuing to Live' presents an argument based on the notions of habit and repetition. It registers an awareness that dawns on an inquisitive mind as it sees through the sham of existence. In brief, the later and/or posthumous Larkin rationally and persuasively sails through the mysteries of existence towards a less clouded vision and more stringent realisation. Each group of poems researches a complex of issues so that almost exhaustive rational diagnoses are offered.

# Chapter 1

## *Juvenilia*

### I

Between 1939 and 1945, Philip Larkin wrote very fluently and prolifically on various themes using a variety of forms. Upon retrospection, the poet apathetically dismissed the majority of these poems as paltry, affected, or inferior and hence unworthy of publication.<sup>1</sup> The entire body of the early verse is not without its merits though and may be used to access the psychological and spiritual, not to mention intellectual, forces in motion at the time and which anticipate the later development. The mind of the young poet operated in conjunction with the established and acknowledged poetical heritage of the towering figures of the time whose works he avidly read and wholly absorbed. The young Larkin aspired to write poetry that would live up to the celebrated legacies of the imitated icons: Yeats, Auden and Eliot, whether he admitted the last or not.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout 1939 and as a student in Oxford, Larkin ‘worked hard, widening his reading to include Verlaine and Lamartine as well as Auden and Eliot, and changing the mood and style of his poems accordingly.’<sup>3</sup> Larkin acknowledges his debt to Yeats, Auden, and Hardy, whose influences superseded each other almost chronologically, or rather supplemented each other along the poet’s poetical career. Even after Larkin got hold of and mastered his own Muse and got past the imitative phase, his debt to them persisted undiminished. That most of the early verse is imitative does not belittle the physical and

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<sup>1</sup> See *The Complete Poems of Philip Larkin*, ed. Archie Burnett (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), pp. 337-671.

<sup>2</sup> More than one study launched a search for Eliotic traces in Larkin’s poetry, for instance Raphaël Ingelbien, ‘The Uses of Symbolism: Larkin and Eliot’, in *New Larkins for Old*, ed. James Booth (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), 130-143; Stephen Regan, ‘Introduction’, 1-22, Andrew Motion, ‘Philip Larkin and Symbolism’, 32-54, and Barbara Everett, ‘Philip Larkin: After Symbolism’, 55-70, in *Philip Larkin*, ed. Stephen Regan; and Richard Rankin Russell, ‘Echoes of Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” in Larkin’s “Aubade”’, *The Explicator*, 65/4 (2007), 234-37.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer’s Life*, p. 31.

mental effort exerted by the young poet to furnish and polish his drafts. It takes time, effort, and experience to polish raw talent, break from the imitative mode, and find an autonomous platform and independent voice. Even then, relativity and scepticism must be admitted into the equation for an utterly autonomous mind is almost a flight of fancy.

The young Larkin wrote voluminously with great speed and amateurish professionalism. It is when he found his own voice and individual signature that he started to struggle with his Muse, so to speak, and his prolificacy faltered. Therefore, Tolley talks about a change that stamped 'the late nineteen-forties' which was marked by 'the disappearance of fluency characteristic of the drafting of his earlier poetry'.<sup>4</sup> In all, the early Larkin drafted verse profusely but with a poetical quality snubbed by the poet himself for falling short of meeting his virtual poetical standards. Yet, examining the profusions of that period offers insights into the development and evolution of both the mind of the poet and his work. Kingsley Amis, reminiscently, writes 'it was these poems that he had never published that told me how good he was and would be.'<sup>5</sup> These early poems bear testimony to the various sources, trends, modes of writing, social and political factors, and many other miscellaneous drives that shaped the poet's character and oriented his poetical contributions. Therefore, this early verse is assumed, here, to afford intellectual, philosophical, and/or psychological readings and may be reassessed and evaluated as poetry of mind proper. Further, though these poems are underrated and undermined by Larkin and suffered long negligence, they can be regarded as the first germs that mutated and the raw materials that ripened into the later poetry.

The mind of the young Philip Larkin as appears in his early poems is no less a prey to tumultuous reflections and contemplations than the cynicism he adopted in his later poetry. From the juvenile attempts, one could envisage a seventeen-year old *sage* whose

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<sup>4</sup> A. T. Tolley, *Larkin at Work*, p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> Kingsley Amis, 'Oxford and After', in *Larkin at Sixty*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), 23-30, p. 28.

perhaps untimely pensiveness introduced him at that tender age to worlds inaccessible to others. Or, at least, it takes others longer, not to mention more experience, to get past the threshold of what Larkin seems to have permeated, absorbed, grown sceptical of, and hence dispensed with or even annihilated prematurely. In keeping with what is generally conceived of as mind-oriented poetry, where mental, intellectual, philosophical, and psychological preoccupations are promoted as the principal constituents, Larkin's juvenile poems will readily and neatly fall in with its scope proper.<sup>6</sup> For the young Larkin, the mind and the heart are almost always in a constant liaison and not divorced from each other. What engages his mind, during its search for truth and enlightenment, is embraced and nursed by emotion. As such, his mind is expressively laid open and pensive thoughts, tentative philosophies and moralisations, and speculative intimations populate the early poems. His poems touch upon a variety of sophisticated themes that are intellectually charged and which kindle his mind and enrich his visions. Many instances aspire to capture the poet's fervent pursuit to locate himself in relation to, and even confer order and sanity onto, a world that has grown so anarchic and unruly that it overtly and covertly flouts logic and derides rationality.

To begin with, the speculative aspect of Larkin's juvenilia asserts itself subtly and powerfully. What is remarkable is the energy, resourcefulness and dynamism with which the mind of the young poet functions. His reflections are premature and far-reaching as the mind deliberates on events and situations, addressing questions relevant to his generation as well as posterity. Larkin's early poems embody the psychological, intellectual and philosophical voices that crowded the poet's mind, sallied his imperturbability, ambushed his cognizance, and dictated, in the long run, poetry that tentatively explored esoteric territories of cognition and psyche. Accordingly, the poems penetrate and enact the

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<sup>6</sup> Gregory Tate, *The Poet's Mind*, pp. 2-6.



obsessions with the mind's striving-to-survive thoughts of futility, defeatism, absurdity, non-conformity, disappointment, non-fulfillment, nothingness, death, and nihilism. This range and array of mental strains seem to be unfit for, at discord with, and even irrelevant to a young poet in his teenage years or early twenties. Yet, they are the themes diffused prolifically and vigorously throughout Larkin's youthful poetry. Death and annihilation, for instance, as motifs feature very saliently in these poems. The narrative/poetical consciousness, which Larkin creates to speak on his behalf, possesses and displays acute awareness, to its dismay, of the imminence of the ultimate end that none is meant to escape. The prominence of death and extinction in the early poems bears testimony to the fact that Larkin's concern about death dates from his youth and not a later obsession, as a letter in December 1940 to James Sutton documents.<sup>7</sup> His psychological and mental reactions to and rendition of death, as both ordeal and ordination, are highly analytical and penetrating. His treatment of such themes exposes a speculative mind and visionary rigour.

To illustrate and provide evidence of the ways in which the mind creates virtual ends, his 1939 poem, 'The Days of thy Youth' is a case in point.<sup>8</sup> The title itself exposes the mind's anxieties and the use of 'thy' establishes references, probably, ironical to the scriptures.<sup>9</sup> The poet's early preoccupation with death is coupled with and materialises in his awareness of the mutability and transience of existence. The poem unfolds its argument along three stanzas; the first is made up of eight lines and the other two are sextains. Overall, the poem hardly has any recognisable rhyme pattern. Larkin varies the line length and metre so that the irregularity of the verse simulates the atmosphere of hurry and emergency:

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<sup>7</sup> Anthony Thwaite (ed.), *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin: 1940-1985* (London, Faber and Faber, 1992), p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Archie Burnett (ed.), *The Complete Poems of Philip Larkin* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012). All subsequent references to the poems are from this edition unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>9</sup> Philip Larkin, inspired by his reading of *Ecclesiastes*, records his satisfaction with the poem: see *The Complete Poems of Philip Larkin*, ed. Archie Burnett, p. 517.

Ah, the rock is crumbling  
And our foothold slipping;  
Near the horizon there are clouds;  
The sun still shines  
But the wind, the wind is rising;  
And some have already gone before,  
Some will soon go.  
But for the second we are safe... (pp. 133-34)

With such meditations as typical of a mystic and religious oracle, the observing bystander paints an apocalyptic tumultuous panorama where the collective *our-we* braves the turmoil of a virtual annihilation. Larkin's foresight, even if coincidental, is impressive considering that the poem was composed three months before the outbreak of the Second World War. The poem envisages a world collapsing on the abysmal verge, and breathing its last; the end is looming and fast approaching. The thematic use of repetition creates parallelism and magnifies the sense of urgency and danger: 'The wind, the wind', 'already gone' and 'soon go', 'but the wind' and 'but for the second', and 'veil on veil'. The ongoing activation of the doomsday-like episode is triggered by the ing-constructions, namely, 'crumbling', 'slipping' and 'rising', which rhyme in the first verse, and 'toppling', 'standing', 'twisting', and 'watching' dispersed across the poem. Futurity is conjured up, as well, to project and deliberate on the upcoming, contemplated metamorphosis.

On the level of form, the poem is rather rugged and rough around the edges. The irregularity of form is functional, even though Larkin's mastery over poetical form and his preference for rhymed verse are often cited meritoriously. Larkin seems to reserve the relatively regular rhyme scheme for the poem's opening to captivate the reader and establish the poem's music. Then he, partially or completely, abandons it elsewhere or at best tends to substitute it by assonance, as in 'name/rains' and 'night/skies' or consonance, as in 'cord/regard' to ensure a freer leash to passions and rhapsodies. These structural renditions serve to inflate the grievous and perilous nature of the described event. Nonetheless, the environment is, oddly enough, soon promising for 'the sun still shines' and the speaker experiences a fleeting moment of security, which runs in antithesis against

the colossal event the poem sets in motion at its very onset. The reader is almost compromised, if not betrayed, as the alleged seismic spectacle is almost mythologised when the know-all narrator spares a brief moment to philosophise on existence which is doomed to regression. With 'But for the second we are safe', the readers who anticipate an escalation of the menace are left desolate and their curiosity, piqued, abruptly declines and subsides. The safety, casually and temporarily sketched, is short-lived as expected and soon to give way to dubiousness for 'there can be nothing durable', and nothing survives other than 'a name / Chipped upon a stone, washed by November rains' (p. 134).

It is a one-way existential, nihilistic trajectory, which surges downwards to the inevitable destination. Death, then, packs things up and irrevocably seals the bargain. At the mention of death, the attitude becomes even more disconcerting and shiftless for posthumous speculations do not ignite interest. The commentator's solitude and, in the long run, individuality are next probed as the *we* is relinquished in favour of 'I shall be nothing more', which epitomises and fathoms out the speaking voice's predicament. The shift from plurality to singularity is perhaps an example of the 'personal autonomy' that Motion acknowledges as being an outcome of isolation.<sup>10</sup> In his separateness as the sole sufferer, the narrator is all alone and distant, but acutely self-conscious. However, as the poem is wrapped up, the scene regains tranquillity and serenity though an arcane ambience of precariousness endures. Larkin's persona is back from the mental limbo he was trapped in earlier and safe again, though by no means spiritually unscathed. The entire drama turns out to be speculatively and hypothetically unfolding in a mind inclined to designing apocalyptic scenarios. Standing next to his youthful companion ('Dover Beach'-like), who operates as the balance-restoring prop and the palpable link to reality, he resumes his watch of the regrettably mutable, snowy scene behind his window, a symbol and motif of

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<sup>10</sup> Andrew Motion, 'Philip Larkin and Symbolism', p. 36.

awareness and discernment, but also security, non-involvement, detachment, and separation. This window symbolism often reverberates in Larkin's later poetry to culminate in his 'High Windows'. In these first writings, the poet's perceptiveness of the challenges that both poetry and the world renew and, in consequence, his poetical stance are baffled and alienated. The voice of reason, though utterly disappointed and sneering, presides assertively and securely, unrivalled; introspective, meditative poetry flows in abundance as the axiomatic corollary.

In another poem, 'I should be glad to be in at the death' (1940), the death wish resurfaces and is further pursued. The mind spins another macabre yarn, conjuring up the demise and obliteration of civilisation along with humankind as the only salvation. With a title slightly modifying the last line of Eliot's 'Journey of the Magi', in which birth and death intermingle, Larkin's poem advances its purely morbid argument.<sup>11</sup> In three quatrains rhyming abab and a basically tetrameter line, the meditative persona carries the reflection a step further to discuss the rationales that propel such dark and sinister intimations. Imagining himself as the sole survivor of the Apocalypse, the debating commentator is tantalised by the magnetic thought of the approaching annihilation of mercenary materialism, arrogance and surefootedness that plague the world and put the narrator to shame. He hails the end and revels in the transcendence it is going to create:

I should be glad to be in at the death  
Of our loud cities, wet hoardings,  
Faces, and trivial assertive breath –  
I should like to see the last of these things. (p. 174)

The episodic sadistic philosophy keeps escalating until it culminates in 'Then I want to lie down, and forget I'm a man'. The strands of ghastly introspection amass, entwine, and are condensed to flesh out the speaker's misanthropy. His yearning for inertia and indolence is ensued by the summoning of an abrupt end, though, to wrap things up:

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<sup>11</sup> Archie Burnett (ed.), *The Complete Poems of Philip Larkin*, p. 539.

Wishing the day would come, as it must,  
When it will all go, all ploughed into line  
With fields, and the plough itself stand to rust,  
And nothing happen for a long time. (p. 174)

The speaker prays for the advent of oblivion or a limbo-like state in a fashion akin to 'Wants' in *The Less Deceived*. Life is urged to come to a halt and stand still, perhaps indefinitely, and the narrator is, oddly enough, certain that his prayer will be answered 'as it must'. It is a feverish prayer for the abolishment of the meretricious existence as known to the speaker and of which he has grown both weary and contemptuous. The lines quoted above offer a visionary, but camera-like, command of the world after it virtually ceases to exist where things lay fallow with disuse. The plough with its symbolism of labour, reproduction, and cultivation is to be relinquished so that all facets and phases of living are extirpated once and for all. The poem proposes an imperative, nihilist philosophy that hails anarchy and vents sordid, mental reflections on the purposelessness of life and the merits of nonexistence. Nevertheless, the contemplating narrator does not call upon death for its own sake; he hardly wishes the world to perish because of his excessive misanthropy. It is rather his belief that the world has grown incorrigibly corrupt beyond any remedy. Band-aid solutions would only aggravate the status quo and extermination is the only option left. The mood and atmosphere of the two poems examined above might appear hyperbolic, but are readily understandable in the context of the war. Larkin's reaction to the war may be tacit or even elliptical, yet also morose and wistful, as his letters from 1940 to 1945 to his friends, especially, James Sutton, demonstrate.<sup>12</sup>

'The canal stands through the fields' (pp. 217-18), a relatively long poem of fifty five lines composed in 1942, explores death's shadow-like presence from birth to the very end.<sup>13</sup> Against the backdrop of war, the certain knowledge of death permeates and blackens the speaker's images of the canal and the fields of the first line. Everything is dipped in

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<sup>12</sup> Anthony Thwaite (ed.), *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin: 1940-1985*.

<sup>13</sup> Archie Burnett (ed.), *The Complete Poems of Philip Larkin*, p. 560

deadly hues: 'The sky is a bird's breast, shielding / Blue shadows in the copse', 'the burnt moon hanging', 'children lie fishing [on the other side across the river];/ Their voices scrape the silence of their hands,' and so on goes the dismal inventory. What keeps death at bay and the speculator safe is its deferment: 'another / Year bends in propped-up rows.' But then, that same speaker is both awed and excited about 'the novelty' he finds 'in death': another antithetical turn that combines contraries, for death is as obsolete, ageless, and familiar as it is novel, exotic, and enticing and the speaker is both appalled and liberated by its prospects. As the observing persona felt momentary safety in 'The Days of Thy Youth' (pp. 133-34), a similar hindsight seems to reassure the speaker in 'The canal' that his time is not yet up to cross to the other bank. While river and water are traditionally linked to life, rebirth and renewal, Larkin's river, Styx-like pouring into the underworld, stands for departure and absence, an observation that calls to mind, with subtle differences, Tennyson's sea in 'Crossing the Bar'. The poem proceeds in a style that fluctuates between the singular address of the first person and the pluralism of *we* or between a private voice and collective consciousness. The predicament which the mind has to face is both personal and universal. The war is obliquely present, lending appropriate images: 'It is not reason, that those kisses / Design a bombsite, those coloured poems / Burn among papers of an enemy consulate' (p. 217). Confusion, anger, and despair are typified in the obscure poetical infusions and the mystical meditation, even though the last verse hails demystification: 'Into lucidity / The moon is focussed' (p. 218).

In a similar vein, 'Poem' (I met an idiot...), cast in the form of encounter, is keyed to expose the absurdity and irrationality of death. Through the use of a conversational register, iambic rhythm, and rhyming couplets, which impose discipline and strictness, the poem hypothesises and philosophises about the futility of existence. A wanderer who seems to court death through invading its territory is warned off and denied access by none

other than an idiot he runs into at the bend of the road. The entire context the poem sketches is absurd and imbecilic, not only because of naming a Cerberus-like idiot, at the gate of the forbidden land, to incarnate logic and commonsense but also the presence of a persona that so flirts with the phenomenon it fears most. But, it was Larkin's habit to keep death so intensely present that he stood always in expectant awe of it. His preoccupation with death is a species of masochism, not a form of psychological therapeutic confrontation where sufferers are prompted to look their fears in the eye in the hope of overcoming and beating them. The rhyming couplets in which the poem is composed effect monotony on the one hand and simulate the tight and inescapable grip of death on the other. Interrogating the trespasser, the idiot exposes the former as ignorant and misinformed. Time, indifferent and oblivious, is depicted as the background puppeteer running the show from a distance. The idiot commences a dialogue that settles into a philosophical dramatic monologue; meanwhile the mind is pried open and a pensive chord is struck:

I don't blame you. Someday you will find all lines  
Lead to a vanished point within the loins;  
(Do you remember the acid used at birth?)  
Time's getting on. Somewhere upon this earth,  
Time's drunken star, the moles have dug your grave,  
One day they'll leave the top off – then who'll save  
The coupons you were cutting out for Life?  
Today death has the last and only laugh.  
But you could change that. Why don't you try? (p. 216)

The idiot, symbolic of the intellectual cul-de-sac, is granted the prerogative of slapping the unwanted visitor on the wrist for breaking into the prohibited zone. The admonisher is by no means a blithering idiot despite the misnomer. His being so called redounds to the antithetical, paradoxical, and juxtaposed ideas the poem maps together where irony and disparagement dominate an atmosphere of reluctance but also equivocal persistence on the part of the loiterer. It is not fearlessness, aplomb, or valour that brings the intruder's steps back to the banned domain, but his sense of and curiosity about the pending unknown, and

this lures him into perilous grounds. However, the omniscient idiot-philosopher is barely designed to inspire despair, but oddly enough to kindle and enthuse the craving for manoeuvring death. He capitalises on the idea of doom and the absence of choice which accompany humanity's most rewarding facets of existence. Love and birth are presented as infested, not to mention crude and painful. Such intimations as the idiot's innuendo of 'a vanished point within the loins' to which all lines (writings or lives) lead and his interrogative exclamation (Do you remember the acid used at birth?) are intended to deepen mental defeat. The physical and carnal, despite inadequacy and impermanence, seem to be a step ahead of the ethereal and everlasting; death overrides all.

## II

At the very core of the intellectual dissension is the sense of non-conformity that the young poet had long harboured, and that he must resign himself to or resolve. Ultimately, he must survive its consequences which influence the man and poet. Larkin is too well aware, not without consternation and alarm of his social divergence and mental asymmetry, which triggered him to create psychological and/or social poetical outcasts. Or at least, he feels the need to prepare the ground for the dissident and contrary Larkin that will break the cocoon some day. In one sense, such poems encourage and call for a kind of social coup de grace, which once met with failure would have its activists disbarred and excommunicated. In another sense, a poem may advocate revolt where self-realisation is whetted and denial is dismantled. 'Smash all the mirrors in your home' explores the latter sense. The poem is cast in four eight-line stanzas and a variable rhyme scheme. The irregularity of the rhymes and the cramming of some verse lines with successive stressed syllables reflect the serious and heavy nature of the claims. In virulent commendations and a series of imperatives, the poem launches on a hectic campaign for an unconventional



self-revision, endorsing intuitive knowledge and awareness, which is inclined, according to the poem, to flout the norms and dictates of society, fashion, etc:

Don't look at blinded shop windows;  
Wear wrong clothes, read authors you dislike;  
Sleep in the rain, ask twenty different people  
The way to your own house... (p. 137)

Larkin himself was trying his hand at non-conformity, sporting flamboyant clothes ('a bow tie', 'green cords', 'a waistcoat', and 'cerise trousers [red is recommended by Lawrence] he boasted were the only pair of such a colour in Oxford') and making friends with students notorious as models of 'unconventionality'.<sup>14</sup>

The poem inaugurates and builds on the awareness that self-repair or rather self-ruin should be followed hot on the heels with a panoramic transformation to the point of distraction and insanity. Almost decadent or even Dadaistic, the advised actions fall into absurdity and purposelessness. However, the poem passes in silence over the consequences and penalties that such radical alterations entail. In its call for bohemianism, the poem connives at the price that comes with scorning dogmas and tenets, hence its argument appears flawed and deficient. Therefore, its non-conforming stance is rather lacking, myopic, or even contradictory. On the one hand, it calls for the re-examination of whatever is ritualistic and taken for granted. On the other, with its motto 'Smash all the mirrors', it simultaneously mandates the exact opposite. Not to look in the physical or intellectual mirror reinforces the notion of self-oblivion and senselessness. Looking in the mirror sharpens self-consciousness and develops self-criticism and self-reform that contribute to the change and revision the poem advocates. Unless the mirrors stand for conventional social standards, smashing them seems to contradict the poem's argument. In all, the poem encourages a sense of independent self-judgement utterly divorced from what people think

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<sup>14</sup> Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, pp. 36, 40.

fit and proper. At its very core, a restless mentality experiments and exerts efforts to encourage change.

To a sonnet written late in 1940 and quoted in a letter to James Sutton in April 1941, Larkin appends a rather outlandish comment – ‘Here’s another Sonnet I found, obscurely scrawled in pencil on the back of another one’ – and then dubs it as ‘elementary but quite nice.’<sup>15</sup> In this ostensibly forgotten poem, the philosophy of the young Larkin seems to take shape and so do his views regarding social texture. He subjects language, silence, speech, and in general the entire verbal apparatus to a penetrating, though rather pejorative analysis as it fails to meet the speaker’s needs. He also dabbles with an argument that is as ancient as life itself when he discusses justice, along with beauty and integrity. Notwithstanding the thematic significance of those motifs, the linguistic faculty is the linchpin of the argument the poem poises, as it links with other entities whom Larkin brings to the debating chamber. The debated polarities appear allegorical and symbolic rather than literal or casual. Accordingly, ‘the chaotic’, ‘hysterical’, ‘lonely’, ‘the weak’, ‘the fair’, ‘the skilled event’, ‘who travel far’, ‘he gets no assistance...which will not’, ‘the lovely’, and finally ‘the lions’ are all cryptic and in need of deciphering and identifying. These epithet-like entities redound to the arcane atmosphere of the poem and evoke speculations and intimations. One may tend to question whether ‘the chaotic’ symbolise an unruly and invidious minority or quite the opposite, in that they stand for the free/open-minded, initiative radical deconstructionists who target deep-rooted, secure legacies. Thereupon, they display non-conformity and dissidence in relation to standardised dogmas and cults to the extent that language fails to serve them or cater for their needs. The chaotic, it seems, are provoked, called upon or waited for to inflict destruction, but they fall short of accomplishing the mission. A language of destruction is virtually non-existent

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<sup>15</sup> Anthony Thwaite (ed.), *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin 1940-1985*, p. 12.

or no matter how vociferous, caustic and cutting, language is no destructive instrument after all when it is liable to self-destruct. In all, the poem admits the failure of language and the potency of its strategies. The verbal defeat, the poem implies, falls in line with the prosecution of the weak, the fair, the lovely and so on goes the list of covert agencies:

There is no language of destruction for  
The use of the chaotic; silence the only  
Path for those hysterical and lonely  
That upright beauty cannot banish fear,  
Or wishing help the weak to gain the fair  
Is reason for it: that the skilled event,  
Gaining applause, cannot a death prevent,  
Short-circuits impotent who travel far. (p. 185)

The dubiousness applies not only to the poem's symbolic personae, but infects the entire argument, which seems to be double-edged and rest on the combination of contraries. On the one hand, language falls short of being a tool of destruction in the hands of the chaotic who axiomatically crave to put the world out of joint and throw every aspect into confusion. They preach disorder and turbulence, but their aspiration is met with frustration, however, as their main weapon, language, fails them terribly. Ultimately, they are disarmed and ostracised, therefore, perhaps dubbed chaotic. 'The chaotic' themselves, on the other hand, do not stick long in the poem's debate, but give room to 'the hysterical' and 'lonely' for whom silence is recommended. Hence, the two extra categories could be linked to the chaotic if not other synonymous designations and nomenclatures of the same category. If language is not good enough for the chaotic, silence is the only option left before them. This poem, like a few others of analogous nature, may have been written in reaction to the war. The war's aggressive discourse seems to serve injustice, fear, despair, and misery, but above all destruction. The abortive verbal apparatus, i.e., language whose pacifist, persuasive strategies malfunction counterpoises the thriving nonverbal one in the form of, perhaps, excessive military action. Language is not only barren and delinquent, but also imprecise and dubious for words have double, countervailing meanings. Language

users are open to ridicule and censure as they are prone to fall into contradictions; verbal plainness and clarity are only delusions:

And no word can be spoken of which the sense  
Does not accuse and contradict at once.  
And he gets no assistance from the world  
Which will not help his looking into words,  
Nor will the lovely, gay as any leaf,  
Assuage his anguish. And the lions laugh. (p. 185)

Human beings are called upon to prod at words and unravel their intricacies, and not to take for granted and unscrupulously trust their face value. In all, the voice in the poem displays rather an inveterate scepticism with respect to the transient, precarious world. The speaker, as well, confesses his disbelief in the ability of the lovely or the good to comfort, cheer, and console, let alone remedy or erase misery and distress. These desolate contemplations of the world and its barren, perplexing means lead the speaker to burst into dejected wrath.

In some other poems, Larkin redresses the situation and fills in the gap so the non-conformist is not a sheer theoretical, speculated idea, but a man of flesh and blood whose intellectual disparity subjects him to discrimination and arbitrariness. ‘Chorus from a masque’ (p. 132), a short poem composed in 1939 for Larkin’s verse drama *Behind the Façade*, unmask the anomalous persona that finds himself in discord with his milieu and is hence ostracised and always at fault. In short, curt lines and second person address – ‘You’re contrary / You are the misfit / All along / Though you don’t think it / You are wrong’ – the poem nonchalantly brushes away the addressee, plays down his suffering, and categorises him as an outsider. Likewise, ‘The house on the edge of the serious wood’ (pp. 191-92), a rather long poem composed in 1941, presents an outcast and a social misfit. It incorporates ‘a dream-like narrative of the ghostly return of the native’ whose ‘home town rejects him as a sinister foreigner’.<sup>16</sup> Roger Day finds this poem ‘intricate in form,

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<sup>16</sup> Adam Piette, ‘Childhood Wiped out: Larkin, His Father, and the Bombing of Coventry’, *English*, 62/238 (2013), 230–47, at p. 246.

ingenious in its rhymes and serious in purpose'; it even dates Larkin's first use of the phrase 'a serious house' which is going to appear later in 'Church Going'.<sup>17</sup> In its semi-narrative structure that extends to seven stanzas, seven lines each in mostly anapaestic tetrameters and pentameters rhyming abbccaa or abbccdd, it relates in the third person the encounter between its central, but glossed-over character, a pariah of some sort or another, and various entities animate and inanimate:

The house on the edge of the serious wood  
 Was aware, was aware  
 Of why he came there,  
 And the reticent toad never told what it knew  
 When from the bracken it saw him pass through;  
 And round the next corner a tree poked its head:  
 'He's coming; be careful; pretend to be dead.' (p. 191)

The natural surroundings seem to be in a dither about his unjustifiably disturbing advent and keen not to be touched by it, creating a grotesque or eerie atmosphere, whose 'loose metaphysics' is found to weaken the poem since 'what was perhaps intended to create ethereality becomes an irritating vagueness.'<sup>18</sup> The awareness of every element is sharpened, rising to the occasion, and they are all alertness and watchfulness not to be discerned by him. As he approaches, they play dead and dumb so that they might be passed unnoticed by him and children, plausibly in retrospect, pause and will not resume the game until he is far gone out of sight. The double emphasis of 'aware' in the second line is reinforced by the atmosphere of secrecy and camouflage evolving as the poem unfolds. The repetitions, along with the regular rhyme scheme where the couplets prevail, apart from the onset of each stanza, establish a consistent but frolicsome atmosphere of playfulness and musicality that runs contrary to the sinister, sombre ambience the poem invests in, particularly towards its conclusion. Besides, with its various line lengths and memorable catch phrases of the refrain-like formula, the poem also calls to mind nursery

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<sup>17</sup> Roger Day, 'Collected Poems by Anthony Thwaite and Philip Larkin', *Critical Survey*, 1/2 (1989), 223-27, at p. 223.

<sup>18</sup> Roger Day, 'Collected Poems by Anthony Thwaite and Philip Larkin', p. 223.

rhymes, which children learn by heart and sing as they play. Further, the regularity of structure and repetition establishes a parallelism, which is not very typical of serious verse but characterises ‘proverbs, slogans, nursery rhymes, and many other “sub-literary” uses of language’.<sup>19</sup> The personified inanimate entities, for instance the reticent but knowledgeable toad and the talking tree, relate to children’s fables and fairy tales that the poem tries to latch onto. Introspectively, the poet adroitly sets facets of superior bearings of an outcast minority in opposition to the trivialities of the majority. Likewise, innocence and spontaneity are counterpoised against a world of growing affectation and rapacious consumerism. Through a series of vague and preposterous encounters, the poem relays the outsider’s miasma, being ‘a man on a journey whose purpose is clearly something to do with “The True and the Good”’.<sup>20</sup> He is presented as a lonely nomadic figure, an unwelcomed alien at his very home. In his pursuit of liberation or perfection, he has perhaps cut himself loose of binding rituals and social ties that the conservative world holds dear and sacred and turned into a prodigal son. Any gesture on his part to return to the flock, so to speak, and re-blend is met with hostility and refusal. The rejection, nevertheless, turns out to be triggered by prejudice and misconception as the poem proceeds to claim:

For they rather resented what he wished them to do;  
 Imagined he wished them to mirror his mind  
 That grew like a sapling and orchid combined... (p. 191)

It seems that the young Larkin, in this poem, is all too aware of the risks a non-conformist mentality runs into and the exacting cost of having a mind opposing consecrated social ideals. Thereupon, at this early stage, he diagnoses the impasse and is not intimidated by it, but finds solace in his surrender to its dictates. The main persona is

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<sup>19</sup> Geoffrey N. Leech, *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry* (London and New York: Longman, 1969), p. 66.

<sup>20</sup> Roger Day, ‘Collected Poems by Anthony Thwaite and Philip Larkin’, p. 223.

trapped for good between what he ‘wished’ and what people ‘imagined he wished’; the wishful thinking on both sides makes the entire stance vicarious and wistful. The poem further condemns the way motives are misconstrued and taken at face value, for nothing is exactly or utterly what it seems. In the face of the sweeping majority, the poem laments the ignorance and deprecation with which that insensitive majority regard the antagonist-protagonist’s superiority due to his knowledge, his sense of adventure, and his diverse experience:

And they were not aware of his previous tours  
Upon southern Alps, across northern moors,  
Seeking in one place another,  
And travelling further from mother, from mother... (p. 191)

In conclusion, the lonesome shadowy figure, the typical Larkin persona, holds on to the inner world of cognition behind windows, Larkin’s favourite and secure spot. The outcast watches ‘the failing light’ that echoes his defeat on the one hand and the world’s bolt into darkness on the other. Neither morose nor resentful, he regards the nightfall: forgiveness and tolerance incarnate. He is repulsed, even deracinated, by the ordinary world; the bohemian is thrust back to the roads he seems to belong to:

For his world that was always just out of sight  
Where weakness was part of the ordinary landscape  
And the friendly road knew his footstep, his footstep. (p. 192)

This poem invites even deeper symbolic readings where every element mentioned may be interpreted and reinterpreted against the social, religious, educational and political backgrounds as the poet reacted to them at the time. But what concerns this study most is the poem’s argument on behalf of the dissident, non-compromising mentality that is often unjustly chastised and even demonised, or so the poem seems to suggest. In reaction, at times, the outcast frets and complains as he defies cherished norms and revolts against popular yardsticks. Other times, he retreats into his solitary world, waving its immobile drama aside. He poses as the contemplative observer who resigns to and embraces all diverse facets and phases of existence with neither objection nor even complaint. Self-

reconciliation and tolerance are ostensibly reserved for the compromiser and antagonism for the objector.

In 'So you have been, despite parental ban' (pp. 147-48), an adverse, psychological experience is discussed where non-conformity seems to bear fruit and take its owner up the ladder of success and glory. In its revolt against parental authority, this poem looks like an early version of 'This Be the Verse' from *High Windows*. In a dramatic monologue couched in a series of six quatrains rhyming abab and written in iambic tetrameters, a narrator addresses directly the aberrant adventurer and dwells upon the intimations of the static community the latter had extemporaneously left behind. The non-conformist, a literal prodigal son, scorns patriarchal authority, whether social or religious, and becomes 'One who through rain to empty station ran / And bought a ticket for the early train.' The defying persona does not end as a recluse, like his counterpart in the previous poem, but as an accomplished and highly esteemed figure. Nevertheless, this happens only because meanwhile the milieu has changed in favour of the poem's liberal protagonist. The poem's enigmatic persona blazes a trail for others to follow and becomes a paragon of progressiveness and radical change. Taking their cue from him, his generation, the narrator included look up to him as their idol and relish in, though are not necessarily emboldened by, the idea of difference, otherness, and innovation:

We heard of all your gain when you had gone,  
And talked about it when the meal lay done... (p. 147)

His is a liberating stance and his metaphorical as well as physical journey is formidable and its impact is cosmic. The stagnant community reminisces with admiration, perhaps even envy:

How you had laughed, the night before you left;  
All your potentialities, untried,  
Their weakness doffed, became our hero, deft,  
The don, the climber on the mountainside... (pp. 147-48)



The musical, lyric-like form is reinforced by alliteration and inward rhyming pairs every other line (been/ban, rain/ran, gain/gone, drawn/on, laughed/left, doffed/deft, absurd/sad, head/had, now/know, show/glow, fought/fit, imitate/it). Such strategic sound play is evidence of Larkin's mastery over and advantageous use of poetical devices which will intensify at later stages of his career. Further, it helps the poem to weave introspection and playfulness together to best embody the physical as well as spiritual journey of the focal character. It is a journey from childhood or rather son-hood to manhood, from dependence to autonomy. Upon his return, he is no longer a patronised underling, but a self-made authority widely acknowledged. He has made his mark and his effort is crowned with success and recognition. His achievements are lauded and his praises sung. Notwithstanding honours, the enterpriser, surprisingly, comes back home with the same bag on the head that he left with. The same burdensome legacy and heritage, he thought he fled, seems to persist; only the bag 'Is labelled now with names we do not know'. The liberator has traded one relentless master for another that is just as relentless. Privileges, successes and glories are rather costly and the path finder has just had his obligations and anxieties multiplied: 'The gloved hands hang between the static knees, / And show no glee at close evening's glow' (p. 148). With happiness out of the question, the portrait is rather pathetic and energy-less and suits a fallen idol. His freedom is, then, a mere illusion, a figment of the imagination. His complacency and sense of accomplishment are questioned and challenged, and achievement belittled and slurred, when doubt and regret, let alone reticence, are introduced as potential actors. Thus the avant-garde hero is struck speechless. The narrator's grilling of the hero is only hypothetical, though:

Are you possessor of the sought-for ease?

That name for which you fought – does it quite fit?

And is your stubborn silence only tact?

Boys wish to imitate who hear of it –

But will you tell them to repeat your act? (p. 148)

Trapped in a society that is retrogressive and conservative, Larkin's shiftless, restless mind, at that young age, creates virtual foils and sketches out scenarios of the potential retribution or reward. His personality could be brooding to break from the conventional models and renounce their dictates. He explores both versions, the retrogressive and the avant-garde, weighing the pros and cons. Such speculations channel gruelling explorations of potentialities, ambitions, and *raison d'être* that precipitate maturity and precocity and sharpen perception and precognition. That rich, self-satisfied 'possessor', 'hero' and 'don' (both with classical, chivalrous connotations), as well as the bold and daring cliff hanger, emerges again as part of Larkin's early image repertoire. Larkin could have as well been conjuring up his Oxford dons as representatives of highly esteemed authority and power and who, Motion reports, 'terrified' and bored him.<sup>21</sup>

A philosophy-loaded poem in anapaestic pentameters, entitled 'A bird sings at the garden's end' (pp. 172-74) and composed probably around 1940, has its pensive and Prufrock-like persona buy a ticket for an express train as he contemplates departure.<sup>22</sup> This gesture could fairly well place the poem's themes in a retrospective, not imperatively chronological, relevance to the previous pair of poems. Addressing his shadow, the virtual daring hero proceeds to confess his straying, unauthorised and with haughtiness and arrogance – in other words unawareness and ignorance – into the forbidden province of knowledge and experience:

This morning, with a swagger in my glance,  
 Money swording at my thigh, I strode  
 Casually up the forbidden road  
 To the station hiding in the trees and fence,  
 Bought a single ticket, saw a train,  
 Noted the black express was still dawn-due to run. (pp. 172-73)

One cannot fail to notice the symbolism of the station, which triggers notions of departure, escape, and change and wild city life where norms, being outdated and retrogressive, are

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<sup>21</sup> Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, pp. 36, 42.

<sup>22</sup> Archie Burnett (ed.), *The Complete Poems of Philip Larkin*, p. 538.

no longer heeded and forbidden pleasures are experienced fully and remorselessly. The choice of vocabulary, for instance, 'swording at my thigh', with the unusual ing-form lends evidence to a paranoia concerning moral standards and social graces and virtues. It is the sword of Damocles jabbing and driving him insane with longing and anticipation, but also compunction and remorse, instead of hanging over his head. The same applies to another ing-structure – 'hiding' – where furtiveness and perhaps even shame rob the mind of its peace. 'This morning', 'black express', and 'dawn-due' demarcate two days division and hence the seminal travel from one time coordinate to another. With its colour symbolism, where white, black and grey dominate the prism, the poem paints a foggy atmosphere of indecisiveness, confusion, and misguidance.

As a young man, the traveller is not yet prepared to flout his cultural heritage and avail himself of the seemingly free, offered opportunities to sow his wild oats and grow worldly-wise so to speak. The debatable equation is still tipped in favour of a static, anaemic existence. Security and familiarity have not yet lost their lustre and still hold some attraction comparable to the haunting prospects of a life of wandering, perversity, and insecurity which folktales tend to warn aspirers against. The speaker is hindered, if anything, by a false intuition of an impending danger. The psychological bogey and the invisible monster that present a menace have to be beaten first before he walks unchained into the unknown. So, the speaker's shadow is the version of the person he, to no avail though, yearns to be. It creeps into sweet dreams and luminous wishes and is a step ahead beckoning and inviting:

Shall I link hands with my shadow and stroll  
Down the canal and over the railway bridge?  
Recall the inn's stories: 'The city's rage  
Will bite you, son, after the third stile.'  
Shall I show myself a haunter of outgoing ways,  
A longer, regretful at boundaries? (p. 173)

His other self, lying furtive and shadowy, shows the road wide open to temptations. The promised thrills of the adventure embolden this surrogate other self. Meanwhile patriarchal dogmas negotiate unrelentingly to hold him back from crossing the line and sliding into the unknown. As such, doubt and bewilderment hold him back and check his bravado. Larkin moves from one obtuse image to another trying to drive home intimations of what might have seemed will-o'-the-wisp to the young poet. In a self-interrogative mood, the speaker goes over possible alternatives and options, and whether or not to obey the call and venture through uncharted, latent prospects. With Larkin's favourite windows metaphor in 'Or leave my shadow in the yard / And sit behind french-windows with a word', the spark is gone and the phantasmagoria gives in to lethargy and passivity behind a glass barrier. Taxed with the pointless, winding argument, the speaker's mind relapses into negativity. He retreats, retracing his footsteps. He temporarily, at least, wants to be freed of the nudging impulse that sets his mind off into that virtual journey in the first place. The shadowy, other schizophrenic self is vanquished for the moment and even suppressed until it manages, probably in the daylight, to break from its chains and reclaim its place and power:

Shadow, when distance is done,  
 Leave us; when we meet  
 Be a lost shadow in the rest of the night. (p. 174)

The mind of the young poet keeps tossing him into areas where he has to appraise and comprehend the world. Knowledge is pursued fervently, though at times proves slippery and beguiling. In addition, the young Larkin subjects to both scrutiny and doubt every aspect of the social heritage passed over generations. His scepticism is very well sketched and documented in 'When we broke up, I walked alone' (pp. 163-66), a long poem composed in 1940.<sup>23</sup> The poem has an air of frolicsomeness where the speaker satirically examines his background and subjects it to derision. Cast in twenty seven

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<sup>23</sup> Archie Burnett (ed.), *The Complete Poems of Philip Larkin*, p. 533.

quatrains rhyming abcb and composed in iambic trimeters, it dwells on retrospective contemplations regarding education, religion, science, and poetry. In this context, the speaker confesses his proclivity for scepticism that has not spared even his tender years and kept him company to the very last:

‘Yes, I was eight years old when I  
Toddled in with Doubt;  
And Doubt is still my fellow as  
Eighteen, I saunter out.’ (p. 163)

This peculiar sense of compelling uncertainty contradicts the assertive ‘yes’ with its ironic twist; the speaker seems to be certain that he is uncertain and his scepticism makes a springboard for the ensuing revelations. The inquiring mind that dates from his prime is going to propel the later Larkin to lead an overall and radical revision of cultural and poetical legacies, a matter that later helps him to break from whatever he thought unfit or of no use to him. Inchoateness and inconclusiveness are the hallmarks of an aporetic mind that finds consolation in tearing values down and forging newer, perhaps even simpler, and less disorienting ones. In this early poem, an air of pride is detected as Larkin’s persona cannot help but flatter himself on the gift of doubt that he acquired naturally, almost effortlessly.

### III

Relevant to scepticism and indeterminacy, Larkin’s poems emerge as unashamed confessions of ignorance and unintelligibility and the personae almost pride themselves on their lack of certitude. Hence, the search for answers or inquisitiveness marks his mental endeavours and features in full flow in the poems where incontestability and paucity of knowledge prevail and the doubtful consciousness is withheld by neither reluctance nor shame. This ‘interrogative mood’ is found to be ‘ubiquitous in Larkin’s work,’ with ‘whole poems turning on a single question’, and is deemed as ‘apparently congruent with

Existentialism of the day.’<sup>24</sup> The quest for knowledge defines existence though the pursuit is not always crowned with success. Yet, Larkin’s poems are debating chambers, abuzz with questions and self-interrogations that often turn a full circle to rest at the very starting points: impotence and futility. As such, the poem occasionally inaugurates its philosophical arguments with a fully-fledged question:

Has all History rolled to bring us here?  
 If so, it needn’t interfere;  
 Further rolling will suit us fine.  
 (‘Has all History rolled to bring us here?’ p. 138)

And:

But as to the real truth, who knows? The earth  
 May bring forth, the past the future  
 Flowering over walls, a leaping urge –  
 (‘But as to the real truth’, p. 159)

These are thematic inquisitions, placed at the very onset, ‘as at the head of an exam answer’, to kindle interest in the poem’s impending argument.<sup>25</sup> Otherwise, interrogative tenors close the poem or rather stretch it for further consideration where the readers are enthused and invited to contribute their own answers and, in the long run, readings :

‘But who am I to curse or carp?  
 I, fashioned with a face that’s odd?’  
 (‘Evensong’, p. 145)

Boys wish to imitate who hear of it –  
 But will you tell them to repeat your act?  
 (‘So you have been, despite parental ban’, p. 148)

Yet who will deny  
 A gaudy universe is nigh?  
 Not me. Yet who obstructs the seeing? I.  
 (‘For the mind to betray’, p. 155)

Who is the faceless reaper that I fear?  
 Where have those visions gone I said I’d seen?  
 (‘Hard Lines’, p. 177)

Questions are incorporated into the poem where they operate as turning points at the thematic and poetical levels. ‘After-dinner Remarks’ (pp. 179-83) falls in neatly with the

<sup>24</sup> John Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, pp. 91, 92.

<sup>25</sup> John Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, p. 91.

last category wherein the interrogator questions the utility of the mental faculty: ‘And what serves, on the final bank, / Our logic and our wit?’ (p. 181) and incredulously laments mortality in: ‘Those who are born to rot, decay – / and am I one of these?’ (p. 182). Questions even intensify and multiply so that an inquisitive nucleus is effected in ‘Poem’ (pp. 216-17), examined above, where the wanderer is badgered by a curious idiot intervener. Almost debriefed by that symbolic idiot who knows him too well to let him go without a caustic interrogation, the trespasser is struck into silence and passivity as the idiot sarcastically exclaims:

How tall you're getting. Do you still  
Roll each day away like an iron wheel,  
Making four spokes of food? (p. 216)

And:

(Do you remember the acid used at birth?) (p. 216)

The interrogative mode defines musings, pregnant with awareness, lodging deep in a consciousness that keeps evolving and increasing ad infinitum, but with renewed uncertainty. That same consciousness realises the futility of the endeavour even before the onset and is thus harnessed to and at the mercy of a relentless master. The interrogator is not the type that brazens his weaknesses out and clings blindly to an arrogant notion of *amour propre*. Rather, the reliance on inquisitiveness is an index of a fervent desire to glean knowledge and gain sure grounds and a full grasp, though with the latent realisation that some questions are better left unanswered.

#### IV

Larkin’s early poems open with the eye of the observer drawn to Nature, recording and applauding its magnificence and beauty but also condemning its cruelty and mutability. Generally, ‘in poetry, a landscape is never only outer, it is also a portrait of a state of

soul.’<sup>26</sup> Larkin’s interest in nature, as Andrew Motion reveals, ‘is much less...for its own sake than for the opportunities it offers to moralise about the human condition.’<sup>27</sup> That is, the seemingly descriptive/natural ramblings tend to meander off the accustomed course to approach and rehearse intellectual and psychological strains that impinged, at the time, on the consciousness of the poet. These same mental pressures and tensions, however, kept operating vigilantly throughout his life-long poetic career orienting and shaping his entire oeuvre. Against claims of parochialism and provinciality, Larkin’s romantic expeditions sustain interest that might be dubbed as *para-Romantic* or *meta-Romantic* whether the romantic infusions redound to the themes or emerge as liabilities or excessive and uninformed indulgences. Steve Clark comments on the ‘romantic tonalities in Larkin’s verse’, which has been over-criticised ‘in an attempt to establish its range and flexibility; but this has tended to concentrate on his response to the natural world, the poignant beauty of transience, the occasional intimation of a kind of agnostic faith.’<sup>28</sup> For Larkin, nature is a starting point and a balancing or ricocheting agent and, in short, indispensable.

Following the steps of the Romantic poets from Wordsworth to Keats and drawing deeply on the Romantic tradition, Larkin would soon adjust his natural effusions to make way for a more profound and sophisticated contemplative attitude that plumbs the depth of the poet’s mind and displays his mental and intellectual calibre. In ‘We see the spring breaking across the rough stone’ (p. 146), a poem that dates back to 1939, the seventeen-year old Larkin traces and comments on life’s journey from arduous birth to mysterious demise, utilising the traditional seasonal metaphor. The poem falls into four quatrains rhyming abab, abca, abcb, and abba, effecting a varied, flexible texture that imitates the fact that life is both various and changeable. The life journey through its laborious phases

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<sup>26</sup> Jane Hirshfield, *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry*, p. 12.

<sup>27</sup> Andrew Motion, ‘Philip Larkin and Symbolism’, p. 35.

<sup>28</sup> Steve Clark, ‘Get Out As Early As You Can: Larkin’s Sexual Politics’, in *Philip Larkin*, ed. Stephen Regan (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), 94-134, at p.105.



constitutes a starting point for a deeper argument where the poet's mind probes themes of loneliness, alienation, imperfection and nihilism. Each season is riddled through and each achievement is projected against a flawed and compromising backdrop. Thereupon, spring brings hard, servile labour where the speaking *we* is robbed of will power. Summer warning goes unnoticed for the narrating *we* is inattentively overwhelmed by summer impetus. Autumn's husky harvest tells of the inferiority of human endeavour and the mediocrity of achievement and finally winter seals the end where 'wintery conditions' often convey 'hardship and exclusion.'<sup>29</sup> The contemplative *we* is left in both wonder and awe as to the potentiality of another journey. Again Larkin's iconic and emblematic window wedges itself into the unresolved, desolate scene as a mediator to posthumous prophecy. At the poem's closure, however, the collective *we* abandons incertitude momentarily and is buoyed up as *it* gains some confidence though still wavering between the two polarities:

And winter closes on us like a shroud.  
 Whether through windows we shall see spring again  
 Or not, we are sure to hear the rain  
 Chanting its ancient litany, half-aloud. (p. 146)

The focal *we* that the poem pivots around and utilises simultaneously is polemical as it is. Its symbolism cannot be passed in silence, for Larkin could have intended it universally. Thus, it is open for alternative and more specific readings, especially as triggered by the second half of the first stanza: 'But we are pledged to work alone, / To serve, bow, nor ask if or why.' It remains unresolved whether the poet intended the enslaved, but ostensibly articulate *we* to symbolise the spiritual slavery of humankind in its entirety, the servitude and drudgery of working classes, or political serfdom.

Window imagery, commanding a rural and immobile panorama, is set into motion in another poem written in 1940. In 'From the window at sundown', reflections emerge

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<sup>29</sup> Stephen Cooper, *Philip Larkin: Subversive Writer* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2004), p. 93.

about knowledge, futility, death, and reasoning. Windows are channels of knowledge from which the viewer gains an outlet into 'usual peace'. This time the window pane does not act as a barrier between the viewer and the outside real world; the window is the launching point of an exploring excursion:

From the window at sundown  
Walking out onto grass  
I receive intimation  
Of the usual peace. (p. 166)

The twilight is all peace and tranquillity and the holistic scene is marked by silence, respite, and motionlessness. Being concluded, the diurnal world retreats so that the nocturnal takes over. It is more like a static picture, a snapshot of natural peace and quiet. The day's work has come to an end and is laid aside until it is picked up again, presumably next morning. The world is reprieving from the hustle and bustle of the day and absorbed by a death-like hush. The dead silence creates an atmosphere of idleness and leisure; there seems to be no need to rush as everything will lie, it seems, unaltered, if it has to, for years on end. One may think that this silence cannot be all ascribed to nightfall. Some mysterious cosmic or at least large-scale event has hit the village of the poem, therefore every activity and routine of the world has been frozen and laid aside. The village is struck dead, as if by a spell, and nothing moves apart from the bells whose movement shakes the otherwise dormant air:

Harvests lie  
Resting in sheaves across  
The arching fields.  
Sounds fall on moss;

Are deadened; die  
The village is there  
As for years;  
Its bells shake gently the air... (p. 166)

However, while the external nightscape oozes peace and calm, in the observer's mind, there is a mental turmoil pent-up. The outside pacifism accentuates the chaos and clamour

within. The awareness of the emotion/reason schism surfaces as the speaker points a finger at the former as the source of the agitation and restlessness he falls prey to:

I breathe, breathing  
Try imagining contrast  
Between this peace  
And my veiled holocaust.

But emotion under  
Guise of reason says:  
You are the motivator; no,  
You are this peace. (p. 166)

Imagination aids the observer to realise how wide the schism stretches between the lifeless outside, which he misnames as 'peace', and his mental 'holocaust'. In the antitheses of life/death, calm/holocaust, peace/war, and reason/emotion, the conflicting and unresolved character of the argument stands out.

Nature symbolism operates to enact Larkin's major concerns: mental discord, mortality, volatility, and disillusionment. When natural elements appear in Larkin's poetry, they are found to be 'neither animistic, nor hallowed by half-remembered druidic lore; they are emblems of mutabilitie.'<sup>30</sup> The image of the untimely falling flowers with which one of his 1939 poems, 'Falling of these early flowers' (p. 149), begins drives home these psychological obsessions. Gloomy natural images populate the poem where decline is set against spiritual and moral deterioration. The alliterated falling flowers parallel the rainy winter cloud that 'Rends the lover's heart'. Sublimation, sacredness, elevation, and in the long run transcendence have come to ruin and rot, and need to be wrapped neatly and sent to their demise: 'the wind that wrecks the shrine / And the rotting of the stairs / Should be a deeper death.' However, the mind does not come to a halt nor is it stunted by the sterility of the endeavour; it braves the disintegrating scene and combats it. The second stanza, likewise, rehearses the image of the first, this time, with 'Fading of this early flower', to orient the meditation marking a shift from collective consciousness to individual adversity.

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<sup>30</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations*, p. 152.

The symmetry of the two inaugurating lines acknowledges the intended link. Philosophising about the ephemera of existence, the changeability of the natural scene and the transience of its beauties lends cogent evidence. Alongside the pensive argument, the poem delves deep to identify and define the place of the mind in relation to the withering surroundings. The mind is hardly immune to subversiveness and apparently taxed by the attempt to impose order. The mind itself is prone to decline and backslide into lethargy and lassitude, for instance, or metamorphoses into some marginal land and intellectual quagmire:

Pull of mind from form apart  
Will for ever sing the seas;  
The constant thought, behind the eyes  
That change at every breath. (p. 149)

Again, that the mind reaches a deadlock and is irretrievably enervated by the effort it exerts is the one evil, next to death, that intimidates and agitates the thinker in the poem. No drastic measures seem to stop the mind from the backslide – “Everything falls to the shade, / Gasping to the withered air” (p. 149). The speaker, however, confesses that certain aspects of the world are ‘Impervious to reasoning’, and the self is taken to task because of its pursuit of beauty and perfection, not to mention permanence:

Impervious to reasoning,  
The frantic answer dies alike:  
‘O what need have you thus to take.  
Who is so wonderful?’ (p. 149)

To come to terms with the mind and to confront its demented state, which seems to be unable to address the existing challenges, raises the question of how to handle the aftermath. The speaker in ‘Lie there, my tumbled thoughts’ (pp. 143-44) has to address the question and break from rigidity and conventionality. The attempt to find answers and nail the whys and wherefores turns out to be a luxury and indulgence:

Lie there, my tumbled thoughts,  
That through th'involuntary year  
Have fallen hot without retorts... (p. 143)

This is the humiliating fiasco of the intellectually researching mind that engineers a quest to land on the vital, crucial key to essential answers. But like all the mental labours that the majority of Larkin's poems profile, the status quo of the pursuit crystallises into formidable disappointment and paves the way for further perplexity. The mind's unrewarded search falls short of contriving answers to essential but axiomatic questions within a cyclic time frame. So, it confronts and grapples with the intellectual and psychological pressures. The thoughts, burning hot and now even more baffling, have to recede and ebb, and the mind has to involuntarily concede defeat and failure:

Queer  
Medley now, of loves,  
And daily hate, and yearly fear,  
Of the mind taking off its gloves,  
Into nudity sheer. (p. 143)

The mind has exposed itself and is being dismantled, committing what it fears and hates. It is laid naked, vulnerable, and defenceless against the irrational medley. The mind plays a risky game sparing none and nothing, hence the 'taking off the gloves' metaphor. The exposé reveals without discretion the thoughts and feelings that are usually glossed over and denied, but are part and parcel of human existence where enormity and nobility coexist complementarily. The focal persona cannot fight the impulse that pushes him to self-ruin, to stage his mental struggles, and revel in the agony inflicted in consequence. The self, vulnerable and untenable after the unravelling experiences, plummets down to hit rock bottom. The rest of the poem seems to go over and over again the notions of time as a burden, but also a confidante: 'So we are encrusted / With the days, bright interlocked, / And learn that only time is trusted.' Antithesis surfaces again while time is designated rather murkily in 'th'involuntary year', 'daily hate', and 'yearly fear', not to mention the plural admission that existence is shackled, frozen, and rigidified by days in the lines quoted above. Time is all of a sudden an only trusted alternative, an auspicious adjustment, marking a paradigm shift that correlates, though, with the bright days of the

antecedent line. Towards the end of the poem, the drama of suspended danger intensifies where 'We pass through knotted jungle / Ready to be shot, or shocked,' until the danger subsides rather ironically into 'Coffins, inscribed, unlocked' (p. 144) in readiness for the final disposal. The poem perhaps suggests that this is the only place where the tumbled thoughts would lie undisturbed. The anxious mind is impoverished, runs dry, relapses to complacency, and finds its final resting place in demise. The flame, lacking sustenance, goes off; the course is run and the mental exertion is extinct. Every time a poem seems to be making an opening, even though illusory, towards mental and intellectual consummation, an aberration thrusts itself into the scene, sabotaging and wreaking havoc.

The mind, however, is not racked solely on account of meditations of a philosophical and/or transcendental calibre. The mind could expire before it approaches its chimera for the mind's desires are insubstantial and intangible, luring it into ruin. This static posture that stunts the mind is described more powerfully in 'For the mind to betray' and the epigrammatic 'For who will deny' (p. 155) that rehearses the closure of the former:

For the mind to betray  
With its deadly paralytic ray  
The unwary body, that is a

Familiar thing. But threnody  
Of being sung by shrinking body  
Is a more peculiar way to die.

Yet in me is combat  
Fought like this: the weird bat  
Of soul, escapeless, will expire at

Length. Yet who will deny  
A gaudy universe is nigh?  
Not me. Yet who obstructs the seeing? I. (p. 155)

With the equivocal, but antithetical, meanings of betray (deceive and expose) operating simultaneously, and with the use of enjambment where the sentence goes, at times, beyond the stanza boundary, the poem launches a pensive, philosophical double-edged argument.

To begin with, the mind is handicapped and intoxicated; its light, a symbol of knowledge and awareness, is eclipsed on account of being harnessed to the indifferent, inattentive body. The poem acknowledges and rehearses the classical idea that the body, being physical and, consequently, inferior, falls short of keeping pace with a flame-like mind. Still the image of ‘paralytic ray’ and the contagious passivity and feebleness that the body infects the mind with are novel and intriguing.

The body/mind duality looms large and menacing in the poem effecting dissension and incompatibility. The body ages, deteriorates, goes to pieces, shrinks, and finally is doomed to dissolution. However, the poem’s argument revises the idea that the mind remains ageless, invincible and an everlasting flame, a beacon of knowledge and inspiration, a widening node even when it, neurotically speaking, loses focus and relapses into senility and decrepitude. It also examines the validity of the eternal dialectic of mind versus body, where the two are perceived as separate entities and the former is axiomatically held in far higher esteem. In Larkin’s poem, the two are more or less reciprocal. The mind and body are denied autonomy and tied to each other, for the poem suggests that they are inseparable, though they ought to be distinct. Both mind and body lament their flawed, imperfect purviews and each contributes to banality.

However, a second reading is plausible in which the body is victimised due to being at the mercy of a mind that blows thoughts, dwelling within, out of proportion, taxing the body along with it. The rules are even reversed and the mind’s inadequacy is portrayed for the ‘ray’ of the mind is found to be ‘paralytic’, another paradoxical combination of opposites. The mind is sickly, static, and lacking in sobriety and energy as the imagery of wanly, ecliptic light intimates. The mind, in short, exploits the unaware and otherwise content body and keeps it in thrall to its morbid whims and idiosyncrasies. After all, the body is the mouthpiece of the mind; it sings its graces and praises as well as

elegies. It goes beyond itself, transcends its weakness, and combats on behalf of the mind. To compromise and throw the argument into deeper confusion, Larkin introduces 'the weird bat of soul' as a third agent, to furnish the combating human triangle in full; vulnerable and without escape, the soul is also by no means immune to expiration. When the argument grows weary and dubious, the meditative persona finds consolation in exposing the vulgarity of existence and its unworthiness. A new, but polemical logic presides with its lamentation of human myopia which overlooks and connives at the flawed, tainted world. But again, the speaker can neither confess his share in the spiritual blackout nor free his mind, body and soul of the culpability. In the end, the speaker's uninformed attitude dumfounds and frustrates the reader. The cause of the corruption the poem hints at remains unknown.

Pensiveness is moulded into philosophy and an intellectual polemic is inaugurated in 'A Study in Light and Dark' (p. 140), a poem of two verses, written in 1939 and dismissed by Larkin as unworthy and inferior.<sup>31</sup> Obviously, the poem falls short of capturing the high ideas and sentiments that motivated the intimation in the first place, which probably has to do with the various incarnations of light. No wonder if one keeps in mind that the poem claims to be a study, i.e., learned and encyclopaedic. Its pragmatic approach to light treats it, in the abstract, as a neutral and relative concept; the context determines the positive or negative connotations of light. Therefore, light may symbolise despair, death, oppression, or boredom and takes on contentious invocations in relation to the source, place, and people. And while *dark* is not mentioned in the first verse, almost all the instances of light the poem surveys are detected only in the darkness.

The poem is structured in a fashion that nearly simulates research papers and the lines are arranged in a list which grows smaller towards the bottom with the

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<sup>31</sup> Archie Burnett (ed.), *The Complete Poems of Philip Larkin*, pp. 520-21.



demonstratives: that/this/there heading the pieces of information or the study's findings. Objectivity, clarity, and accuracy of the language mirror the observant mind behind. As the poem opens, the first stanza is marked by its long lines whose first letters appear in lower case, apart from the first line. The symbolic imagery of railway glow, church candle, a cigarette after consummated carnality, evanescent materialistic joys, domestic life compromise, industrial, political and military awkwardness are all silhouetted and reviewed, making of light an even more sophisticated, chameleon-like agent of thought.

For a short poem, the content is a plethora of dense and varied symbolism; the poet has it symbolically loaded, perhaps to its own demerit. Light as an embodiment of knowledge and transparency comes only in flashes or insufficiently in meagre proportions or is merely implied. Every item in the light inventory adds a new nugget of information albeit tiny and vestigial. Light gives only casual glimpses into objects to identify them, but neglects to elaborate and define them. It is the blinding flashlight from a car's headlights which both redound to and dispel opacity or 'a searchlight feeling for bombers' which may announce the advent of fear and death. The outcome is a perfunctorily black and white snapshot, a monochromatic caricature, and a cursory sketch of the world. Light, in the poem, gives up its traditional auspicious symbolism partially and augurs ill when through association, light 'was the flash as a man shot himself', 'a searchlight feeling for bombers' and/or 'of Mars' to double emphasise the mythical war symbolism, or 'twin headlights of a capitalist's car' in contrast to 'the gaslight of a trodden worker', bringing forth both labour and its exploitation. But for good and worse, it is the light of discovery that dawns on the mind. It is light that provokes thinking and speculation. The light penetrates into the mind and adumbrates its intimate windings and twistings, but which could equally be deficient and even cruel.

As the condensed, almost prose-like introduction closes, the poem's persona comes to life oddly enough in darkness, not light:

Alone now, in my dark room,  
The pebbles cease to drop into the rocking pool  
And gradually the surface quietens  
Reflecting image of darkest peace and silence. (p. 140)

The retreat into darkness takes the thinker to embryonic imperceptiveness and pre-knowledge. In so doing, it allows his thoughts to subside and he feels safe tucked in this prenatal state. The mind, here, is modestly equated with a 'rocking pool', not a sea of immeasurable vastness, a typical self-belittling strategy of Larkin's. In its confined and limited space, the mind is first subjected to suffering, but soon finds comfort. Restless thoughts that have disturbed the mind in the realm of light and set into motion pensiveness and introspection have not only receded but also ceased. The water is back to stagnancy and the mind has recovered its tranquillity; that peace of mind costs the speaker the relapse into passivity, though. Hence, the mind takes shelter in the night, backslides into torpor, or goes into hibernation. In such a stasis, questions no longer strike fires that 'catch the clothes' and burn covers into ashes, exposing the vulnerability of the mind and, in consequence, jeopardising it. The mind, in the darkness, is a ghost, insubstantial and so safe from the 'nudity sheer' of 'Lie there my tumbled thoughts', already analysed. Besides the silhouetting, shadowy aspects of light and darkness, the vignette-like poem nourishes its pictorial ambience with:

But only as it were a spreading  
Draws all threads to their finished pattern  
And you are pieced together bit by bit  
Set against the evening  
Lovely and glowing, like a chain of gold. (p. 140)

The solitary mind, now the darkness has chased all imperturbable thoughts away and restored silence, commences to trail away from the ungainly, clumsy arguments. It gradually pieces together an ethereal image of the beloved whose presence, in its turn,

opens up a light imagery triggered by ‘glowing’ / ‘gold’ and settles into the awareness of the double edges of love that is simultaneously entangling/enslaving and thrilling.

‘The world in its flowing is various’ (p. 190), written in 1941, emerges as a more pensive and mind-oriented poem that debates the role played by the mind in codifying and reshaping essential truths of life. The world, tide-like in variety, instability, and momentum, has to bow to the ‘rules imposed / By others on it as their personal guides.’ Hence, rebellion is in the air. The mind here has a general and more universal reference where it is an abstraction. The poem unpacks the sabotage inflicted when the mind intrudes and imposes itself on the natural ordinance of the world or ‘The plot of life bequeathed to each’. Although it seems to condemn intellectual smouldering, still it adopts none other than the intellectual argument it lampoons to support its claim. Personified as a schemer, the mind is laid open:

That is the mind’s natural destructiveness  
Aiding its plea for reason; even so  
Its charts and plans are made in readiness. (p. 190)

However, life is too vast to be vanquished by rational reasoning that is intended to curb and trim the call of living. Aided by the simile of winter tides, the poet argues that life flows high and uncontrollable and will ultimately win supremacy and break free of bonds:

And yet, as tides in winter when  
The glass is sunk, incalculable flow  
Of life can break down mortared walls, drown men. (p. 190)

The poem does not deviate from the norm, recruiting a philosophical argument to drive home its anti-rational appeals. It is presumed to promote spontaneity and inadvertence, but resorts to obtuseness and contortions. Thus, the contemplative voice seems to have fallen between two stools and its arguments are self-contradictory. The poem pivots around a polemical intellectual dispute that cannot be spelt out with less sophistication and solemnity. When it comes to the notorious intellectuality, the young Larkin seems to be on the horns of a dilemma.

Likewise, 'Evening and I, young' (p. 188) traverses the continents of thought and knowledge and the failure of the human grasp to define and encompass what lies beyond the physical immediate world. Death is the primary theme and the poem is the mind's attempt to navigate through its mysteries. Here, the mind is bent towards the celestial where the gazer is set on reading the stars. Larkin would revisit the same theme later and treat it with more confidence, sophistication, and finesse in 'Sad Steps' and 'Solar' (*High Windows*). In a variation of trochaic and iambic trimeters, the poem begins with a prologue-like piece and launches an argument that orients itself to phenomenal issues:

Evening and I, young,  
Watch the single star beyond  
The quiet road and trees;  
Move in time and know  
The evenings of the tired who die  
Under the guardian hill:  
Move in space and realise  
The ones I love in lighted rooms  
Their movements and their peace. (p. 188)

A single star, symbolic of the single life trajectory of the speaker, perceived in the evening sky, opens the door wide before adventitious, impromptu reflections. The single star imagery, conveying perhaps the limitation of the observer's egoist perspective at the moment of reminiscing about his loved ones, is shortly replaced by a more panoramic view where 'myriad stars' are encompassed. So in the place of a single obsession that extends over time and space, the mind is trying to come to terms with myriad ones. The speaker rehearses the questions: 'But who can tell the many myriad stars? / Not I, not I, though soon I must face them and feel / The light night wind singing against my eyes.' The choice of vocabulary is intriguing, with 'the night light wind' blinding his eyes if one is to paraphrase. To perceive, acquaint himself, and command a better view of his whereabouts, he admonishes in the imperative: 'Stand on a hill, or lean from dark window', but in vain for:

The stars in their intricate patterns will daze  
Any who stare; useless to try to order their mass,

Their number, they are balanced in system  
Which you cannot better. (p. 188)

The stars, whether they literally refer to the galaxy or symbolically to fate and destiny, are unreadable and irreversible. The stellar panorama defeats rationalisation and codification and therefore symbolises failure and impotence. The latent religious symbolism is invoked likewise. Mythically, the stars are the Olympic gods who trifle with human lives and send them into uncharted destinies. Human exertions are futile and all they can do is reinforce the sense of the human's diminutive stance in comparison with the gigantic elements of the universe. In his pursuit of knowledge and enlightenment, the speaker ends up ironically dazzled and smitten. The more he looks and searches, the more opaque the picture gets and the more humbled he is. The quest that started as a thin flame and one simple line of reflection has grown into 'jagged colours' and 'orchestras of sound and rhythm' so that ears go deaf and eyes blind, but more importantly the mind is 'mazed'. If he persists in search of an intelligible pattern, the mind will malfunction or even perish:

nothing can save  
From the cascading mind, the rocks that receive  
The final crashing turrets of the brain. (p. 188)

The mind or brain in favour of the biological faculty has gone into a wild goose chase and returns vanquished. After the chaotic expedition and glorious adventure, the argument is back to the basics:

Night wears through its hours at last, and  
Again we stand where we stood watching a single star,  
By the stark tree on the hill, and think  
Of faces, webbed with decay, that once  
Pulled us protesting through sunlight on water,  
Rain on grass: the rusted hands rest on a stick. (p. 188)

When the darkness wears thin, the mind is demystified and the *we* emerges to replace the antecedent imperative. While the night is a realm of plaintive pensiveness, the day heralds inscrutability and matter-of-factness. The unworthiness of the pursuit wins the upper hand and puts the seal on the intellectual negotiations. The mind is torn apart by thoughts of decay, death, senility and the mutability of beauty and youth. What remains is a faint

memory of faces that sparked the quest, recalled against a background of exuberance and liveliness: ‘sunlight’, ‘water’, ‘rain’, and ‘grass’. These faces have ruefully transformed with decay probably beyond recognition; their owners’ hands which once switched the ignition on are rusty and dilapidating. The rust spreads and the body falls to pieces; it is time to announce:

O love, then there is little time for them,  
The last stronghold will fall, day pass, defence vanish,  
And we depart as we came, with a pale star,  
Shading our eyes before death’s imminent sun. (p. 188)

Humans depart this world as they come in the first place, defenceless and alone. They are finally set free of the ‘pale star’ that accompanies a life of agony and trials. Death is no longer coupled with negativity or fear, but is elevated to approach the mightiness, warmth, and light of the sun in contrast to a barely lighted star-like life. As the poem reaches its conclusion, the moment of transcendence is accomplished. The sought-for eternal, priceless knowledge is almost attained and the enlightenment humans pine for is at hand. This is one peculiar example when the notion of the imminent death exudes comfort, consolation, and confidence. Larkin’s rendition of death par excellence is more akin to Lawrence’s death imagery in ‘Shadows’ where death is invoked as numbness and oblivion unfolding humans in the shadow of God. What is of paramount interest here is the mood with which the mind rationalises death in its attempt to fit it into the pattern of existence. Agnosticism in this poem surfaces and a faith-like notion dominates the conspicuous valedictory rhythm of the poem’s finale.

Philosophical and intellectual speculations populate and animate another fourteen-line sonnet-like poem: ‘This triumph ended in the curtained head’, organised into four tercets and a final couplet :

This triumph ended in the curtained head:  
The walls blew out and spring remained outside,  
Flaring through thick trees;

Love blew a fuse and saw us in the sun  
Nailing the writer's dust against the breeze,  
A season and nothing done;

The modern wind runs steady past my ear,  
As broken from a broken land I come  
Into the furious year

Where hot grass parts the rivers and the roads,  
The petrol throne of hoardings and the drum  
Of the drought-giving birds.

Here childhood ends, and days again become  
The real spread country forcing through my dream. (p. 204)

Composed between April and July in 1942, in iambic pentameters and trimeters, the poem speculates on many an intellectually charged theme.<sup>32</sup> While many of the previous poems revolve around defeat and failure, this poem undermines an alleged triumph and snubs a rather mediocre victory. Consciousness surfaces as a strong force that keeps the speaking persona well grounded and alert. He is too aware to be blinded by transient, shaky success. An ambience of desolation, ruin, and gloom hangs on the poem and the imagery draws dark and unwholesome sketches of a probably dying world. The Pyrrhic victory has expired; spring remains outside and hence the seasons are disrupted; love is acrimonious and so is the year; the debating voice fails and quits; his labour goes wasted; both Larkin's persona and the land he belongs to are sabotaged. The speaker has lost faith in all highly esteemed human values, which collapse one by one as he goes over them. Hope, love, patriotism, art, and nature have lost their meanings and impact. From the very onset with 'the curtained head', symbolism is pervasive and operative, creating a gnomic atmosphere of secrecy and camouflage. The poet is plausibly insinuating at Modernism through the symbolism of 'the modern wind', which may have a broader sense to designate all facets of Modernism: artistic, social, and political. The sestet wraps things up; perception and maturity have superseded, ad hoc, spontaneity and carefree, dreamy childhood.

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<sup>32</sup> Archie Burnett (ed.), *The Complete Poems of Philip Larkin*, p. 554.

A similar vein runs through 'Poem' (pp. 238-39), which abounds in a dreary, sterile, and dismal imagery. The debater winds up an argument that reassesses his precarious existence and finds it irrevocably faulty and wanting. The argument is couched in brief lines, written in iambic trimeters with an anapaestic variation and an ababedcd rhyme scheme. The rhyme and metre mimic the hurried and urgent tone of danger and emergency. The world has been stunted and is no longer productive or fertile. The seasonal symbolism, traditional as it is, is again a little bit twisted and tampered with when summer's characteristic bounty, echoing Eliot's 'cruellest' April in *The Waste Land*, is diminishing.<sup>33</sup> Retrospectively, the speaker casts aspersions on his personal values, prods at them to demean and deflate them, and finds them invalid and unsound. The outcome is akin to self-blame and admission of a faulty personal logic:

Summer extravagances shrink:  
And now memories drop  
Forsakenly, I used to think,  
A finite and shapely crop,  
Nothing was more mistaken... (p. 238)

The symbolic opening is soon to give room to more symbolic speculation about the world and even perhaps existence. The cosmos, in its entirety, is being remoulded over and over again. Everything lays unfinished as if time had stopped and the scene is frozen; whatever is built soon falls into ruin and disuse, hence an atmosphere of waste and loss prevails:

At the fierce unfinished centre  
Everything grows and is broken,  
Spring, summer, and winter. (p. 238)

There is a fervent desire to create something that matters, but any flicker of hope soon proves illusory and is, thus, beaten out. Ascent, beguiling as it must be, is soon followed by a downward trajectory for the 'headland' of ambition is slippery and eludes the touch:

If gulls rose in the wind  
Crying, and fell away  
From the climbed headland  
One similar day  
To this, we were lucky but

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<sup>33</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909 - 1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 63.



Can claim no credit,  
For nothing console  
Ever was granted... (p. 238)

Dreariness and dissipation are further fathomed out with more retinal images of waste and forsakenness. Some of the ideas that this poem introduces, but to which it does not do great credit, reappear later in 'The View'. Both poems share the symbolic outlook from above and both map the metaphor of past years in terms of a descent. Time is appraised as cyclic and repetitive as the daily rising sun. Again, awareness and consciousness through seeing on the one hand and sunlight on the other orient and animate deducible knowledge:

And the eye must descend  
Through the sparse field of years  
To this empty land,  
This desert of houses  
Where the aristocratic  
And to-be-denied  
Gold sun throws back  
Endless and cloudless pride.<sup>34</sup> (pp. 238-39)

An imagery of hollowness or nothingness dominates the scene and only an 'aristocratic' sun rules unrivalled. The view from above is neither comforting nor promising; hope sinks and bounties of seasons are dwindling or even ending. The barrenness which threatens the entire landscape is actual and literal as well as intellectual and cultural.

## V

As they speculate, Larkin's personae target the reality they find themselves entrapped in and intrigued by as well as profess opinions regarding art, its futility, and its meaning. Larkin's awareness of his predicament, as a poet, grows and he is swayed towards self-disparagement, hence the derogatory comments he appended to a significant part of his early poetical compositions.<sup>35</sup> In these early experiments, Larkin reveals the literary critic in him attempting analyses and assessments of writing and also enlightens readers on how at least he strikes a poetical ore. He tries to navigate through the mental and psychological

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<sup>34</sup> Larkin mildly revises these three last lines and uses them to close VIII (pp.238-9) from *The North Ship*.

<sup>35</sup> See Larkin's commentaries that populated the manuscripts and his journals, and which Archie Burnett documents in *The Complete Poems of Philip Larkin*.

dimensions involved in the writing process to elucidate and demystify it. His criticism is largely marked by non-complacency and discontentment to say the least. This excoriating philosophy regarding writing stands out in a poem he entitled 'A Writer' (p. 104). Like Auden's 'Matthew Arnold', Larkin's 'A Writer' (p. 104), according to Smith, addresses 'the idea of a thwarted, solitary gift'.<sup>36</sup> And in its diary-quote opening, the poem anticipates 'Forget What Did' from *High Windows*. Though the neutrality of the title is explained in the very first line, which quotes a diary, the poem is not only a concise statement on writing in the abstract, but also a commentary on existence. This early poem, it seems, holds the view that writing, though undeniably intriguing, is a 'futile', barren process that is the by-product of an egoist agency and an act of both denial and admittance. Writing is no magic wand and a writer is no longer the Bard; he is liable to be stripped of his glorious robes. In this early sonnet written in 1941, the writer outlines the flaws of writing, which is 'Interesting, but futile,' a diagnosis that applies to existence as well. Its narrator laments the pre-knowledge that 'no actions were rewarded, / There were no prizes'. The writer should learn to expect that there is 'no lasting salary / Beyond the bowels' momentary applause', a metaphorical package that banalises writing further. In the conclusion, Larkin's attitude tends to be even more astringent and barbed:

He lived for years and never was surprised:  
A member of his foolish, lying race  
Explained away their vices: realised  
It was a gift that he possessed alone:  
To look the world directly in the face;  
The face he did not see to be his own. (p. 104)

A writer's existence is rationally analysed, assessed, and stigmatised. Again, the writer is torn between the latent belief in the matchless uniqueness, the singularity of creative talent, and the tantalising fulfilment good writing sparks on the one hand and the quixotic, unwieldy pursuit of idealism and perfectionism on the other. The realisation makes him sceptical and even self-degrading to the point of questioning his own integrity when his

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<sup>36</sup> Stan Smith, *Poetry and Displacement* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), p. 31.

‘race’ is denounced as ‘foolish, lying’ and his face ceases ‘to be his own.’ Hence, he turns the mirror inwardly to underrate the pretentious writer in him whose job is only to explain vices away. That move takes readers back to the opening line where the fallibility of writing is accentuated. Even though writing is by no means impeccable, it still endows the writer with the privilege to see through and point the finger at fellow humans’ ‘vices’, hence it is a catalyst of consciousness and an agent of knowledge. The writer is fully aware and his mind is the verifying mirror.

Similar revelations on writing emerge in ‘Hard Lines, or Mean Old W. H. Thomas Blues’ (pp. 175-77) with its twist on W. H. Auden and Dylan Thomas. The poetical persona laments his inability to force language to do what he aspires, and covets, whether genuinely or cynically, Dylan and Auden’s seemingly easy flow of words and images. The argument is couched in an obtuse and ambivalent language to best embody his anxiety and distress at his deficiencies. His mind is taxed by the weighty load of thoughts it is saddled with: ‘Barren the lilt of comfort she can salvage / And lost the phrase embroidered on the badge: / The wall-high thinker round the garden shed / Cannot with these go easily to bed’ (p. 175). Larkin seems to lurk in the shadow behind the persona of his poem that wonders:

‘Where does the power come from? who hears it call?  
Are all the chosen chosen when at school?’ (p. 176).

Further, that his inspiration would drain away and desert him is an ongoing and agonising life obsession, exclaiming in the end ‘Where have those visions gone I said I’d seen?’ (p. 177). Again, the struggling poetical voice aspires to rationalise creativity and make sense of the processes involved, but is met with disappointment and bleakness. Thereupon, he gives up the entire quest and consoles himself by the thought that creativity lodges in a mystic latitude beyond his physical grasp or even rational logic.

The references to creative writing are, sometimes, entirely pejorative and tinged with cynicism. ‘The poet has a straight face’ (pp. 211-14) is a long meditative poem of a

hundred lines on despair, death, alienation, and the war. The poet seems to suggest that in order to be coruscating and prosperous, poets may dispense with cathartic airs, opt for less serious mediums of expression, and stoop to jocularity and horseplay: 'The poet has a straight face / Otherwise he would be out of place. / Nothing like comedy / Can ever be admitted as poetry' (p. 211). Larkin returns to argue on behalf of or against art and writing (poetry included) in such other poems as 'Further after-dinner Remarks Extempore' (pp. 158-59), 'Art is not clever' (p. 160), 'Creative Joy' ( pp. 161-62), 'The question of poetry, of course' (p. 167), 'Rupert Brooke' (p. 168), 'Postscript On Imitating Auden' (p. 168), and 'The Poet's Last Poem' ( pp. 189-90). These poems expose the major streams of influence with Auden dominating the scene. They also prove that Larkin's writing is hardly based on spontaneous effusions and that an individualistic poetical epistemology and poetics are in the process of forming and maturing. It does not seem to matter to him, though, how much outrage his adverse poetics could generate.

To sum up, Larkin's juvenile scribbles, which he was too dissatisfied with to make public, but also did not feel the impulse and urge to destroy, harbour more than meets the eye. The poems provide insights into the mental forces, anxieties, inspirations, ambitions, and yearnings that set the mind working first and foremost. These unaccomplished pieces subsume the basic strands and explore the initial strains that later ripened into a mature approach and polished strategies. This early repertoire exposes Larkin's primary modernist training. Larkin was all too familiar with the existing celebrated and highly-esteemed poetical canon. Therefore, the young Larkin absorbed and exemplified modernist tenets and practices when he chose to. He was not from the very outset hostile to modernist poetics. Larkin's juvenilia proves that he was by no means oblivious to the poetic mainstream of the time and that he initially planned to practice within its scope. The indulgence in obscurity and impenetrability bears witness to Larkin's interest in modernist

aesthetics. Larkin's obscurity in the early works went unquestioned and *The Less Deceived* seems to mark the intelligible stage.<sup>37</sup> Larkin's early reliance on obscurity is not always to create convoluted windings, but to effect profundity and sophistication. Oddly enough, the poet whose poetry is stigmatised as clear, direct and accessible is found, upon reappraisal, to write poems that are intangible and mind-taxing. Still, the disparate critical views point to the inconsistency and indeterminacy of how Larkin's poetry has been received.

In all, the early poems are infected with obscurity which occasionally prevails throughout the entire poem so that it looks cryptic and riddle-like. The contemplative and pensive tenors entail the resort to obscurity as a dominating factor which is an inevitable corollary of thoughts, multiplying, merging, and fracturing. Larkin, at large, barely circumvents obtuseness and obscurity except when he chooses otherwise. He seems to relinquish candour and transparency and opt for philosophical and esoteric veins on both linguistic and poetical levels. The poet's entire reliance on the direct, undisguised medium of expression is going to be inculcated later in his career, laying himself open for continuous criticism and attack on account of simplicity, commonality, and even professional and poetic despondency and impotence. His determination to steer clear of modernism was an afterthought and a transformation he underwent as his poetical style took an individual and original turn. His mind veered towards what is superficially deemed ordinary, nondescript, anti-intellectual and less intriguing to couch in themes that are intricate, philosophical and inquisitive.

Nonetheless, the early repertoire of the poet is by no means devoid of the misty and eerie airs and windings of the modernist poets, hence references that link him to the towering figures of modernism are investigated and exposed. The impact Eliot has on Larkin is an area explored by more than one critic, where the latter's symbolism is set

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<sup>37</sup> Barbara Everett, 'Philip Larkin: After Symbolism', p. 55.

against the backdrop of the former's poetry.<sup>38</sup> Larkin has obviously adopted the symbolist tradition, despite his declared distaste for foreign poetry, and made full use of it. Larkin's resort to symbolism marks his reflections on religion, Christianity and faith. Raphaël Ingelbien analyses Larkin's religious symbolism as manifested by an early poem, 'A stone church damaged by a bomb', and a later one, 'Church Going', and uncovers their relation to Eliot.<sup>39</sup>

Larkin was no stranger to foreign influences, either, as manifested in his fondness for symbolic imagery, which lends the poet an intricate medium to flesh out his profound arguments. He was well-versed in French literature, for 'as a young man he translated Villon, Verlaine and Baudelaire; he was familiar with Proust; and to the end of his life he retained an unillusioned affection for the brilliantly disagreeable Henri de Montherlant' not to mention Baudelaire's influence on his Brunette's phase.<sup>40</sup> His reading as a student in Oxford proves the diversity, variety, and even unorthodoxy of influences for 'he worked hard in private to broaden his knowledge of writers who lay outside the syllabus' admiring D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, and W. H. Auden, whom he praised as 'the first "modern" poet, in that he could employ modern properties unselfconsciously.'<sup>41</sup> For Larkin, these authors modelled a combination of 'intellectual achievement with the spirit of revolt.'<sup>42</sup> Further, Larkin dabbled in notions of consciousness and psychiatry by exposing himself to the tutoring [by no means ideal or precise] of John Layard (who happened to have influenced Auden before), expanding hence his knowledge in human psychology.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> See footnote 2.

<sup>39</sup> Raphaël Ingelbien, 'The Uses of Symbolism: Larkin and Eliot', pp. 130-43.

<sup>40</sup> John Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, pp. 52, 166.

<sup>41</sup> Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, pp. 42, 34; Philip Larkin, *Required Writings*, p. 123.

<sup>42</sup> Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, p. 44.

<sup>43</sup> Anthony Thwaite (ed.), *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin: 1940-1985*, pp. 19, 53.

Larkin's intellectual interests date from college days when he was a member of 'the Essay Society' whose 'dozen members...met regularly... to discuss (or hear discussed by visiting speakers) issues to do with literature and contemporary culture.' Motion proceeds to comment that Larkin's 'letters home' demonstrate 'that he thought of his membership as a privilege, and revelled in the company of "serious-minded intellectuals".' He was also acknowledged by his friends then, including Kingsley Amis, who tells how Larkin was 'always much better read' and more mature than any of his Oxford friends at the time. Likewise, Philip Larkin as a student seemed to have complained if his tutors were 'intellectually' lacking, a matter that confirms that his anti-intellectual views were afterthoughts and basically targeting scholarly authorities that he disliked.<sup>44</sup>

The mind of the young poet experiments with the diverse array of options accessible to him and grows poetry-wise so to speak. Some of the experience gained from this precarious stage would nourish some of the most celebrated examples of the poet's achievement. To Andrew Motion, Larkin's 'themes remained strikingly consistent' despite the great change of tone that marks years to come, for 'while still a schoolboy he squared up to the themes of isolation, evanescence and choice which were to dominate his later work.'<sup>45</sup> For instance, 'Church Going' has its roots deep in an early poem, 'A church damaged by a bomb', that explored the human contribution to the collapse of faith. Death and what waits beyond it constitute a mental obsession, which is debated and intellectually and philosophically debated in the early poems. This obsession would make a continual appearance in and impact on the later poems. The imagery that premiered in these poems, for instance the totemic high windows and the railway station, would emerge over and over again. Thus, Larkin recycles at least some of the anchor symbols that he landed on very early in his poetic career when he was drawn to symbolism. Larkin's later *aestheticism*, to

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<sup>44</sup> Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, pp. 51- 52, 55, 73, 69.

<sup>45</sup> Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, p. 35.

use Rowe's term, takes root in the premature, tentative aestheticism of the juvenile poems. Just as he recycles images, he has no scruples picking up a neglected piece from the shelf, redrafting and invigorating it, not imperatively to the point of mutation, and seeing that it gets published, as he did with the Baudelairean 'Femmes Damnées' which was written in 1943, but published in 1978. As such, an aesthetic, symbolic, and thematic dialogue is holding and even cementing his poetic production together from the early unacknowledged attempts to the later mature works. Rowe comments on the consistency of Larkin's poetics:

The passing of time has made the melancholy Romanticism of *The Less Deceived* seem more closely related to *The North Ship* than Larkin would have us believe. And later in life, he frequently reworked poems he started in the forties and early fifties: thus 'Vers de Société' [1971] is partially based on 'Best Society' [1951?], 'Aubade' [1977] draws on the form of 'The wave sings [...]' [1946], 'Livings I' [1971] revisits 'Negative Indicative' [1953], 'Livings II' [1971] draws on an image in 'Mother, Summer, I' [1953], and so on. Clearly, the Symbolist element in his work is most evident in his last collection *High Windows* ('Sympathy in White Major', 'Solar', 'Money'), and it is significant that although he wrote his version of Baudelaire's 'Femmes Damnées' in 1943, he only published it in 1978. By this date, not only were its contents less shocking, but it blended effortlessly into Larkin's oeuvre.<sup>46</sup>

Further, Larkin has from the early poetical stances targeted readers' safe, secure cocoons and he rejoiced in jolting readers out of their conservatism, probing private and shocking concerns. The young Larkin exerted his mind to impose logic on worldly absurdities and human insanities that culminate in death tolls, hatred, poverty, exploitation, and cruelty among many others. The poet, after all, makes no claims to being perfect, nor has he any pedagogical agendas that entitle him to preach and admonish. Nevertheless, the poet's intellectual calibre emerges in these youthful outpourings, causing him to grapple with philosophical questions of existence, love, creativity, dissidence, perversity, and uniqueness. This inclination of Larkin's would persist to climax in his rejection of celebrated patterns and recipes of modernism to create a poetical career of an arena and scope marked by its self-imposed boundaries. It is a species of artistic self-discipline intended to land on an individualistic poetics. This strategy by itself exemplifies

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<sup>46</sup> M. W. Rowe, *Philip Larkin: Art and Self* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 1-2.



intellectual reasoning and philosophical deliberation. It is a brooded gesture that brewed furtively in these early poems before it matured into an individual canon worthy of defending and adhering tenaciously to. His mind, however, believes in the search for alternatives as an imperative to set his poetical stance apart from that of the other poets.

The mind, in these poems, displays a variety of nuances and experiments with a diversity of roles that are at times pernicious and even ruinous. Or else, the mind is occasionally a beacon of transparency and light and a source of consolation and comfort. Hence, the intellectual harvest is either fertile and strengthening or insidious and detrimental. Reasoning is harnessed to a similar fate as it either offers answers and solutions or impairs, distorts, and baffles. In either case, the mind overshadows the poet's choices and decisions and steers his contemplations and reflections. In a nutshell, Larkin's is a poetry that stems from and rests within the realm of thought, not a mere emotional outburst or materialistic, or even worse, empirical venture that fails to go beyond commonalities and daily trifles. Rather, a spirit of experimentalism defines his poetics that tends, nevertheless, to embrace and endorse everyday cares and worries and ultimately transcend them.

## Chapter 2

### *The North Ship: Writing Under the Influence*

#### I

In his introduction to Faber's reissued edition of *The North Ship* in 1966, Larkin did not hesitate to confess his shame and disappointment regarding his first verse collection, originally published in 1945. He was anxious to affirm that the immediate, mature Larkin meagerly related to *The North Ship*. The qualities of the collection, nonetheless, do not grow more diminutive as Larkin fishes for excuses for the inferior aspects of the poems. Nor is the later Larkin totally absolved or purged of the drives that preside over its poems. That the early poetry before 1950 is marked by 'an engaging bookish talent, too verbose to be memorable and too intellectual to be moving' seems to diagnose its shortcoming.<sup>1</sup> In the Faber edition of *The North Ship*, Larkin watched, rather to his regret, the revival of the 'several' selves, or rather masks, which he long since had 'abandoned' and dismantled. Years of experience, which was often frustrating and irritating, and reading Hardy have managed to shake the juvenile multi-selves off, though not necessarily once and for all. At that point in his career, Larkin, the poetic, lyrical, and bardic, overrode the cynical and sagacious. His rhetoric seemed to be more focused on eloquence and lyricism than profundity and sophistication. Though the poems appear serious, he found nothing 'serious to write about' then, as he confessed to Neil Powell. While the mood is serious and melancholic, the themes do not live up to the same standards and the language is more ornate than persuasive. The form takes precedent over the content, a misjudgment he attributes to 'looking at the world out of the eyes of Yeats'.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Stan Smith, *Poetry and Displacement*, p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Larkin, *Further Requirements*, p. 30.

The so-disapproved of feebleness of the poems in the collection, and hence their inferiority, Larkin seems to ascribe apologetically to more than one catalyst: the war, Yeats (perhaps more accurately the fin de siècle rather than the modern Yeats), inexperience, and the poetical ambition of a young talent earnest to seize a public platform.<sup>3</sup> Next to their derivativeness, upon inspection, the patchiness of the poems, so to speak, and their failure to achieve public appeal may be traced to occasional indulgence in sentimental emotionality and romanticism, as David Timms pinpoints, which is fairly understood with regard to youth and immaturity. Kuby attributes the failure of *The North Ship* to its subscribing to the Victorian interest in ‘sweet pain and languishing melancholia which the worst of Victorianism had carried over from the worst of Romanticism’. As a result, the poems came to be ‘more expressive of, and directed to, the emotions than understanding, more subjective, and, though, one hesitates to use so impressionistic a word, immature.’<sup>4</sup> Petch’s criticism of *The North Ship* is even sharper and more stringent, deriding its ‘atmosphere of vague romanticism recalling the worst excesses of the Pre-Raphaelite movement,’ the aimless ‘drifting...in a dreamworld from which the pressure of personal feeling is almost wholly absent,’ and the poetry in want of ‘concrete focus’.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, in *The North Ship*, Larkin abandoned ‘the witty demotic’ register of Brunette in favour of ‘the evocative, symbolist manner’ and ‘a consistent seriousness’.<sup>6</sup> The absence of humour and wry cynicism and indulgence in pathos and melancholy could in part account for its anaemic and apathetic qualities. Whalen dubs the collection as ‘quite pale, not to mention unconsciously amusing, in its youthful and contrived sadness’.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> David Timms, *Philip Larkin* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1973), p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> Lolette Kuby, *An Uncommon Poet for the Common Man: A Study of Philip Larkin's Poetry* (The Hague: Mouton, 1974), p. 160.

<sup>5</sup> Simon Petch, *The Art of Philip Larkin*, p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 86, 124.

<sup>7</sup> Terry Whalen, *Philip Larkin and English Poetry*, p. 29.

*The North Ship* is wanting in neither profundity, nor symbolism, nor intellectuality; the title itself attests to the powerful presence of all the above. The rub, for there is one for sure, is that *The North Ship* was often viewed as mediocre to and considerably differing from Larkin's subsequent collections and ultimately pales beside them. In all, the collection is characterised by an esoteric and introspective ambience, which Regan attributes not to 'poetic immaturity' but to 'the social and political constraints imposed upon creative expression by the conditions of war'. *The North Ship* embodies a shift from 'the discourse of the 1930s', which Larkin found 'difficult to sustain' to that of the 1940s which the war shaped. The safest poetical code, then, would require 'a divergence away from direct statement and ideological commitment towards the kind of poetry favoured by Vernon Watkins and others: mellifluous, mystifying and resolutely apolitical.' Hence, *The North Ship* was conceived under conditions marked by 'political quietism'.<sup>8</sup> The poems may be said to stir very little controversy regarding their quality. For one thing, there is, as Motion argues, an overall consensus about *The North Ship* that comes more in line with Faber's acceptance to reissue the collection twenty one years later which was done 'in the spirit' that it is 'juvenilia, derivative, faintly ridiculous, a curiosity.' Further, *The North Ship* draws the consent of 'everyone' as to its 'recognizable Larkin features' though rather 'veiled and intermittent.'<sup>9</sup> The volume dates an experimental episode in Larkin's poetical career. Stephen Cooper calls Larkin's aesthetics in 'the 1940s poem' subversive and proceeds to point to 'the imaginative and symbolic landscape of *The North Ship*' which is marked by the 'rejection of established values and conventional ideals.' Nevertheless, Whalen finds that the sadness of *The North Ship* is by no means abandoned by Larkin and its traces survived to remain 'in his canon as an important sentiment.'<sup>10</sup> Moreover, to *The North Ship*, 'many good poems', in Timms' opinion, make their way, such as VII and

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<sup>8</sup> Stephen Regan, *Philip Larkin* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 66, 67, 72, 67.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, p. 132.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Cooper, *Philip Larkin: Subversive Writer*, pp. 85, 84.

XXX, in which Larkin sloughed off the imitative constraints without having established his own authentic voice.<sup>11</sup>

*The North Ship* cannot be simply dismissed as worthless, as Larkin, in his Faber introduction, almost urges readers to do; it is not essentially without any poetical merits either. He could not totally 'abandon' it and he 'shouldn't mind' seeing 'one or two' poems reprinted as he wrote to Conquest in 1955 to that effect.<sup>12</sup> The collection works perfectly well as a foil or background that makes 'the virtues' of Larkin's subsequent collections *The Less Deceived* and *The Whitsun Weddings* stand out.<sup>13</sup> The subsequent collections, of course, would have earned the recognition and acknowledgment they scored either way: with or without the vestigial *North Ship* to stand out in its relief. Often waved aside as defective and flawed, *The North Ship*, nevertheless, helps to define Larkin's poetical trajectory and penetrate into the operative mechanics of the artistic mind. The poems expose the mental and intellectual calibre of the young Larkin publishing a book of verse at the age of twenty three after a hectic life in Oxford and a relatively stumbling novelistic career. They also reveal his fondness for symbolism and obscurity among other modernist characteristics. Motion quotes a review that appeared in the 26<sup>th</sup> October (1945) issue of *Coventry Evening Telegraph* after the collection made its debut:

Mr Larkin...has an inner vision that must be sought for with care. His recondite imagery is couched in phrases that make up in a kind of wistful hinted beauty what they lack in lucidity. Mr Larkin's readers must at present be confined to a small circle. Perhaps his work will gain wider appeal as his genius becomes more mature.<sup>14</sup>

The statement is both complimentary and derogatory where the reviewer levels criticism against the recondite content of the poems and the lack of 'lucidity', but does not overlook or deny the poet's visionary potential. Even the beauty of the language is found wistful and

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<sup>11</sup> David Timms, *Philip Larkin*, pp. 31-2.

<sup>12</sup> Anthony Thwaite (ed.), *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin 1940-1985*, 246.

<sup>13</sup> David Timms, *Philip Larkin*, p. 22.

<sup>14</sup> Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, p. 132.

may be recognised by a small class of readers, who themselves remained obscure and unidentified, until Larkin's poetics grew in maturity to score a public success. More interestingly, Larkin was often taken to task for the presence of almost the exact opposite in later poetry, namely lucidity! Such an attitude betrays the instability, if not dubiousness, with respect to the aesthetic judgment awarded or appended to contemporary literary works, which is very likely liable to future revision and even contradiction. Besides, there is strong evidence as to Larkin's recycling themes and devices of his youthful and less mature poetry to the extent that makes Lerner, upon finding binding affinities between 'The Winter Palace', one of Larkin's last poems, and '65° N' one of the five sections of 'The North Ship', exclaim: 'does this mean that Larkin came full circle, returning after all to the visionary, Yeatsian writing of his early work?'<sup>15</sup>

The young Larkin, carried adrift by his sense of individuality and preoccupation with flouting orthodoxy, creates poems that reiterate his disappointment, melancholy, discontentment, and pessimism as his letters in the early 1940s reveal.<sup>16</sup> The world and its rigid conventionality were ruefully too slow changing for Larkin's taste. Hence, a plangent, even lamenting, tone permeates *The North Ship*, coupled with a definite sense of impotence and alienation. The impatient, young Larkin persona, in *The North Ship*, seems to throw up his hands in despair, preaching isolation and loneliness and professing disbelief in existing values. The later Larkin, axiomatically, would express sentiments and attitudes so akin to the ones reverberating in *The North Ship* with almost no revision. Any revisions he performed on these views, were a mere editing of the form; the content remained more or less the same. These promising semi-ideas, half-beliefs, and tentative philosophies would populate the later poetry after they hardened into adamant principles and aesthetic codes.

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<sup>15</sup> Laurence Lerner, *Philip Larkin* (Plymouth: Northcote, 2005), p. 50.

<sup>16</sup> Anthony Thwaite (ed.), *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin: 1940-1985*.

To penetrate the mind of Larkin in his early twenties, these poems offer feasible outlets and portholes into his anxieties, fears, phobias, and mental as well as psychological strains, which would be devolved upon diverse, surrogate personae and made articulate in various voices. His death phobia, for instance, emerges in poem I ('All catches alight'), where the conflict between an actual, fast approaching winter and a conjured-up or wished for spring remains unresolved. Through the conventional symbolism of nature and the seasons, Larkin proposes an argument on behalf of existence in the face of imminent, but ultimate, automatic annihilation. Another conventional symbolic package, namely war, is used to cast the ideas the poem advances. Spring festivity, symbolising the stubbornness of life, is set in opposition to winter drumming. Hence, the argument is well poised, even though hyperbolic, especially with the histrionic effect invested in the winter/war drums refrain, which is meant to interrupt and check the 'strenuous bursts of joy'.<sup>17</sup> The refrain is a tactic that helps the celebrator's mind to launch on a dialectic of life against death or peace versus war. Unlike Shelley's Winter in 'If Winter comes, Can Spring be far behind?' ('Ode To the West Wind'), Larkin's is disrupting and does not seem to augur well.<sup>18</sup> The importunateness of winter is played against the energy, diversity, and persistence of spring. 'All catches alight' also furnishes an 'elegiac impulse', 'recalling Walt Whitman's American Civil War Poems in *Drum-Taps*', a matter the endorses the war symbolism in the former.<sup>19</sup>

I or 'All catches alight' looks more like a theatrical piece with wintry drums banged backstage; meanwhile spring burgeons and blooms. The spring devotee(s) seem to be far more articulate and eloquent in their verbal defence whereas the foe, none other than the bellicose winter, proves vulgar, uproarious, and incessant. While the spring conjurer hails

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<sup>17</sup> Alan Brownjohn, *Philip Larkin*, p. 6.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Hutchinson (ed.), *Shelley: Poetical Works* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 579.

<sup>19</sup> Stephen Regan, *Philip Larkin*, p. 73.

an almost illusionary green, fruitful spring: ‘All catches alight / At the spread of spring’, winter’s menacing drums, heralds of death and extirpation, are roaring backstage: ‘*A drum taps: a wintry drum.*’ Here, the speaker’s mind goes into denial as if by mentally visualising spring through the mere power of contemplative concentration, the phantasmagoria will assume shape and actualise and winter may be exorcised. The argument asserts the advent of the much desired season to resurrect life and tip the scales in favour of warmth and joy. Despite its superficial simplicity, the regular rhyme scheme of abababcc, the dramatic refrain, and the variation of anapaestic trimeters and tetrameters, the poem discusses a philosophical strand where a far more profound theme is handled. The mind grows aware of the perils of lapsing into cold torpor, hence its feverish endeavour to ward off the potential menace. The speaker’s self-consciousness dictates that he cast off the troubled past and assume a volitional amnesia to help him make a fresh start, aided by the spiritual spring that refuses to be mauled by wintry ultrasonic noise. As to the introspective stance, it has the future in focus, not the past; nostalgia is entirely discarded:

Let the wheel spin out,  
Till all created things  
With shout and answering shout  
Cast off rememberings;  
Let it all come about  
Till centuries of springs  
And all their buried men  
Stand on the earth again.

*A drum taps: a wintry drum.* (p. 5)

This is the typical Larkin mentality which is going to take further measures in his later poetry. It is a mentality inclined towards and overwhelmed by dialectic that sounds largely aggressive and belligerent; it seems to pick a fight whenever the opportunity offers. The argument is couched in the form of warring polarities and competing, antithetical extremes. The commentator looks forward to the wheel spinning and the promised novelties attained in due course, which aid his resurrectional hypothesis. In this respect, the



poem clearly draws on Yeats's 'The Second Coming' (1919) or even as late a poem as 'The Gyres' (1936/37), from which Larkin borrows 'Rejoice!' that ends his first stanza.<sup>20</sup> Yet, Larkin seems to reiterate the theme of resurrection slightly differently in that it is, in essence, the speaker's seemingly mundane vision that is promoted. It is the personal and private version of life that the speaker aspires to militate. Though Larkin endeavours to enlist a secular ambience, he does not dispense with Yeatsian or even scriptural vocabulary, resorting to 'rejoice', 'whirl', 'wheel', 'resurrected', 'buried men', 'beasts', and 'ghost' to advance the argument. Nor is the poem's imagery entirely irrelevant to primeval fertility myths with its resort to seasonal antithesis and warring adversaries. However, the apocalyptic spirit is eclipsed so that the general ambience appears metaphorical, though barely surreal. It becomes difficult if not impossible to find a logic that reconciles the actual version of the world in which winter is a constant menace with the ideal conjuration of spring and its highest standards. The seasonal renewal does not seem to supply evidence, convincing enough, of the promised rejuvenation. Therefore, no true or final denouement is offered and the argument runs a full circle to settle back into its inaugurating point, unresolved, with winter's drums roaring. The symbolic war of life against death will keep on going non-stop, at least, as far as the commenting voice is concerned.

In 'All catches alight', the voice of the past is thrust to the shadow, which is a common practice of Larkin, i.e., to repress the past and shy off retrospection. The freer the mind is of the shackles of time, the intimation seems to run, the better off one is mentally and psychologically. This attitude to time serves to advance the hypothesis of potential rebirth which the poem argues on its behalf. In overlooking winter, time becomes irrelevant, memory performs a surgical intervention to any unpleasantness, and the mind

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<sup>20</sup> Drawing on 'The Gyres', Larkin seemed to have absorbed Yeats' later poems, contrary to his claim in the introduction to the Faber edition of *The North Ship* (*Required Writing*, p. 29).

follows suit by inventing a plethora of spring to impede the advance of winter. By the sheer power of concentration, wishful thinking, and determination, fantasy and reality merge.

This line of thought runs in XXX, making it ‘a more complex and concentrated meditation’ which ‘is not permitted the luxury of a fantasy ending’.<sup>21</sup> This poem invests in ‘abstraction’, weaving an atmosphere of obscurity and fuzziness in which either ‘a complicated thought-process’ entails the ‘resort to symbolist opacity’ or the ‘symbolist vagueness’ as implemented in the poem leads to ‘an esoteric thought-pattern.’<sup>22</sup> The sonnet exposes, in Timms’ words, Larkin’s ‘individual voice.’ The poem is an analysis and commentary on how ‘memory distorts the real character of event’.<sup>23</sup> The accommodation of memory in this poem is more like a self-defence mechanism, devised to counterpoise loss, disappointment, and shame, and it helps preserve the experience despite the pain it invokes.<sup>24</sup> In a letter to Kingsley Amis, dated 9 August 1945, Larkin betrays the way he tampers with memory:

I came across a list of about 10 awful incidents in my life I prayed to forget, compiled at the end of 1943, and was interested to find that I could not remember one of them at all, while several others were indistinct in my memory and quite without power to hurt. I think I must have deliberately censored some recollections.<sup>25</sup>

It is apparently a Larkin practice: crossing off unpleasant memories through writing them down in prose or poetry. The poem commemorates an unpleasant event and in so doing makes it cease to hurt or at least the poem operates as the fillip that assuages the ghastliness. For one thing, the split of the lovers brings about pain: ‘So through that unripe day you bore your head, / And the day was plucked and tasted bitter, / As if still cold

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<sup>21</sup> Simon Petch, *The Art of Philip Larkin*, p. 23.

<sup>22</sup> Sisir Kumar Chatterjee, *Philip Larkin: Poetry That Builds Bridges* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Dist, 2006), p. 48.

<sup>23</sup> David Timms, *Philip Larkin*, p. 32.

<sup>24</sup> Larkin discusses poems in terms of preserving experience (*Required Writing*, p. 79).

<sup>25</sup> Anthony Thwaite (ed.), *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin: 1940-1985*, p. 105.

among the leaves.’ The parting is wrapped in coldness and the day on which it happens is both flawed and dismal. However, an almost contradictory vision is summoned up: ‘Instead, / It was your severed image that grew sweeter’ (p. 20). Again, that image of growing sweetness, implanting ambivalence among other unwholesome thoughts, is engulfed with ‘uncertainty’ and ‘gales of shame’, which sum up the fallibility of romance. Therefore, the reflective ex-lover fails even to muster courage to think of his ex-flame as alive somewhere else. He has washed his hands of the past though the ‘recollection, which floats in his imagination’ is still cherished:<sup>26</sup>

Now you are one  
I dare not think alive: only a name  
That chimes occasionally, as a belief  
Long since embedded in the static past. (p. 20)

Time takes care of everything and straightens any crookedness. It takes the edge off any unhappiness in the past so that it fades and wanes to become a mere flawed memory viewed objectively, almost mechanically. Summer loses its dynamism and becomes, upon conjuration, stale and worn-out:

Summer broke and drained. Now we are safe.  
The days lose confidence, and can be faced  
Indoors. This is your last, meticulous hour,  
Cut, gummed; pastime of a provincial winter. (p. 20)

Desolate and earmarked as it is, the past is now ‘cut’ and ‘gummed’ as in a scrapbook that should be set aside. Organising memories and archiving them, the narrator may look forward to learning how to live in peace with them, be reconciled with a not too comfortable past, and attaining psychological composure. It seems that the mental apparatus is groping its way back to order, sanity, and compatibility.

## II

In II, a sonnet-like poem mostly in iambic pentameter, the mind is pried open to expose fears and anxieties that populate and plague it. The speaker dwells on the topics of

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<sup>26</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*, p. 51.

existence and death with sophistication, delicacy, and even tenderness. The long, run-on sentences betray a mind in turmoil and arrests a line of thought long since brewing inarticulately. Assuming disguise, the poem's persona addresses his contemplations, private and personal as they happen to be, to an unidentified confidante. He pretends to remain untouched and safe behind the addressed persona he has invented:

This was your place of birth, this daytime palace,  
The miracle of glass, whose every hall  
The light as music fills, and on your face  
Shines petal-soft... (p. 6)

This is a very gentle and serene conjuration of the symbolic glass palace of the world that never fails to allure and attract. It combines light and music, along with fragility and evanescence, all together in one harmonious, alluring amalgam. This surreal palace of glass being a glamorous creation of the mind teams with promising connotations, but would years later mutate into an icy edifice in 'The Winter Palace' (1978). To be alive or to exist in its absolute sense is an everyday miracle dearly felt and appreciated. There is, therefore, a candid confession of gratitude, which celebrates the 'new sense of beginning', in the face of the 'mood of loss' and the overwhelming awareness of 'a diminished existence'.<sup>27</sup>

The presence of the companion redounds to the lustre of the world, redefines its worth, and dwells on its amenities. The self-conscious speaker prefers to capture the moment, bathing in its bountiful sunlight: 'sunbeams are prodigal / To show you pausing at a picture's edge / To puzzle out the name, or with a hand / Resting a second on a random page' (p. 6). However, the spell is short of perfection for even when a moment of bliss is offered, it is one ablaze with mental endeavour where the mind is applied to puzzle and decipher. Though this span of physical torpor and mental absorption lasts a second, the speaker wishes to photographically preserve and keep it locked for eternity lest time

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<sup>27</sup> Stephen Regan, *Philip Larkin*, p. 73.

tarnishes and strips it of its loveliness and magic. The next seconds will bring change that hardly does any credit to the parting lovers with their dreamy and precarious atmosphere. The couple are basking in the provisional daylight of existence, almost oblivious to the clouds whose murky 'shadows' are 'cast' menacingly 'on the land.' Winter is near and the serenity is due to end. The picture oozes primordial peace, grace, and indifference for a brief moment before the advent of the night which will bring forth 'The stranger who will never show his face / But asks admittance'. In the second stanza, the mood of the poem changes from descriptive to interrogative with: 'Are you prepared for what the night will bring?', engaging the mind in extended questioning. The speaker renounces the tranquil, dreamy tone and adopts a feverish, anxious one:

will you greet your doom  
As final; set him loaves and wine; knowing  
The game is finished when he plays his ace,  
And overturn the table and go into the next room? (p. 6)

It is the next room, the mysterious flip side of existence, that the speaker stands in awe of most and wishes to delay moving into as long as he can. Again just like 'All catches alight', II makes use of a simplified symbolism of day and night or life and death to advance its argument with respect to the instability and ephemera of the world. Fear guides and alerts the reflector not to get too personally involved in the argument, but to devolve the inauspicious speculation, instead, upon a present second persona. Hence, he assumes the role of an awakening guru who, in second person mood, warns, explicates, and rationalises in total detachment and aloofness. The phobic speaker momentarily trades awareness with impersonality and denial. The poem is intellectually loaded and its symbolism, though simple and cliché-like at first glance, transforms into a more profound psychological inquisition. The semi-sonnet form helps the argument to move smoothly and flexibly towards an apex of uncertainty and perplexity. Like all humankind who are destined to make the inevitable passage into the next room (analogous to Bluebeard's room

or the seventh room of mystery and enigma in folktales and gothic fiction), the speaker has neither the prior knowledge nor the required information to venture answers or propositions. There is only a sad consolation in the fact that, all along, there is this latent ‘knowing’ of the inescapable finale so acutely experienced and so much dreaded. The mind is, nevertheless, divided between the urge to rebel and the thought that surrender is the only option.

While death is typified as an uninvited guest-like stranger in II, the much-desired company of a night guest is denied the speaker in VI, a poem in iambic tetrameter and pentameter and a haphazard rhyme scheme. Company is another prerequisite along with the fire ‘to drive the shadows back’ that would probably hold court once the host is left alone and darkness closes in. The antithesis is made necessary for this welcomed presence of the guest relieves the vigilant speaker temporarily from loneliness and idleness which, oddly enough, triggers mind-wrenching thoughts, ruins his peace, and thrusts him into turmoil:

Yet when the guest  
Has stepped into the windy street, and gone,  
Who can confront  
The instantaneous grief of being alone?  
Or watch the sad increase  
Across the mind of this prolific plant,  
Dumb idleness? (p. 7)

What the tormented figure in the poem craves for is something to keep his mind off wandering into forbidden territories due to the lack of occupation. The poem asserts a double-edged ambivalent atmosphere. For one, the speaker is afraid of imploding into idleness and triviality once a proper company is no longer available. His mind proves to be highly wanting when unoccupied. Alternatively, loneliness and idleness, plant-like in their growth, branching and entangling, are sure to force him into endless, distressing brooding. The deep-rooted thoughts are liable to break into shoots once the mind is not elsewhere occupied. But the guest is a guest after all and two o’clock after midnight is his/her cue to

leave. Moreover, the speaker seems to make do with temporary company and expresses no plan to forge one that lasts and perseveres. Too afraid of shadows and night, he craves unawareness and oblivion, but at the same time he dreads 'dumb idleness' or mental stagnancy.

Likewise, Larkin meditates about forced loneliness and seclusion in 'Ugly Sister', a short poem about 'a girl whose plainness has prevented her from being loved, but her response is philosophical'.<sup>28</sup> The heroine or in fact anti-heroine, hermit-like and a possible outcast in Rossen's view, flees upstairs seeking quiet and lazing about to 'Let the music, the violin, cornet and drum / Drowse from my head' (p. 14). Left with no other choice whatsoever though by no means hapless, the ugly sister summons up 'focused concentration on nature outside', as Rossen intimates, by removing 'all other distractions'.<sup>29</sup> She substitutes human companionship with nature and welcomes the 'solitary contemplation of elemental presences'.<sup>30</sup> Larkin seems to contemplate how 'lovelessness' and the creative 'gift' or rather creative mind relate to each other.<sup>31</sup> Deprivation on the physical level provokes the mind and operates as the catalyst for the meditative mood. Assisted by reasoning, Larkin's 'ugly sister' sloughs herself off the unfriendly environment, bounces back to balance by adopting an alternative philosophy, and fends for her own peace of mind. The version of life and the philosophy prompting it may appear faulty and anaemic. Still, it remains a conscious, rational choice not to stoop into self-pity or bathos.

The sleepless night in VI is rehearsed in XVI, a poem composed basically in iambic tetrameter and a rhyme scheme abba cdd; the hurried, impatient ambience of the poem is thus simulated. Another insomniac emerges to name time, not loneliness, as the dreaded

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<sup>28</sup> David Timms, *Philip Larkin*, p. 29.

<sup>29</sup> Janice Rossen, *Philip Larkin: His Life's Work* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), p. 28.

<sup>30</sup> Andrew Swarbrick, *Out of Reach*, p. 24.

<sup>31</sup> Adam Kirsch, *The Modern Element: Essays on Contemporary Poetry* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), p. 195.

enemy: 'And now the luminous watch-hands / Show after four o'clock, / Time of night when straying winds / Trouble the dark' (p. 13). In the detailed time framework, echoing Eliot's 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night', the poem states a polemic relevant to the arduous 'passage of time'.<sup>32</sup> Time and trouble link hands as their alliteration suggests. The narrator lists, with a faint disdain, his nocturnal routines which expire one by one. Each is a ploy devised to trick the mind into an illusionary security and each fills in a temporal lacuna.

'Aubade'-like, the poem suggests that the small hours are the worst when the sleepless persona runs out of things to do. The mind is perturbed by thoughts that stray into its confines uninvited and the reflector is both powerless and will-less. He can neither suppress and send them back, nor bear their heavy intellectual load. The vigilant persona lies awake in his bed apart from his lover pricking his ears to welcome with relief the first signs or rather noises of the morning. Though the narrator has by no means grown a purist or inattentive to epicurean pleasures, he possesses a mind that seems to be too fastidious to be diverted. Besides, all these diversions are disposable, casual, transient, and short-lived. Night activities have lost their meaning and attraction; drinking, reading, and especially love are all found consumable and unsatisfactory. 'Love and its commerce done' (p. 13) shows how far the speaker is agonised by the 'awareness of the perfunctoriness and dullness, and his detestation at the mechanicality and inconsequentiality of the act of love-making.'<sup>33</sup> The dissatisfaction is gnawing at him, driving sleep away and spicing with scepticism and wryness all that is around:

And I am sick for want of sleep;  
So sick, that I can half-believe  
The soundless river pouring from the cave  
Is neither strong, nor deep;  
Only an image fancied in conceit. (p. 13)

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<sup>32</sup> Sisir Kumar Chatterjee, *Philip Larkin*, p. 41.

<sup>33</sup> Sisir Kumar Chatterjee, *Philip Larkin*, p. 40.



Doubt infects the 'soundless river', reminiscent perhaps of Coleridge's Alf in 'Kubla Khan', symbolic of life and creativity. The speaker's own creative powers, being himself frazzled and haggard, have momentarily lost their gravity. Weariness and fatigue both physical and spiritual govern the contemplation. A voice of faithless secularity rationalises towards disillusionment and stark self-confrontation. It is also an instant where faith and confidence are dealt a blow and implode. It is a different awakening experience argued in XVI, where the speaking voice is totally deprived of oblivion and the mind is ceaselessly alert.

A similar sleepless night is sketched briefly in XVIII, where both the heart and soul writhe in a welter of tormenting grief from which no hope of relief is entertained. However, the grief seems to be self-inflicted or so the imagery of the poem intimates. The speaker in the poem is bent on stirring the fire back to flames after he claims to 'have watched all night // The fire grow silent, / The grey ash soft'. He takes a masochistic pleasure in self-induced distress:

And I stir the stubborn flint  
The flames have left,  
And grief stirs, and the deft  
Heart lies impotent. (p. 14)

Grief is a sign and proof that his mind is malfunctioning and that he has slipped into melancholy, perhaps even bathos. The desolate thoughts are dismaying him and chasing sleep, dream, and unconsciousness away. The imposed wake-up experience is so loaded with discomfort and depression that it drowns him in etiolating despondency.

Alternatively in XXI, sleep is as dreadful as awakening for it seems to bring forth dreams that soon turn into nightmares in which 'the wind climbed up the caves / To tear at a dark-faced garden / Whose black flowers were dead' (p. 16). The mind paints a fully-fledged gothic atmosphere as an alarming dream. At Oxford, Larkin dabbled in psychology under the tutorship of John Layard and even indulged in his dreams to the point of

recording some ninety of them, a vocation he sketched in detail in his letter to J. B. Sutton in January 1943.<sup>34</sup> No wonder that his early poems invest dreams as their raw materials. If one assumes that the voice speaking in the poems is one and the same, the only inference one may draw is that the speaker has tried every alternative and every antidote to ease the mind, but draws no relief whatsoever. His major enemy is his energetic mind that keeps searching for cracks and fissures, i.e., imperfections to deplore and grieve over. As in II, another persona, namely, the beloved, is keeping the speaker company and seems to act as an awakening catalyst:

I was sleeping, and you woke me  
To walk on the chilled shore  
Of a night with no memory,  
Till your voice forsook my ear  
Till your two hands withdrew  
And I was empty of tears,  
On the edge of a bricked and streeted sea  
And a cold hill of stars. (p. 16)

There is an atmosphere of ‘indeterminacy’ surrounding ‘the world evoked’, reinforced by prevalence of the indefinite articles; in consequence, ‘the landscape dreamed in sleep’ emerges ‘as vague and unspecific as the mindscape felt on waking.’<sup>35</sup> The abrupt awakening finds the speaker surrounded by night, urban jungle, and cold stars. The voice that induces the wakening could be a ventriloquism of his dream and not necessarily an immediate physical presence. Memory has involuntarily forsaken him this time and he does not crave amnesia. On the whole, it is an experience of grief and disappointment that leaves the speaker oscillating between hope and disillusionment. Otherwise, the intensity of the cataclysmic dream, phantasmal as it is, still traumatises the sleeper, haunts, embitters his waking thoughts, and sends him into fits of passion. Upon wakening, instead of his lover’s hands and voice, he is greeted by void, coldness, and night.

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<sup>34</sup> Anthony Thwaite (ed.), *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin: 1940-1985*, pp. 52-3.

<sup>35</sup> Sisir Kumar Chatterjee, *Philip Larkin*, p. 36.

### III

Larkin's typical protagonist enormously dreads the rise of his dormant thoughts in 'Winter' (VIII). A prairie-like field stretches, populated by a wind blowing 'over / A waste of thistles / Crowded like men', a river, and a pair of horses (which later emerge in 'At Grass') and swans. This unmanned wilderness is a fertile ground for the invocation of long-winded thoughts. However, in stringent self-critique and with admirable integrity, the thinker recognises the fallibility if not silliness of these thoughts which

are children  
With uneasy faces  
That awake and rise  
Beneath running skies  
From buried places. (p. 8)

For one thing, the speaker admits having fathered thoughts of some sort and so his mind is a fertile ground that fosters and sustains thinking. Thoughts are, nevertheless, sketched pejoratively as children, immature, unruly, perhaps even naïve, and on top 'a nuisance'. Given how much Larkin 'disliked' children, as he himself confessed, he must have equally disliked disturbing thoughts, hence the ludic metaphor.<sup>36</sup> Resorting one more time to winter symbolism, the speaker complains about how his mental endeavour to slip away, unnoticed and undisturbed, is met with defeat and frustration. His mind keeps nudging him towards thinking that he is trapped in a world of coldness and waste. The sleeping monster has been stirred awake and invidious thoughts chip away at and ravage his defences or even slyly worm themselves into his mind. While writhing underneath the crushing weight of unwholesome thoughts and memories, he cannot help but watch their sabotaging forces:

And oh, they invade  
My cloaked-up mind  
Till memory unlooses  
Its brooch of faces –  
Streams far behind. (p. 9)

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<sup>36</sup> Philip Larkin, *Required Writing*, p. 111.

The mind and memory coordinate so that when the former fails to shield itself against invasive thinking, the latter unearths buried memories and sepia faces. The poem gets more mystical and philosophical towards its end when the landscape of ‘the whole heath’ and ‘the leaping wind’ is set parallel to ‘shrivelled men’ who are ‘Crowding like thistles / To one fruitless place’. It is a hyperbolic effect to aggrandise the suffering brought upon humans with ageing, hardship, and drudgery. Though each and everyone is bent towards one single destination, the poem celebrates the miracle of life and resuscitation:

Yet still the miracles  
Exhume in each face  
Strong silken seed,  
That to the static  
Gold winter sun throws back  
Endless and cloudless pride. (p. 9)

This finale is a slight modification of the closure of ‘Poem’ (see Chapter 1) with ‘static’ replacing ‘aristocratic’ and ‘winter’ in place of ‘to-be-denied’. While the onset of the poem sketches a stumbling awaking and an alarming rising that agitate the speaker, the conclusion is wrapped up in dignity and hope with the auspicious ‘Strong silken seed’ promising a latent invigoration. Even winter is not devoid of some merit, though its ‘gold sun’ lacks dynamism.

The notion of awakening and the ensuing questioning are once more dwelt upon in III and ‘Dawn’ (IV), where the mind explores and grows wiser, more aware and eventually better informed though, of course, more melancholic. Knowledge is priceless and costs the narrator his psychological composure; anguish and frustration are its accomplices. However, while II (treated above) runs brimful of light and love, thanks to the presence of a second persona, III and IV are either moonlit, or cloudy and cold, or all three together. In ‘Dawn’, the speaker wakes up at dawn to a loveless cold heart, a theme that would be fully

explored later in 'Aubade', whereas in III, a dystopia of disquiet and incertitude replaces the romantic utopia of II:

What if it has drawn up  
All quietness and certitude of worth  
Wherewith to fill its cup,  
Or mint a second moon, a paradise? –  
For they are gone from earth. (p. 6)

The vigilant thinker surveys and questions alternatives and plays with probabilities and conditions. One possible justification is that self-consciousness, heightened and piqued at the awakening, leads the narrator to review his life and express regret at its vulnerability and imperfection, but also the absence of alternatives.

In 'Nursery Tale' (XIV), the speaker contrasts the romantic, chivalrous, and oblivious atmosphere of childhood with the awareness and remorse of adulthood. The first stanza paints a perfect gothic atmosphere so akin to Walter de la Mare's 'The Listeners' with 'horseman', 'hoofbeats', and 'moonlit hedges' to name a few, only with the door found 'unbarred' in Larkin's version.<sup>37</sup> The simplicity of the child's entrancing make-believe world captivates the mind and initiates its flight into fantasy. Tales may be haunted with mystery, fear and horror, but the horror of real life experience is unparalleled. At the threshold of adulthood, this perfect world of dreams is shattered and blown to smithereens. Reality, found worse than any childhood horror story, tightens its grip around him and the speaker is left feeling trapped and conned:

So every journey that I make  
Leads me, as in the story he was led,  
To some new ambush, to some fresh mistake:  
So every journey I begin foretells  
A weariness of daybreak, spread  
With carrion kisses, carrion farewells. (p. 12)

The many journeys of the adult life or perhaps experiences and enterprises are set on a par with the various tales of nursery days. The speaker is apt to ridicule and vilify both,

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<sup>37</sup> Walter de la Mare, *The Complete Poems of Walter de la Mare* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), p. 126.

though he laments the flawed, decayed, and weary nature of the former. Above all, though he complains about life ambushing him and hence catching him off guard, he seems to regret stale predictability, rottenness, and lack of vigour, which reality offers. Or, he could be nostalgic, missing and longing for his childhood mentality that finds sustenance and thrill in nursery tales. This is the true dilemma of the Larkin hero: he is always prey to inconsistencies and contradictions, much to his own discredit.

In XVII, the voice of a poet, in his own bardic robes, lays bare the drives behind a planned indulgence in insidious thinking which he himself inaugurates:

To write one song, I said,  
As sad as the sad wind  
That walks around my bed,  
Having one simple fall  
As a candle-flame swells, and is thinned,  
As a curtain stirs by the wall  
– for this I must visit the dead. (p. 13)

Despite the simple layout of the iambic trimeter, the poem proposes a long-winded rationale that becomes loose and unfocused as the lyricist confesses the macabre sources he has no scruples to indulge in to draw inspiration from. Thoughts of morbid, but weighty calibre, are induced by confronting death, the most dreaded of Larkin's phobias. Indeed Larkin's persona is stormed by 'the sad wind', which evokes ghastly, haunting thoughts. He seems to be led by the nose to frequent graveyards and find inspiration: 'Headstone and wet cross, / Paths where the mourners tread, / A solitary bird, / These call up the shade of loss' (p. 13). In explanation, Kuby suggests, '*The North Ship*'s are mood landscapes painted as backdrops of the poet's emotions; and the poet's emotions are too often graveyards of the heart, too willingly dug, and adorned with language of romantic epitaph'.<sup>38</sup> He is willing to make sacrifices as dear as stepping out of his comfort zone and confront death in order to flatter his poetical superego. The poem, however, does only inadvertently insinuate the speaker's fear and abstains from frank disclosure. The effect

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<sup>38</sup> Lolette Kuby, *An Uncommon Poet for the Common Man*, p. 163.

induced, afterwards, relaxes and hence loses its attraction when the speaker fantasises about a 'sodden grave', discerned as having gold-like stones and 'the image morning gave' looking like some 'seven-piled wave' that 'streams at an endless shore' (pp. 13-4). If the poem has as a target to summon up a motif of overwhelming and invincible nature, then the imagery works. This is one of the pieces in which Larkin penetrates into the nature of writing and the risks it entails, an early inclination that he later dispenses with as Timms suggests.<sup>39</sup>

XX or 'I see a girl dragged by the wrists' discusses rather in elaborate detail disillusionment and ennui concerning pleasures of the world which the observer seems to have suddenly relinquished or at least grown weary of. The poem juxtaposes two disparate images to promote its intellectual polemic. The beginning features a girl playing happily in the snow and the closing scene focuses on two old men shoveling the snow into a cart. The coughing of the two old men replaces the flirtatious laughter of the girl. The scene with the girl that could have thrown the voyeur into raptures is watched now with relative composure and indifference, or at least so claims the audible, indifferent voice in the poem, which readers are apt to take with a grain of salt. Thus, Larkin creates a conscious agent whose perceptions discern that maturity dictates the need to stop at a certain point, abandon all its inadequacies, then embark on a new life phase. However, the stoic commentator argues in terms quite contrary. Self-conscious and almost apologetic, the voyeur points to the insensitivity, nonchalance and insusceptibility he has developed lately in contrast to his old, sybaritic self: 'But now I seem devoid of subtlety, / As simple as the things I see, / Being no more, no less, than two weak eyes.' The wintry snowy landscape, static and lifeless, is animated by the vigour and ardour the girl bestows, yet the watcher claims to be unmoved and phlegmatic. In the third stanza, the observer rationalises why he

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<sup>39</sup> David Timms, *Philip Larkin*, p. 33.

has lost interest in what used to draw him so tenaciously: ‘So I walk on. Perhaps what I desired / – That long and sickly hope, someday to be / As she is – gave a flicker and expired’ (p. 15). Further, it is not only the fruitless, futile waiting for hopes to be realised that urges him to take such a drastic standpoint, but also far more dreary speculation. In tribute to ‘An aged man is but a paltry thing, / A tattered coat upon a stick’ from ‘Sailing to Byzantium’, Larkin spices the meditation with a clear Yeatsian flavour:<sup>40</sup>

For the first time I’m content to see  
What poor mortar and bricks  
I have to build with, knowing that I can  
Never in seventy years be more a man  
Than now – a sack of meal upon two sticks. (p. 15)

It is perhaps awareness plus hypersensitivity that drives the contemplating ‘I’ to review life and pass a final and irreversible verdict concerning its value. Larkin’s persona arduously fishes for sorrow and grief, conjuring them up to plague a future yet to take place in a half century or so. It is more like a time machine programmed to explore a future conceived of as dreary and desolate as the one and only version. Whatever may come, Larkin’s protagonist seems to philosophise, will be far inferior to what has already past. The past is by no means ideal, utopian, or fulfilling, for it has its own share of unpleasantness. The past seems to be marked by superiority once compared with the future. The latter has to look dreary almost solely on account of implacable ageing with senility and deterioration looming up in the prospect.

The paranoia concerning old age is further furnished in the next stanza with the image of ‘two old ragged men / Clearing the drifts with shovels and a spade’, which ‘Bring up my mind to fever-pitch again’. There is the symbolic significance of the shovels and spade as ‘emblemised versions of instruments with which to rebuild life’ as Chatterjee remarks.<sup>41</sup> Yet the image of the two old men overwhelmed by snow overrides any

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<sup>40</sup> Daniel Albright (ed.), *W. B. Yeats: The Poems* (London: Everyman, 1994), p. 239.

<sup>41</sup> Sisir Kumar Chatterjee, *Philip Larkin*, p. 70.



optimistic gesture and signals belatedness, mistimed labour, or even impotence.<sup>42</sup> The fallibility of the idea is double-yoked with old age and snow as symptoms of the approaching demise. Old age imposes an austerity of some sort on the onlooker, sweeps the girl from his thoughts, and cures him of fantasies. Ageing reminds him of the primordial fact that nothing in the world endures long and therefore everything is imperfect and worthless. This arid, hermitic contemplation is short-lived and soon replaced by a relapse of his mind back into what he has claimed to have got past: 'Damn all explanatory rhymes! / To be that girl! – but that's impossible' (p. 16). The speaker does not regret not being able to be the man next to the girl, but the girl herself. In effect, the man, if he exists, dragging the girl by the wrist stays invisible or vanishes into thin air once his action has been noted in the opening line. It is one of the poems that surprises the reader with a different or unusual perspective, whether in terms of condemning poetry or coveting a female identity. The pragmatic assessment of existence allows playfulness and sensuality, if not hedonism, to triumph momentarily over seriousness and discernment. However, self-realisation sways him back to sanity and a different line of thought is inaugurated to comfort the speaker and revive his hopes. In the failure to live up to the desired image, his spirit finds form, so 'That each dull day and each despairing act // Builds up the crags from which the spirit leaps'. The argument keeps winding in a rather Yeatsian fashion as he next speaks of his spirit as 'The beast most innocent', but also wakeful and 'fabulous' introducing the coda of the poem which is, oddly enough, hope incarnate:

If I can keep against all argument  
Such image of a snow-white unicorn,  
Then as I pray it may for sanctuary  
Descend at last to me,  
And put into my hand its golden horn. (p. 16)

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<sup>42</sup> Snow as a herald of death and loss features in 'An April Sunday brings the snow' (1948)(p. 265), Larkin's elegy for his father.

The image of two old men, which symbolises ‘the speaker’s emotional deprivation’, is transformed ‘into a mythological fantasy.’<sup>43</sup> Even as a young poet, Larkin appears to think seriously of trading love and intimacy with creativity. The golden-horned unicorn may find sanctuary in the poet’s mind and inflate him with inspiration, but equally doom him to a loveless and lonely life. It is a losing bargain either way. The mind is all too aware of the predicament of choice, which it has to make as long as one lives. Choosing the snow-white unicorn (where snow-white canvasses both coldness and purity/celibacy) entails sacrificing simple but basic joys, but promises singularity, exceptionality, and uniqueness.

#### IV

In Larkin’s unpublished early verse, a non-conformist, almost autobiographical, persona is promoted, which is faintly present in the first two-thirds of *The North Ship*. A dream of uniqueness emerges in XXII to trap a forever-at-dawn journeying ‘one man’ who has a train to catch ‘walking a deserted platform’. Everybody else is fast asleep in their wind-blown ‘shuttered house, that seems / Folded full of dark silk of dreams, / A shell of sleep cradling a wife or child’ (p. 17). The living world has all retired, except the one man who journeys non-stop, whether literally or metaphorically. He has fled the world and escaped its turmoil by slinking off at daybreak. This is the typical non-conformist Larkin hero with an unorthodox mentality that leads him to embark on agonising choices. With a twinge of regret, he has given up on love and, certainly, on conventional domestic bliss:

Who can this ambition trace,  
To be each dawn perpetually journeying?  
To trick this hour when lovers re-embrace  
With the unguessed-at heart riding  
The winds as gulls do? (p. 17)

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<sup>43</sup> Eric Homberger, *The Art of the Real: Poetry in England and America Since 1939* (London: Dent, 1977), p. 77.

The ambition to rove usurps the peace the small hours typify and stops the traveller from being the perfect, devoted lover. His unsettled mind always strays, taking him away from love and warmth to deserts during windy, rainy autumn nights. On the one hand, the wanderer is expected to experience regret or, at least, displeasure regarding the kind of jerky, nomadic living he has to lead. Divided between his human needs for love and companionship and the unrelenting dictates of his restlessness, he remains 'dispossessed' and his mind flitting. On the other hand, he yearns for freedom and bird-like mobility, shakes himself free of desolation, and makes a narrow escape. It is a sort of punishment he must undergo for possessing a mind that is too pedantic and fastidious.

In 'The North Ship' (XXXI), five poems endeavour to capture the fervent human pursuit of the unknown, the unconventional, and the risky. Saved for last, the sections of 'The North Ship' embody both Larkin's unorthodox personality, his cherished interest in contrariness, and his proclivity to push things to extremes. In a letter addressed to James B. Sutton in October, 1944, Larkin enclosed a poem entitled 'Song: the Three Ships' which differs, in many respects, from the published version of 'The North Ship'. In the same letter, Larkin expresses his dissatisfaction with the 'Three Ships' rather vociferously, hence the significant modifications later made.<sup>44</sup> However, the general frameworks of the two are identical and the motif operating remains unchanged. In another letter to Sutton dated nine days later, Larkin, already proceeding with his revision of the poem starting from its very title, wrote: 'I have just been rewriting The North Ship, the ballad I sent you some days ago. It took a great hold on my imagination, and I planned some more poems to make it into a loosely-linked long poem.' His long, 'Ancient Mariner'-like poem seems to face an impasse as Larkin proceeds to explain:

Every now and then I am impelled to try to declare a faith in complete severance from life: and I can never quite do it. Perhaps it is as well, because who knows the consequences? And I always say that no one can

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<sup>44</sup> Anthony Thwaite (ed.), *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin: 1940-1985*, pp. 90-2.

write well if he does not believe what he is writing... In consequence the subsequent poems, planned as analysis and celebration of this faith, have come to nothing.<sup>45</sup>

The five-section song was accomplished ultimately, and it is heavily packed with symbolism and possesses a barely disguised personal ring. The freezing cold and white winter atmosphere are more or less constant major concerns of the entire collection. In 'The North Ship', man is set in conflict against wild nature. Like Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', Larkin's poem raises the alarm 'against violating the union nature offers and the isolation and torment caused by the violation.'<sup>46</sup> The journey is a key motif that premiered in Larkin's early work and would keep permanent appearance in his later poetry. Cooper elaborates on the symbolic value of the journey to the north for Larkin, pointing to the similarities shared between *The North Ship* and *Letters From Iceland* by Auden and MacNeice. For the latter, the journey towards Iceland is both liberating and invigorating. *Letters from Iceland* promotes 'alternative models of social organization... [and] also calls for a more tolerant perspective on personal identity and gender roles'.<sup>47</sup> The poem thus typifies Larkin's yearning to turn things upside down, go against the current, and re-emerge victorious.

In 'Legend', where the three voyages are inaugurated, the ships that went west and east come back home happily and unhappily consecutively. Their fates are sealed and hence they neither stir curiosity, nor achieve glory, nor experience shame except provisionally. Both ships do not deviate from the set course of success or failure and embody the usual, common mainstream in consequence. It is the ship that heads north, in defiance of custom and rationality, whose fate is an enigma and requires solving. Therefore, the dauntless vessel deserves to be singled out and mythologised. While the

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<sup>45</sup> Anthony Thwaite (ed.), *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin: 1940-1985*, p. 93.

<sup>46</sup> Victoria Longino, 'The Alien Moment: Philip Larkin and Gender', *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)*, 9/2 (2003), 91-104, at p. 94.

<sup>47</sup> Stephen Cooper, *Philip Larkin: Subversive Writer*, p. 89.

north in *Letters From Iceland* breathes liberty and tolerance, where the mind is not weighed down by any shackling commitments and unwieldy constrictions, the north in Larkin's '*Legend*' is 'the darkening sea', yet to be explored where 'no breath of wind came forth, / And the decks shone frostily' (p. 21). An image of immobility and impotence is conjured up in tandem. The journey north is one that seems to be taken by a ship whose crew are set to explore uncharted seas and know that theirs could be a journey of no return. So the crew on board the north ship are the pioneers and the daredevils straying into no-man's-land and grappling with the corollaries of the risky adventure. Yet they still choose to embark on this perilous expedition and continue to plough a futile, lifeless, and unforgiving sea: 'The northern sky rose high and black / Over the proud unfruitful sea'. And later the same strain is rehearsed: 'But the third went wide and far / Into an unforgiving sea / Under a fire-spilling star' (p. 21). The north ship is the one that 'was rigged for a long journey', as the poem's opening tells, though this piece of information is revealed in the last line.

What is curious about the north ship is not only that it has gone on to a destination other ships abstain from, but also the idea that this ship's journey may be both endless and non-returnable. Further, while the west and east ships seem to make unconscious choices, otherwise the latter would not have gone on its wretched journey to return unhappily, the north ship seems to make a conscious and voluntary choice, and this is why it 'was rigged for a long journey.' In an early version of the poem that survives in his letter to Sutton mentioned above, Larkin ended each stanza with this line as a refrain. With hindsight, he later confined it to the last stanza to become a characteristic of the north ship apart from the two others. Had the line become a refrain, the north ship would have been stripped of some of its glamour and uniqueness. In sum, the north ship of '*Legend*' has sailed on its own will to get stuck in an ungainly fate from which there is no hope whatsoever of

liberation. On it will keep going, navigating through the northern territory, an endless stretch of insatiable frosty seas, and meanwhile forging its own legend. The narrating persona argues perhaps on behalf of conscious choices, being unconventional and contrary to the norms, which send their makers fumbling into mystery and jeopardy. The mind is tempted to flout conventionality and chart its own maps at very high stakes. Like the journey north, once idiosyncratic intellectual, artistic, and social choices are made, the point of no return is crossed and retreat denied and blocked. However, '*Legend*' seems to make the point that no withdrawal is desired let alone sought out or pleaded. If it pivots around wild ambition and the desire to conquer the impossible, the north sea will not cease to attract adventurers and eccentrics who find the experience energising, despite suffering, until the north territory is tamed. Its Sirens keep luring adventurers who are neither intimidated by the hazardous experience nor inclined to feel regret.

There remains the symbolism of three, not four, ships to be reckoned with. Does Larkin's being in his third decade dictate the need for three ships to summarise his life journey so far? Why is a voyage to the southern coordinate passed over in silence? Does Larkin associate the north with forwardness and progressiveness, so that the south by implication stands for stagnancy and retrogression? In a letter to J. B. Sutton dated 26 January 1950, Larkin philosophises, 'I'm afraid we all find ourselves steering upstream, if our power is strong enough to carry us, despite our protestations that spiritual health lies only downstream with the blood-ties of family and race.'<sup>48</sup>

The narrator of '*Legend*' is omnipresent, but external, relating the story in an offhand detached manner. It appears as if the fate of the ship matters less to him, being not one of the doomed crew on board. Therefore, his version lacks the personal involvement and individualistic air. In the next poem, '*Songs: 65° N*', the situation is redressed; the point of

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<sup>48</sup> Anthony Thwaite (ed.), *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin: 1940-1985*, p. 157.

view becomes internal and the voice is projected from within. In so doing, ‘the mindscape of the narrator who happens to be a member of the crew’ is pried open as his sleep is ‘perturbed’ by ‘a “recurrent” nightmare’.<sup>49</sup> Composed of short lines rhyming abbbca, the song simulates the singer’s precarious state of mind after a long voyage into the Arctic wilderness. The singer is one of the doomed sailors who are stranded in this northward ship arriving at 65° N, a latitude where Iceland is located.<sup>50</sup> Oddly enough, the atmosphere that the song promotes is rather hallucinatory and nightmarish:

My sleep is made cold  
By a recurrent dream  
Where all things see  
Sickeningly to poise  
On emptiness, on stars  
Drifting under the world. (p. 22)

The crew member seems to be trapped in a limbo between waking and sleep, where an icy, lifeless sea panorama frowns at him in the day and haunts his sleep at night. It is more like the spell the mythological Sirens cast on sailors to enmesh them in an entrancing reverie that will lead them to their final downfall and eventually have them all perish. However, the singer is all too aware of the traumatic experience, and laments the irrevocable bargain:

Light strikes from the ice:  
Like one who near death  
Savours the serene breath,  
I grow afraid,  
Now the bargain is made,  
That dream draws close. (p. 22)

The sea-sufferer craves unconsciousness and thirsts for a blackout though he is by no means relieved by dreams. Awakening from dreams is set parallel to death, for the dream, no matter how nightmarish, seems to be less horrifying than awakening to face the appalling reality in the middle of the merciless sea: ‘When waves fling loudly / And fall at

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<sup>49</sup> Sisir Kumar Chatterjee, *Philip Larkin*, p. 49.

<sup>50</sup> When Googled, the position 65° N and 20° W is where Iceland is located, a matter that further bolsters Cooper’s observations on the affinities *The North Ship* has with *Letters from Iceland*.

the stern / I am wakened each dawn / Increasingly to fear / Sail-stiffening air, / The birdless sea' (p. 22). The rough climate and hostile, albatross-less sea bode ill and warn against inevitable dangers. On a metaphorical level, imagination and dream, despite their bizarre or uncommon nature, are contrived to circumvent the frustration which reality inflicts. The imagery of 'The North Ship' strikes the reader as almost fantastical, hence the delirious dreaming ambience of 'Song'. As the collection makes scant references to reality, Larkin creates an imagery that goes along with 'the exploration of inwardness', resulting in obscurity.<sup>51</sup> This surreal landscape is not confined to the five north ship poems, but a consistent motif in the collection as a whole.

In '70° N: *Fortunetelling*', the past and future are entwined as the ship sails on the icy waters of the Arctic. The voyager is reminded that he has still the infinitely stretching sea to navigate and a very long way to go before the expedition comes to a close, a fact he is fully aware of. In line with Eliot's *Waste Land*, though not as clairvoyant as Madame Sosostris in 'The Burial of the Dead', the northern fortuneteller, on one level, reveals a prospective fate, promising idyllic and romantic quests that pander to the globetrotter's cherished fantasies and cravings:

You will go a long journey,  
In a strange bed take rest,  
And a dark girl will kiss you  
As softly as the breast  
Of an evening bird comes down  
Covering its own nest. (p. 22)

Indeed, the image of the dark girl, native of the Arctic, haunts masculine fantasies, a theme Larkin will return to in 'Breadfruit' (1961). Larkin is all too aware of the affiliation between the two. In a letter to Robert Conquest in December 1961, Larkin explains that the latter is 'in direct linear succession to *The North Ship*'.<sup>52</sup> Feminine and masculine symbolism is so cardinal in 'The North Ship', expressing 'Larkin's early mythical psychic

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<sup>51</sup> Gary Day, "Never Such Innocence Again": the Poetry of Philip Larkin', p. 38.

<sup>52</sup> Anthony Thwaite (ed.), *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin: 1940-1985*, p. 335.



voyage into manhood, into the “male-strom”.<sup>53</sup> On another level, the future projected here could be a disguised replica of the past:

Lest memory exclaim  
At her bending face,  
Knowing it is the same  
As one who long since died  
Under a different name. (p. 22)

Hence, the north-farer, who will always remain a stranger and expatriate, is not entirely extricated of past memories, failures, and disappointment, and is prone to get thrust back into nostalgia. If it is a journey north towards escapism, it must be then a failure as the escapist finds himself re-experiencing the past he thought he left behind. Furthermore, the traveller is plagued with the certain knowledge that all the efforts he exerts to forgo the past and the exile he imposes on himself could be null and void. His awareness that this world does not mutate simply by navigating through distant or foreign latitudes stops him short of sliding into barren reveries. The fortunetelling poem is part and parcel of the sea credo, but also an indispensable component of the mental and psychological picture. Humans hope to adjust the future to their own dreams and wishes and ward off evil and misfortune. Clairvoyance fits in well with the feverish desire to elude and forestall the future and even reshuffle its cards. It is the endeavour of the transcendental, visionary mind, reaching out for the supernatural to rewind and straighten the proceedings of fate.

An *Odyssey*-like voyage to the unfriendly north cannot do without a perfect storm to go with it and aggravate peril and agony. ‘75° N: Blizzard’ fits into the slot perfectly well. As the ship plods on north and as the voyage is drawing towards its finale, a snowy storm strikes the sea-farers: ‘Suddenly clouds of snow / Begin assaulting the air’ (p. 23). Oddly, the crew is taken aback by the abrupt hostility of the weather, quite oblivious to the fact that they have penetrated very deep into unmanned, wild territory. The awe-struck sailors commence to theorise and visualise about the inhospitable blizzard that greets them as the

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<sup>53</sup> Victoria Longino, ‘The Alien Moment: Philip Larkin and Gender’, p. 94.

ship traverses 5° closer to the north. Their theories strike a puerile tone considering the risk and danger they are exposed to:

Some see a flock of swans,  
Some a fleet of ships  
Or a spread winding-sheet,  
But the snow touches my lips... (p. 23)

Their perception is clouded and their minds are delirious. Perhaps they have all taken leave of their senses and grown so insane and bewitched by the eerie atmosphere of the antagonistic waters that they are ranting and raving. Neither the romantic and imaginative with their swan flock hypothesis, nor the feverish with their nonsensical one, nor even the sinister with their 'spread winding-sheet' signifying impending death are credible enough to the narrating voice to admit them into the realm of possibility. Shrugging them all off, he has in store a different theory:

And beyond all doubt I know  
A girl is standing there  
Who will take no lovers  
Till she winds me in her hair. (p. 23)

The girl's hypothesis has made its debut in the first stanza, where the air is seen to be 'As falling, as tangled / As a girl's thick hair.' The sailor, for his part, romanticises the storm as a Calypso-like enchantress set on entangling and detaining him. He argues in terms of sure knowledge that such a creature has singled him out, apart from other sailors, and laid her snare to trap him. She intends to bring him to his ruin, hence he is the jinxed, ill-starred passenger, a Jonah-like persona, bringing calamitous fate to the vessel that carries him. In so doing, the narrator stresses that love and romance and the entanglement they entail are hazardous. Larkin could have in mind and hence even parody, perhaps, Shakespeare's Miranda who meets Ferdinand after a similar ship wreckage caused by a human-induced storm.

The blizzard poem is designed to accelerate the flow of the narrative towards its climax. The north ship must drop anchorage, the perilous, ominous journey is drawing to

an abrupt close. It has got stuck in the middle of nowhere. However, 'Above 80° N' is barely a concluding coda of 'The North Ship' in the conventional sense of the term. It begins as a fully-fledged song with the singer identified:

'A woman has ten claws,'  
Sang the drunken boatswain;  
Farther than Betelgeuse,  
More brilliant than Orion  
Or the planets Venus and Mars,  
The star flames on the ocean;  
'A woman has ten claws,'  
Sang the drunken boatswain. (p. 23)

The song, with its typical bawdy seamen's opening, trails away after the first line and the narrator picks up where the boatswain left off. The topic of the song also shifts from a eulogy of the marvelous sea firmament to a derogatory tenor, longing for, but equally repulsing, a woman's companionship. As the ship navigates through the north, 'fear gathers into the image of the female lover'.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, Longino argues that 'The North Ship' is 'a tale about the terror evoked in the male by the female, the risk that the male undertakes and feels in seeking out the lost feminine, and the unreadiness of the masculine to reunite with the feminine.' Though the death-inspiring image of the woman embodies 'the sabotaging persistence of the masculine fear of the feminine', the stellar imagery that follows flames the ocean up.<sup>55</sup> The unidentified stars of the ocean which breathe flame and fire are brighter than all of the Orion constellation, Venus, and Mars together. The idea of the woman as a merciless Siren luring the helpless seafarers to their deaths emerges again. A woman, not the sea and its perils, nor the icy, frozen latitude, is named as the tool of ruin and fall from grace. The song exposes the insanity of the entire pursuit and indeed no man would have his wits about him, when combating this hostile climate or the ten-clawed woman. The mind breaks down under all the psychological pressures. The subconscious

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<sup>54</sup> Andrew Swarbrick, *Out of Reach*, p. 25.

<sup>55</sup> Victoria Longino, 'The Alien Moment: Philip Larkin and Gender', p. 94.

designs a female figure whose appearance, monstrous and uninviting, inspires fear rather than romance.

A drunken and awkward coda as it is, the song sums up the futility of the whole pursuit, derides the superego that has launched it in the first place, and plays down the seriousness of the entire quest. 'Above 80° N' is intended as a requiem rather than celebration of the doomed adventure. The five poems of 'The North Ship' simulate a mind's journey when it goes astray, toils, labours, and meanders into nothingness. The argument the poem puts forward leads nowhere and Larkin seems to have intended it thus, making it a modernist poem of a peculiar kind (given that it is also meant to be a ballad). His poetical ship is supposed to remain marooned in the frozen latitude, to be rescued, if at all, in a novel not a poem. In a letter to James Sutton dated 20<sup>th</sup> September 1945, Larkin writes: 'Now I am thinking of a third book in which the central character will pick up where Katherine [*A Girl in Winter*] left off and develop *logically* back to life again. In other words, the north ship will come back instead of being bogged up there in a glacier.'<sup>56</sup> Ultimately, a third novel never saw the light and the north ship remained stranded.

XXXII, the poem Larkin added to Faber's *The North Ship*, belongs to the same period, but it has little in common with the original collection. While in the other poems, love seems to be more like a mirage that vanishes upon the touch, in XXXII, love is a palpable everyday reality. However, instead of fulfilment and satisfaction, love stands as a menace to the lover. First, the poem gives a glimpse of what domestic life could look like as summed up in the opening line 'Waiting for breakfast, while she brushed her hair'. Second, it serves as a starting point to the morose mind to dwell on such retrospections as 'I looked down at the empty hotel yard / Once meant for coaches', but no longer of course, striking a nostalgic chord and dropping a hint about the transience of the world. The

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<sup>56</sup> Anthony Thwaite (ed.), *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin: 1940-1985*, pp. 109-10.

modern has long superseded the Victorian. However, the recollection endorses a far more searing transformation regarding love and intimacy. This is ‘the empirical’ and documented reality that ‘the aspiring aesthete’ reviews with a growing sense of disillusionment, defeat, and contrition.<sup>57</sup> Then the mind’s meandering is set in motion discarding both love and retrospection. The eyes do not scowl at the misty, dark surrounding, with its modern trimmings of wet ‘cobblestones’, ‘Drainpipes and fire-escape’, and rooms ‘still burning their electric light’, while the mind experiences ‘a sense of surprise’, as Whalen phrases it, mixed with the discovery.<sup>58</sup> Obviously, the observer is keen on spotting imperfections that lead him to lose heart and wash his hands of the whole project. The mind goes dark with unwholesome intimations: ‘I thought: Featureless morning, featureless night.’ The string of sombre thoughts keeps going and the murkiness of the view reflects the sordidness of the thoughts populating the narrator’s mind:

Misjudgment: for the stones slept, and the mist  
 Wandered absolvingly past all it touched,  
 Yet hung like a stayed breath; the lights burnt on,  
 Pin-points of undisturbed excitement; beyond the glass  
 The colourless vial of day painlessly spilled  
 My world back after a year, my lost lost world  
 Like a cropping deer strayed near my path again,  
 Bewaring the mind's least clutch. (pp. 23-4)

The stanza seems to go over, with little more details, the same intimations of the antecedent stanza. It also rehearses the theme of the world’s worthlessness and imperfection, which falls short of satisfying the narrator. However, in assuming that nocturnal wickedness or at least impishness may be absolved or struck off with the morning mist, the speaker expresses his wish to slip through, free of what he deems to be a hindrance or a disgrace. Later a turn is initiated in ‘My world back after a year, my lost lost world’ when the contemplation gets more personal, pensive, and retrospective. This highly cherished and acutely missed lost world of the narrator is back on this very murky, misty

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<sup>57</sup> Andrew Swarbrick, *Out of Reach*, p. 33.

<sup>58</sup> Terry Whalen, *Philip Larkin and English Poetry*, pp. 4-5.

morning. The so-called 'lost world' of his re-emerges like the annual resurfacing of a buried mythical city; he cannot afford to let its enchanting opportunity slip away.

An undisguised tone of regret, guilt, and even lament exposes the element that spoils the entire view for the beholder. The speaker's thoughts dovetail with an aching realisation of his misuse or even abuse of his mental and creative resources. Larkin's paranoia regarding wasting his better and artistic half by indulging his inferior and physical one disrupts any comfort and satisfaction he must have collected from the latter. This semi-domestic bliss of love and companionship, or at least an affectation of it, chases away the narrator's dearest and most prized mental indulgence. Deer-like, the Muse has to be coaxed assiduously with utmost devotion, self-denial, and meticulous commitment. It dawns upon him that he may not manage to offer diligence and dedication to more than one deity. He is anxious lest he tips the scales in favour of love; therefore domestic bliss wanes. He lays the golden trap tenderly, 'Bewaring the mind's least clutch', so that the inspiration may stray into his vicinity. However, there is no guarantee that the efforts he exerts and the schemes his mind spins will bear him fruits. The speaker, edgy and strung up on account of his Muse, prioritises inspiration and offers to bully his present lover out of his immediate vicinity: physical and spiritual. To his agitated mind, monism is the key to enlist the Muse that tolerates no rivalry; the presence of a third party chases the coy Muse away. However, ignoring the importance of the equal presence of both, his lover and Muse, might be another misjudgment on his part:

How would you have me? Towards your grace  
My promises meet and lock and race like rivers,  
But only when you choose. Are you jealous of her?  
Will you refuse to come till I have sent  
Her terribly away, importantly live  
Part invalid, part baby, and part saint? (p. 24)

Now that the night lapses, romance fizzles out and the reader is reminded of 'love and its commerce done' of XVI. On the other hand, the Muse, which is 'drained of female

attributes and with the aspect of a shamanic animal familiar', trots into the poet's proximity inaudibly and intangibly when it chooses for the matter is by no means up to him.<sup>59</sup> The Muse is possessive, egoist, and mercurial. The speaker is anxious to the point of pleading with his Muse to condescend and render him service or confer upon him that 'tender visiting'. Therefore, he offers to wheedle and cajole like a baby, pray and implore like an invalid, and promise monogamy and celibacy like a saint. In view of his notorious sexual promiscuity, it is a wonder how Larkin seems to have always pretended to keep his Muse a top priority.

In sum, *The North Ship* reveals a poetical mind that works itself into a state of turbulence and agitation as it unreservedly touches on mental, poetical, psychological, and romantic strains. The poems reveal minds juggling with alternatives and possibilities, contriving well-informed and knowledgeable intensity and energy. Larkin was yet to find his own individual signature, therefore these poems expose his tentativeness and almost atavistic experimentalism. Indeed, it is his experimenting with 'linguistic strangeness, self-conscious literariness, radical self-questioning, sudden shifts of voice and register, complex viewpoints and perspectives, and symbolist intensity' that links him to the modernist canon.<sup>60</sup> It may help to remember that in the 1940s, Larkin did not view his future poetry-wise so to speak; perhaps even did not think poetry-writing worthwhile. To be a novelist was a relentless obsession of his twenties. It was only when he gave up on the latter that he struck on his poetical individuality. All in all, *The North Ship* is a point in Philip Larkin's poetical 'curve', to borrow Ezra Pound's metaphor, that he worked to move away from.<sup>61</sup> It looks more like an illegitimate child whose father is loath to boast and brag about, but still bound by duty and commitment not to disown. Nonetheless, Larkin has not

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<sup>59</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*, p. 120.

<sup>60</sup> Stephen Regan, 'Philip Larkin: a Late Modern Poet', in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century English Poetry*, ed. Neil Corcoran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 147-58, at p. 149.

<sup>61</sup> John Press, *A Map of Modern English Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 34.

altogether shaken his practice from the whims and impulses, or the fever (in his own words), that dictated the romantic and surreal diffusions of the *The North Ship*. He only managed to abate the Yeatsian fever which he spoke about in his Faber's introduction so that the emotional effusion is replaced by something more polished and sophisticated. His later poetry shows him reconciling these early unpolished assets with the more realistic, down-to-earth, stoic qualities he acquired early, but gradually developed and fostered. The tentative, stumbling beginning with its symbolic and modernist tendencies are superseded by a disillusioned, more poised, temperate quality that defines Larkin's career in its entirety.



## Chapter 3

### *The Less Deceived: Finding a Platform*

#### I

Larkin's much praised and celebrated collection *The Less Deceived* (1955) marks the birth of a far more authoritative poet with an unmistakably personal, private signature and turn of mind that launched the later Larkin. In this collection, Larkin no longer orbited Yeats or any other poet, in that no other poet is so articulate in Larkin's poetry that his personal ring is muffled. Despite the 'surfacing perceptions' of 'a man's own life' and 'its "moments of vision"' which Larkin acquired from Hardy, not even Hardy is heard loudly enough to call the poems Hardy-esque, in the way that *The North Ship* might be described as Yeatsian.<sup>1</sup> What is heard in *The Less Deceived* is not Yeats's 'grand music', which attracted Larkin in the first place, but 'the sound of the mind thinking aloud'.<sup>2</sup> Though Larkin commented, in an interview, on what he perceived as its fortuitous success, *The Less Deceived* marks his landing on a perfect medium and individual platform which he was not going to part with in the future. One may tend to think that his later collections kept competing with his second in the hope of not falling short of it, if beating it seems beyond the reach.<sup>3</sup>

Gardner finds the title '*The Less Deceived*' too intellectually loaded, almost, to the point of faultiness, as 'it suggested a clever, cool refusal to be "taken in": it chimed too easily with the fashion for intellectual suspicion and wariness of the grand gesture'.<sup>4</sup> The collection is marked, among many other things, by its complexity, profundity, sophistication, and multiplicity of voice and attitude. These seem to be the characteristics, typical of Larkin's poetry of the 1950s as Osborne intimates, which 'advances briskly from

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Thwaite, 'The Poetry of Philip Larkin', *Phoenix*, 11/12 (1973/4), 41-58, at p. 47.

<sup>2</sup> Héctor Blanco Uria, 'The Topic of Ageing in Philip Larkin's Poetry', in *The Art of Ageing: Textualising the Phases of Life*, ed. Brian Worsfold (Catalunya: Universitat de Lleida, 2005), 3-12, at p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey Thurley, *The Ironic Harvest*, p. 144.

<sup>4</sup> Philip Gardner, 'The Wintry Drum', *Phoenix*, 11/12 (1973/4), 27-40, at p. 31.

an apparent acceptance of Existentialism (“Next, Please”), via a deliberate embrace of the *mauvaise foi* demonized by Kierkegaard and Sartre (“Church Going”), to a penetrating critique of that philosophy (“Poetry of Departures”).<sup>5</sup> Within the existential domain, Larkin is seen to lend ‘wryly humorous attention to the ordinary and a surprisingly grave awareness of how it contains within itself major existential concerns.’<sup>6</sup>

In *The Less Deceived*, personae and narrators confide in the readers and develop better understanding, doing full honour to the title. The mind of the poet is fractured and partially laid open; each and every voice, articulate in the poems, picks up a shattered piece and duly argues its case. Long winding arguments are unleashed, contingent at times on philosophical ramblings where obscurity and ambivalence are thematically invested without ruining the intended effects. However, when layers of complexity are lifted, a casual and simple occasion can often be found to be the trigger of the poem. Poems like ‘Wants’ and ‘Wires’ are remarkably condensed philosophical profiles that boil down into a moral. Parable-like, ‘Wires’ has its speaker philosophise cogently about how knowledge is as costly and agonising as butting against ‘wires / Whose muscle-shredding violence gives no quarter.’ The loss of innocence (which is mourned in the poem), maturity, and consequent prudence exact demureness, deprivation, and even captivity. By default, ignorance and innocence are liberating, inspiring, and adventurous, but more importantly congruent with the intrinsic nature that scents ‘purer water / Not here but anywhere. Beyond the wires’ (p. 35). In ‘Wants’, the rational mind meditates on death and names oblivion as the one want that Larkin’s persona most yearns for: ‘Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs’ (p. 32). Death is the covert desire that humans try to cheat by indulging every other possible desire (drilled and confirmed in the poem), but they ultimately succumb to it.

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<sup>5</sup> John Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, p. 82.

<sup>6</sup> Michael O’Neill and Madeleine Callaghan, ‘Post-War poetry’, p. 149.

The desires and wants the poem catalogues perfunctorily are going to fuel other poems in the collection and receive a detailed and in-depth deliberation. Philosophical and intellectual questions are tackled in different lights and the concluding codas are at times convulsing and shocking. The mind, which remains in a feverish reverie in *The North Ship* or at best half-awake, jolts back to wakefulness, though its new state is found neither reassuring nor comforting. It is a mind that promises a rich, but equally disturbing, harvest of its own if forced open, as the speaker of 'If, My Darling' claims. When its speaker hypothesises, 'If my darling were once to decide / Not to stop at my eyes, / But to jump, like Alice, with floating skirt into my head' (p. 43), this is more a warning than an invitation. It is a conditional summons against accepting the visible and an invitation to venture into the invisible, into the wonderland of a mind that seems to harbour a territory odder and more esoteric than Alice's. The bluntness and audacity with which the daring mind lays down its load forces it to unveil its demons. Therefore, the addresser warns of a Pandora's box of a mind that shocks and stupefies.

*The Less Deceived*, indeed, offers slices of agitated minds in the sense that its various personae and speakers open up to and invite readers in with less reluctance and more candour so that both sides may grow better learnt and less deceived. The poet, in his turn, creates various personae unashamed or unembarrassed, to say the least, of their mental, intellectual, and psychological status quo. They review and inspect issues and queries with displeasure and even anger, but also and more importantly with resignation, running a full circle back to the basics. All in all, the collection is about shaking off (self-)deception and crossing the threshold of experience to admit to oneself, if not to the world, that everyday reality as lived and experienced can be far more outlandish than speculations. *The Less Deceived* is a journey through mental and psychological strains that impinge on a constantly growing and cleaving consciousness. It is a treatise on nostalgia

with time, memory, and retrospection as motifs that shape the arguments in the majority of the poems, such as 'I Remember, I Remember', 'At Grass', and 'Church Going', to name just a few. In some instances, time and retrospection provide a backdrop against which major concerns such as love, durability, transience, and fulfillment are measured. In others, the entire argument rests on time, whether retrospective or speculative, as its basic trigger.

One of the major deceptions dispelled in *The Less Deceived* is the preconception regarding romance and relations. Many poems investigate sexual insecurities and fears that one might 'burst into fulfilment's desolate attic' and be deceived. The sexual phobias reverberate in 'Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album', 'Reasons for Attendance', and 'Dry-Point' let alone the peculiarity of 'Deception'. Larkin's sexually deprived or fulfilled personae happen on a line of thought that takes the edge off sexual triumphs and makes them re-examine their true wants and rearrange priorities. Their minds are highly weighed down by a sense of dislocation, alienation, and difference. The analytical, critical mind ensures that it is not the ideal place, nor the perfect partner that Larkin's persona yearns to find, but a complaisant mentality and a sense of contentment. Poems like 'Places, Loved Ones', 'I Remember, I Remember', and 'Poetry of Departures' expose a psychological and intellectual dialectic between what one really is and what one aspires and longs to be. The protagonists are torn between the urge to lead a secure, comfortable life and the flighty whim to outstrip themselves and reach far more romantic and idyllic pursuits. Failing to achieve the latter, Larkin's personae resort to a reasoning in favour of a philosophical passivity and stoicism and promote a sense of the futility of all human endeavours and pursuits. This line of argument is driven home poignantly in, for instance, 'At Grass' and 'Poetry of Departures', where a speculation of celebrated fame and adventure are respectively debunked.

## II

*The Less Deceived* opens with 'Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album', a poem that is marked by what Steve Clark calls 'a decidedly Baudelairean air'.<sup>7</sup> For Whalen, it dwells on 'the sensation of human transience' and Petch finds it a 'meditation on time and change' despite 'the casualness of the situation'.<sup>8</sup> Being a poem of 'wit', as Tolley puts it, it is carefully crafted.<sup>9</sup> It is a poem in which the mood changes from the humorous, sensual opening where voyeurism dominates, erotically populating the outset of the poem, to the serious, sombre peroration where a transcendental tone presides and insight supersedes sight. With perceptions sharpened and alert, the mind is split between reality and the idealism of photographic poses, and skids from sheer adoration and doting to mild criticism: 'Too much confectionery' (p. 27). The poem, though basically a 'visual' expedition, exploits 'a sharp contrast between the movement of his [the speaker's] mind and the fixity of what he is looking at'; this movement is reflected in the shift of verbal tense. The visual movement is reinforced by a similar movement of the 'consciousness', which recruits rhyme 'ages/images/pages' in the first stanza to accomplish it.<sup>10</sup> Both the seeing eye and the analysing mind are summoned to coordinate, though the latter is 'distracted' by the thrill which physical beauty sends through the spine almost to the point of choking. The photographs have the advantage of arousing the same feelings that the girl, in flesh and blood, arouses in him, but also the disadvantage of disarming him for she is 'faintly disturbing' and 'from every side' striking at his 'control'. Thus, he is caught in a private net of vulnerability. As he almost surreally hankers after its owner, the album, yielded to him, marks his 'sexual triumph'.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Steve Clark, 'Larkin's Sexual Politics', p. 115.

<sup>8</sup> Terry Whalen, *Philip Larkin and English Poetry*, p. 6; Simon Petch, *The Art of Philip Larkin*, p. 51.

<sup>9</sup> A. T. Tolley, *Larkin at Work*, p. 69.

<sup>10</sup> Simon Petch, *The Art of Philip Larkin*, pp. 51-2.

<sup>11</sup> Stan Smith, 'Margins of Tolerance: Response to Post-war Decline', in *Philip Larkin*, ed. Stephen Regan (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1997), pp. 178-86, p. 180.

For a moment, the images evoke his base instincts and his predatory side, a matter that recalls to the mind Larkin's weakness for 'pornographic magazines'.<sup>12</sup> Before long, the rationalising mind takes over and offers meditations on art/photography, beauty, love, and time, and closes this erotic episode. So, the album after all proves to be ambrosia of some sort for the mind, not only a mere erotica. The narrator's mind fleshes out furtive speculations regarding the girl's future prospects in which the voyeur does not feature, much to his dismay. Autobiographically speaking, Larkin seemed to have entertained no hope of seducing the album's owner; he suspected himself to be out of her league or, to simplify things, she was 'out of [his] reach.'<sup>13</sup> Getting the album works as a psychological surrogate that makes amends and restores balance. Larkin's protagonist does not entertain hopes of winning the girl in the photographs either and never will, as he insinuates. He has instead possessed ageless, timeless miniatures of the unapproachable beauty hostages of his lust, whims, and leisure to feast his eyes and reflect on them. The poem, hence, ignites an argument that suggests that the voyeur has opted for the picture over the woman, art over life, fantasy over reality, or vision over experience. Therefore, the experience remains vicarious and virtual. The photographic exhibition 'recreates... the experience', as Timms suggests, and challenges 'the speaker's insecurities' according to Marsh.<sup>14</sup> The photographs make the voyeur re-live the passions, lusts, jealousies, and even rehearse a brief déjà vu of the unconsummated romance. He feels life palpate and the blood race in his veins, a tantalisation that is both rewarding and tormenting. He is a reversed Pygmalion for whom life is not breathed into art, but altogether dispensed with. The ecstatic mind, however, blows the album out of proportion. It is not an album that the speaker flips through, but a pictorial biography, authenticating 'All your ages / Matt and glossy on the thick black

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<sup>12</sup> Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, p. 234.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, p. 232.

<sup>14</sup> David Timms, *Philip Larkin*, p. 77; Nicholas Marsh, *Philip Larkin: the Poems* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 145.

pages!’ From ‘pigtails, clutching a reluctant cat’ to ‘this one of you bathing’ (p. 28), the photos seem to document a person almost posthumously as if the woman had long since passed away in the prime of her youth. He betrays a collector’s possessive mental attitude towards the lady. Rational calculations assure him that with no strings attached, eying the images up allows him to access and possess the woman ‘without becoming involved’.<sup>15</sup> Further, preserved in these snapshots, the woman will consequently know no advanced age, nor will her beauty suffer or diminish. Her bathing photograph is the summit of this juicy phase, hence the urgency of its theft.

Notwithstanding the praise lavished on the photos, the entire attitude is ambivalent and the narrator appears to be of two minds. The images look both ‘matt and glossy’, since while the face on the page is timeless, the material itself, i.e., paper, betrays signs of fading, reminding the thrilled speaker of reality. Snapping: ‘Or is it just *the past*?’ (p. 27), he dispenses any illusions as to the immediacy and accessibility of the intimation. The mind seems in conflict to impose a rational and orderly pattern on the contemplations lest they go unruly. As time hurries non-stop, the photographs and their owner seem to fall in tidily with a past which will soon be distant. The memory of the woman, disturbing as it is, will soon be shrouded in forgetfulness together with ‘These misty parks and motors’ (p. 27). Memory, like the album, will eventually have to be picked up and flipped through. Likewise, this attitude bolsters up a philosophy where art replaces, if not enhances, reality, not to mention a psychological stand where a not altogether pleasant bitter-sweet memory is tampered with and ameliorated to answer to a vision rather than reality. But reality with its ‘blemishes’ thrusts itself into the equation, for even these seemingly impeccable shots betray defects and imperfections as life itself which they copy faithfully. Despite the artificial poses which are more or less symbolic (for instance, the one in a ‘trilby hat’,

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<sup>15</sup> Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, p. 233.

which may be indicative of lesbianism), photography is not artistic, but highly informative.<sup>16</sup> The album seems to tell more about the girl than meets the eye, and certainly the viewer becomes better informed as he reaches the last page. As he moves from one picture to another, knowledge grows and new insights arise. The girl in the photographs seems to be forging ahead with a quite different rhythm. She is promised a far more interesting and fulfilling future or so the speaker insinuates as he brushes aside the girl's male friends photographed next to her with: 'Not quite your class, I'd say, dear, on the whole' (p. 27).

The Tennysonian allusion, en passant, in 'furred yourself, a sweet girl-graduate' (p. 27) is designed to endorse more liberal, intellectual, and feminist dimensions, true or false, of the photographed woman, not to mention what Cooper underlines as the 'frank sentiments of revolt against orthodox sexual politics'.<sup>17</sup> Retrospection and projection are enlisted to promote a state of mind that helps to revive the memory in part. Even then, the mind meanders to strike a fresh ore of pain. Ultimately, he cannot help but lament that 'you / Contract my heart by looking out of date' (p. 27), where the heart is simultaneously reduced and engaged.<sup>18</sup> Masochism surfaces as the pleasure ritual is never complete without self-inflicted pain. The viewer feels the urge to remind himself 'That this is a real girl in a real place'; then the run-on line splits the shrewd observation in half to have it resumed in the next stanza: 'In every sense empirically true!' (p. 27). With the consequent gaping hiatus, the idea hardly rests assured, but remains dangling. A goddess-like female figure is evoked from the photographs to sum up a whole past of frustration and disappointments, a vicarious present, and a bleak future: 'No matter whose your future' (p. 28). It seems even a far more distant past, reminiscent of romantic tradition of the previous

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<sup>16</sup> Dr. Paul Batchelor drew my attention to *Trilby*, a novel by George du Maurier, first serially published in 1894. The events are set in a bohemian Paris with the model/laundress heroine Trilby O'Ferrall (a half Irish girl) adored by all the men in the novel.

<sup>17</sup> Stephen Cooper, *Philip Larkin: Subversive Writer*, p. 125.

<sup>18</sup> Steve Clark, 'Larkin's Sexual Politics', p. 117.



centuries where ‘courtship’ and politeness curb desire and lust.<sup>19</sup> As if she could never be in any other form, the untouchable icon of beauty succumbs to him utterly in the form of photographs, lending herself freely and unconditionally to his hungry touch and gaze. Thus, photography, though ‘as no art is’, presents the speaker with a platform to weave up virtual romances and conquests. Although the poem strips photography of the status of art, Nicholas Marsh finds Freud’s observation that the artist’s use of art as ‘a seedy process by means of which the inadequate artist exploits the “wishful constructions of his life of phantasy” to obtain “honour, power and the love of women”’ applicable to Larkin’s poem.

<sup>20</sup> The mind overlooks the romantic fiasco and winds up a compensatory rationale for ecstasy and pleasure, if not indeed for contentment and complaisance.

Reflections, however, double and intensify from the seventh stanza on, up to the poem’s closure. The poet, hence, strikes a lofty note that is absent from the beginning of the poem when mood ‘alters’ from ‘lightness’ to ‘gravity’:<sup>21</sup>

Yes, true; but in the end, surely, we cry  
Not only at exclusion, but because  
It leaves us free to cry. We know *what was*  
Won't call on us to justify  
Our grief, however hard we yowl across

The gap from eye to page. (pp. 27-8)

Again Larkin splits the idea and has it run on into the following stanza, creating a stumbling effect. The speaker is agonising both for and because of the knowledge that dawns upon him and the package of self-realisation it unloads. The contemplative mood operates to alleviate loss and mitigate regret, for the album’s woman breathes life back into a past and a present that have belonged to none, and hence the mourner is not the only one compromised. She is, at the time, herself and her own boss, a position she might not

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<sup>19</sup> Stephen Regan, *Philip Larkin*, pp. 97-98.

<sup>20</sup> Nicholas Marsh, *Philip Larkin: the Poems*, p. 146.

<sup>21</sup> Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, p. 233.

maintain in the future. The album builds a paradise-like haven from which the viewer draws comfort and consolation:

In short, a past that no one now can share,  
No matter whose your future; calm and dry,  
It holds you like a heaven, and you lie  
Unvariably lovely there,  
Smaller and clearer as the years go by. (p. 28)

Larkin's coinage 'unvariably' to replace 'unvarying' or 'invariably' may indicate his impatience with language, whose adequacy falls short of doing the idea full justice. It also exposes an earnestness, if not anxiety, on his part to make language live up to the idolised muse. This is the working of a mind that exposes an impatient and almost gloating frisson. It has shut itself in a romantic episode and stopped the ticking of the clock; time stands still to help an adored image escape deterioration. Thus, these images 'froze' the object of his infatuation 'in her youth and available singleness'.<sup>22</sup> Or alternatively, the album presents a challenge whether time would corrupt not the beauty of the owner as much as her preserved virtual image in the speaker's mind. He flips through the album to reassure himself that what sends him into raptures does not lose its magic touch even when only virtually present and can always evoke that 'vicarious' pleasure<sup>23</sup>. As he manipulates language to answer his mind's image, his correlation of 'smaller' and 'clearer' carries contradictory senses of diminishment and clarity. Effigy-like, the album owner will remain unchanged, invaluable, and inaccessible. In a state of denial, the intimation is harnessed to the fervent desire of the gazer to preserve an image, almost embalmed, as he first came to know it, untainted and lovely. By the same token, it is an attempt to relive the erotic passion, agitation, and disturbance, the weird combination that yet defines life.

Larkin has yet more to say about beauty in 'Maiden Name', where again notions of time and transience reinforce an attitude of indifference and denial. Both poems select the past as a bubble to confine the beloved in her most enticing state; the maiden name, like

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<sup>22</sup> Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, p. 235.

<sup>23</sup> Nicholas Marsh, *Philip Larkin: the Poems*, p. 146.

the album in 'Lines', freezes 'a fixed and unchangeable ideal woman'.<sup>24</sup> In this poem, too, the speaker seizes upon a seemingly simple idea, but pursues it to more philosophical domains. Operating almost as a sequel to 'Lines', 'Maiden Name' rehearses the anxieties of the former. Here, the speaker attends to and theorises about a schizophrenic split between the unmarried and married woman on account of a name change. What the speaker in 'Lines' dreads has become a reality in 'Maiden Name'. In 'Lines', he does not approach the question of the woman belonging to somebody; in fact, he even shakes the idea off as absurd and unfitting. In 'Maiden Name', he faces the reality which he finds highly wanting and disappointing.

The argument, aided by 'mock-philosophical solemnity' and the 'witty exterior' of the poem, runs towards the conclusion that once a woman doffs her maiden name, she is forced to give up her individual identity too.<sup>25</sup> He does not dwell on the consequent identity crisis he professes women to experience, but he acquaints the readers with his thoughts regarding the subject. A woman ceases to be the person she used to be and which the speaker, along with many others, adores: 'For since you were so thankfully confused / By law with someone else, you cannot be / Semantically the same as that young beauty' (p. 33), and he might have appended *photographed*. At this point, the narrator 'switches between reflective tenderness and tongue-in-cheek stoicism' and the abandoned name 'become[s] the hub of meditations on the nature of a relationship'.<sup>26</sup> There is a ring of disappointment, endorsed by the technical formality of 'semantically'. The girl in 'Lines' seems to be cut out for a much more celebrated future and meant to indulge in higher pursuits. As the disconcerted mind contemplates her marriage, the consequent name change puts to rout all the anticipations. The wishful scenarios, his mind concocts, lie

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<sup>24</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Writer*, p. 130.

<sup>25</sup> Andrew Swarbrick, *Out of Reach*, p. 51.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Bradford, *First Boredom, Then Fear*, p. 102.

debunked and fallow with disuse like her maiden name, ‘discarded’ along with ‘other trivia of her girlhood and adolescence’:<sup>27</sup>

Now it’s a phrase applicable to no one,  
Lying just where you left it, scattered through  
Old lists, old programmes, a school prize or two,  
Packets of letters tied with tartan ribbon –  
Then is it scentless, weightless, strengthless, wholly  
Untruthful? (p. 33)

The question the speaker raises epitomises the whole name change ordeal, for the maiden name must be false and insignificant if the replacement is achieved smoothly and effortlessly. Paradoxically, while the new name’s owner will be allowed, in fact even compelled, to retreat to a nondescript background, wrapped in oblivion, the maiden name’s owner will survive as a cherished and relished memory:

Or, since you’re past and gone,  
  
It means what we feel now about you then:  
How beautiful you were, and near, and young,  
So vivid, you might still be there among  
Those first few days, unfingermarked again. (p. 33)

The tone is apologetic, but also arrogant and patronising. It is rather baffling how the voices in both poems betray an infatuation with the purity of the woman which runs in antithesis with the non-platonic stuff of the erotic reveries. The maiden state, unlike the marital, is suggested to define an idealistic innocence, which the latter confuses, if not corrupts. The poem forestalls an argument against marriage which Larkin has made no secret of. If it exposes feminist sympathies, it does so accidentally and only by virtue of its subject matter. The poem may be a lamentation for the loss of innocence and confusion of identity, or in essence, a scaffolding to Larkin’s abhorrence of marriage and the concessions it entails.

The rift between romantic idealism and reality widens in ‘Latest Face’, a poem in which Osborne perceives ‘multiple selfhood’ and ‘contending selves’ on the ground of the

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<sup>27</sup> Andrew Swarbrick, *Out of Reach*, p. 51.

psychological and mental evolution to which the central persona is subjected.<sup>28</sup> It negotiates rationally the status and value of romance in an individual's life and whether it is worthwhile. As such, 'Latest Face' carries affinities with other poems in *The Less Deceived*, such as 'Lines', 'Reasons For Attendance', and 'Dry-Point'. It also refers back to at least two earlier poems: XX 'I see a girl dragged by the wrist' and XXXII 'Waiting for breakfast' from *The North Ship*, where love and art are poised as adversaries and contesting platforms with love paling next to art. In 'Latest Face', however, the speaker is not necessarily an art devotee, but one who entertains doubts and fears regarding the worthiness of the incipient romantic experience he finds himself embarking on. Nor is romance hedged in an inverse position to any other phenomenon, whether mundane or aesthetic. Romance is contemplated regardless of the speaker's other options and/or passions. The counter plan seems to run in the direction of designing an argument that dissuades him from going any further. Before things accelerate and he loses control, he has to keep his feeling on a tight rein. Therefore, he dissects his romantic status quo and speculates on love, winding up a rationale and rehearsing ideas which other poems have indulged in.

The speaker, as usual, is aware of the transience and instability of love, albeit its inaugural, superficial effortlessness. He is also equally attentive to its impact or 'great arrival at my eyes' (p. 43), as the poem puts it. He reminds himself that this is not his first romance, nor is it going to be the last, as the title suggests, and hence its value plummets. So, when he has to choose between love in its immediacy 'On a useless level' and, let's say, independence, he seems to opt for the latter. As such, the mind contrives arguments to forestall events before the romance moves to the next non-platonic level, symbolised in the 'real untidy air' which has 'no lasting attribute' in store. The celebrated effortlessness of

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<sup>28</sup> John Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, pp. 219, 220.

the opening is soon to bow to chaos, suffering, and compromise which deny love its elegance and grace. Thereupon, the menace gets stuck on the hypothetical level as only a mind's scenario, for 'it is the tenuous incipience of a possible relationship which he chooses to celebrate, rather than any actual human contact'.<sup>29</sup> Or rather, the poem applauds the stoicism with which the speaker greets his decision to impede and circumscribe the looming intimacy. The argument is intellectually charged to slander and slur the non-platonic alternative. The vulgarity of 'Bargains, suffering', introducing 'love', moves in contrast to the prospects of an 'always-planned salute', i.e., glory and recognition which other alternatives promise, whereas love does not. The arguer's alertness and presence of mind spare him the entire ordeal by stopping him short so that he does not come close to making a difficult choice. He is saved before it is 'far too late for turning back?', which the speaker pronounces interrogatively. The rationale in favour of the platonic relation and non-commitment is fitted with another intellectually wrought excuse:

Lies grow dark around us: will  
The statue of your beauty walk?  
Must I wade behind it, till  
Something's found – or is not found –  
Far too late for turning back? (p. 43)

He admits his mediocrity compared to the paragon of flawless beauty the addressee embodies, a state of affairs that refers the reader back to 'Lines', in which the narrator pines for an unapproachable, 'disturbing', and idolised beauty. The latent inferiority complex stems from an acute awareness of the superiority of the contemplated partner, whether true or false. The alleged superiority can barely be purely physical, but needs to be equally intellectual to make any sense. As his rival, her growing power over him looms as a challenge to threaten his ego. Otherwise, he will not be so intimidated to the point of scaring himself off a future where she has to lead, as he depicts it, and he to follow at the heels, playing second fiddle. In consequence, he is competing for power, which makes the

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<sup>29</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Writer*, p. 127.

conflict intrinsically hegemonic, as he himself soon suspects: ‘Or, if I will not shift my ground, / Is your power actual’. Equally plausible as well is the notion that the whole argument is designed to fabricate this troubling effect of the rivalry or even mismatch and the narrator is in essence paranoid, delusional or, even worse, hysterical. The inquisitive mood, pervasive in the third verse, bears testimony to his uncertainty, anxiety, and bewilderment. Sounding the alarm seems to be his best strategy to counteract the opposite power before it is too late to undo the damage. Detecting an equally intellectual and sophisticated mind in a romantic partner threatens his pride and self-esteem, already bruised with self-realisation, and which the lover is so keen now on sheltering from further damage. This intellectual chauvinism keeps the speaker on guard so that he cannot stoop to *wading* behind in pursuit of something that is not even positively there. Again, ‘wading’ indicates both difficulty and discomfort and deflates the effortlessness claimed earlier. It also serves as a reminder that this is not his usual arena or zone of comfort; he is conceding. If he persists, he is, then, going against his very nature.

The poem is a sophisticated journey of conversion from one philosophy concerning love and romance to another, and hence a change of *faces* or evolution of ‘contending selves’. In consequence, the ‘ardent pursuer’ transforms into a ‘cool assessor’ in preparation to mutating into a ‘love denier’ when the poem ends.<sup>30</sup> After all, romance could be a mere mirage. Instead of chasing after a lost cause, the lover chooses a tactical retreat, deploying various strategies:

Or, if I will not shift my ground,  
Is your power actual – can  
Denial of you duck and run,  
Stay out of sight and double round,  
Leap from the sun with mask and brand  
And murder and not understand?’ (p. 43)

It seems like the poem’s persona contemplates using every trick in the book to ward off an imminent danger. The slight humorous ambience of the closing statement of the poem is

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<sup>30</sup> John Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, p. 220.

set in antithesis against the earlier gravitating, serious tone. As he debunks romance, his weaponry is no less romance proper. With his resort to children's games, conventional 'out of sight, out of mind' tactic, and vulgarity of mask-and-sword swashbuckling, everything is reduced to ludic logic. The mind conspires further to ensure that romance loses its foothold. All in all, the poem does not merely state its thesis, which is by itself polemical, but contrives persuasive, intelligent subsidiary debates to drive home its point, and enmesh and engage its readers.

The latter observation applies properly to 'Wedding-Wind', in which a bride takes the floor to murmur her connubial bliss. 'Wedding-Wind' is an interior monologue and a projection of 'a particular state of mind.'<sup>31</sup> It has 'a Lawrentian effect of ecstatic elevation' due to its 'unrhymed tetrameters and pentameters, with the occasional intensifying rhyme'.<sup>32</sup> Whalen identifies the elevated experience as 'close to the religious' and Booth finds the 'first-person evocation of the feel of being alive' to capture 'a character at a moment of epiphany.'<sup>33</sup> Larkin adjusts his voice to approach a reflective feminine consciousness, a practice that he has achieved with considerable success in *A Girl in Winter*, but still seems 'somewhat artificial' to James Booth.<sup>34</sup> Apparently, not at all bothered by the name change, the bride is overwhelmed by what Marsh calls 'her new sexual awareness' and connives at her wind-blown wedding.<sup>35</sup> Chanting: 'The wind blew all my wedding-day, / And my wedding-night was the night of high wind' (p. 28), she is too overwhelmed with happiness, wonder, and incredulity to interpret the portentous forecast.

Retrospection, memory and time are again major motifs in this poem, as they have been in the previous poems. The bride undergoes an awakening experience, hence the

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<sup>31</sup> Andrew Swarbrick, *Out of Reach*, p. 62.

<sup>32</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: The Poet's Plight* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 12.

<sup>33</sup> Terry Whalen, *Philip Larkin and English Poetry*, p. 58; James Booth, *Philip Larkin: The Poet's Plight*, p. 31.

<sup>34</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Writer*, pp. 126-7.

<sup>35</sup> Nicholas Marsh, *Philip Larkin: the Poems*, p. 14.



‘perpetual morning’ of the finale. As such, she is left trapped between the fresh and exciting memory of her wedding night and a banal present as a farmer’s wife. The gap between the two is epitomised in the night/day contrast, or darkness/light that sets the two procedures apart in the poem and which Larkin employs to mark the shift between the poem’s two stanzas. Apparently, she confuses the two and the thrill of the former osmoses to the latter. The irregular rhyme and broken rhythm which vary and shift, as if wind-blown themselves, fit in well with a fast and furious vision of the world.

Larkin creates a universal and timeless persona in a farmer’s wife whose rural life routine would barely vary from one individual to another, nor one time to another. However, what may really vary and differ is the attitude and mentality with which a farmer’s wife contemplates her position. The poet pries her mind open and ushers the readers inside or rather invites them to share the intimacies of her private assessment of her new life phase. Her evaluation is revealed to be highly biased, even verging on naivety, but nevertheless genuine to the point of engaging the reader’s compassion and appreciation. Larkin’s bride is barely self-deluded, if there is room for delusion. Awake and illusion free, she nevertheless embraces her destiny with nothing less than pleasure and complaisance and rejoices in her role as if a primordial Eve. Presently, a far stronger wind is blowing the young bride away and sweeping her off the ground. Nature, a backstage chorus, is echoing her agitation and excitement, thus suiting her mood best. She casts no shadow whatsoever on her bliss nor interprets the turbulent natural scene as a forecast of forthcoming evil. With a mental attitude like hers, no inconvenience whatsoever could have eclipsed her happiness, not even when ‘a stable door was banging, again and again’:

That he must go and shut it, leaving me  
Stupid in candlelight, hearing rain,  
Seeing my face in the twisted candlestick,  
Yet seeing nothing. (p. 28)

The bride may be carried away by passion, but she is by no means unaware. Her consciousness surfaces in her self-criticism and confession of clumsiness as she catches sight of her reflection 'twisted', not merely in line with the twisted pattern of the candlestick, but in distress or, at least, confusion. Her joy cushions the blow awareness deals her and rain drowns any unhappiness she may feel. With rain and flood, symbolising life and fertility as well as hardship and impediment, a perfect domestic picture is accomplished. But then on the night of her wedding, a reflection of this kind does not make its way into her mind. Next morning under the sun, she reviews the wind-ravelled scene and murmurs her contentment. Larkin creates a vigilant character whose mind assuages the flawed reality as it filters it through. Yet she has a paradoxical mentality. The momentum that utter happiness creates is suggested to numb the senses and cloud the vision. The mind, in this case, is not blind or oblivious to the cracks in the picture, which the 'chipped pail' epitomises, but it is reconciled with them:

He has gone to look at the floods, and I  
 Carry a chipped pail to the chicken-run,  
 Set it down, and stare. All is the wind  
 Hunting through clouds and forests, thrashing  
 My apron and the hanging cloths on the line. (p. 28)

A world view clouded by matrimonial felicity is apt to see the blowing wind as a 'bodying-forth' of the bride's joy, despite having to embark on domestic chores the very next morning of the wedding. Her actions are almost mechanical as she sets the chipped pail down and stares with eyes momentarily glazed. The purblind gaze in stanza two recalls the 'yet seeing nothing' in the first stanza, spilling out her perplexity and consternation. What sight misses or eschews, hindsight nails down. She is hence aware that her mind is flickering and turning into blankness under the impact of what she experiences as an ineffable joy. She believes that her existence is brimming over with wonder. That same realisation shakes her confidence a bit and triggers the ensuing inquisitiveness: 'Can it be borne, this bodying-forth by wind / Of joy my actions turn on, like a thread / Carrying

beads?’ Her mind, which is bent towards positivity, is challenged by scepticism, and two more questions are dwelt upon next. The first betrays a reluctant and hesitant mind unable to process uncertainty, an aftermath of self-realisation and thereupon burdened: ‘Shall I be let to sleep / Now this perpetual morning shares my bed?’ A question of this calibre casts doubts on her alleged happiness. Hence, the streak of scepticism which has been withheld so far creeps in to wedge doubt and bewilderment. Indeed, one is rather apt to take her claim less literally because the speaker’s tone, all through the poem, is hardly cheerful. Contrarily, the concluding question sways her back to the initiating *joie de vivre*: ‘Can even death dry up / These new delighted lakes, conclude / Our kneeling as cattle by all-generous waters?’ (p. 28). Larkin’s bride draws sympathy for her optimism as much as sangfroid, contemplating death on par with fertility. Her mentality seems to be submissively and thankfully reconciled with the dictates of matrimony. By letting the reader into the bride’s mind, Larkin might be suspected of reiterating the idea that a nuptial and domestic role is a woman’s chief and even sole preoccupation, while a mere sidetrack or even distraction to man.

‘Wedding-Wind’ ends up in the bride’s eye on a naively confirmed optimistic future that hinges on the momentum of a single night, where the future is recruited as a trusted ally. ‘Next, Please’ and ‘Triple Time’ introduce a theory regarding the avenues in which time is subconsciously internalised, and invested. Both adopt a general and an almost aphoristic vision, presumably unclouded by personal involvement, with the pronouns *we*, *our*, and *us* presiding. For one thing, the poems propose a simplified philosophical treatise on the physics of time as a cosmological phenomenon. For another thing, the readers are invited and enmeshed so that an overall consensus is axiomatically enlisted. As a poem of futurity, ‘Next, Please’ manifests what Whalen calls (after Ben Johnson) ‘the hunger of

human imagination'.<sup>36</sup> It orchestrates an interpretation and rationale of time as 'seen from the high ground of imagination and hope', but whatever future enterprises are entertained, they are soon to be defunct.<sup>37</sup> Pensive and philosophical, Larkin's narrator in 'Next, Please' offers an argument about how proleptic modes operate on and temporally numb the human consciousness, a matter that makes disappointment even more agonising. This is why the poem argues towards the dispersion of illusions and welcomes the inevitable and rather dismaying 'arrival at a cleansing scepticism, a "less deceived" mentality when all is said and done.'<sup>38</sup>

'Next, Please' opts for a cogent theory of future, contrary to 'Wedding-Wind', for instance. In 'Next, Please', the speculative narrator sees the future as always holding failure and unfulfillment in store. Thus, its discussion of the subject, which is no longer personal and intimate, hinges on the fleetingness of the future and its elusiveness. However, the ironic twist of the title, where a colloquial cliché is applied to as macabre a phenomenon as death, exposes not only the speaker's cynicism, but also his stoicism and disillusionment. Awareness features in the argument, for the innocent, stale, and literal 'next, please' said automatically to human multitudes on a daily basis is rigged allegorically. If death is housed, concealed but lurking, in as habitual and spontaneous a phrase as 'next, please', then the entire 'existential experience' to use Regan's description, and its apparatuses, the linguistic included, reiterate and echo the looming perdition.<sup>39</sup>

The dismantling process commences with deriding and disdaining human behaviourism. As creatures of habits, harnessed to habitual mental stances with regard to existence, humans are aware of the pitfalls of time and hence invent tactics to counterpoise its impetuosity. People almost overlook the present and hang onto the gossamer-like

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<sup>36</sup> Terry Whalen, *Philip Larkin and English Poetry*, p. 36.

<sup>37</sup> Lolette Kuby, *An Uncommon Poet for the Common Man*, p. 70.

<sup>38</sup> Terry Whalen, *Philip Larkin and English Poetry*, p. 37.

<sup>39</sup> Stephen Regan, *Philip Larkin*, p. 89.

future. Like the Dickensian ‘Mr. Micawber’, as Thwaite intimates, people wait for ‘the proverbial ship of “when my ship comes in”’.<sup>40</sup> This escapist philosophy that humanity falls upon out of ineptitude or even impotence is hence criticised in the very opening lines, ‘Always eager for the future, we / Pick up bad habits of expectancy’ (p. 31). The future is deceptive and as ‘Something is always approaching’, the passive waiting is futile:

Watching from a bluff the tiny, clear,  
Sparkling armada of promises draw near.  
How slow they are! And how much time they waste,  
Refusing to make haste! (p. 31)

A psychological analysis of the human understanding of time is offered here, for while the past and the present are the tangible or identifiable dimensions of time, they are apt to be dismissed as the unworthy tip of the iceberg. The future is deemed superior, vaster, and richer. The ‘Sparkling armada of promises’, tantalising and alluring as it must be, is nevertheless doomed to capsize and sink. This is why Osborne finds the poem as embracing ‘one facet of Satre’s *mauvaise foi* (“bad faith” or “self-deception”)<sup>41</sup>. This looking forward to a different and more prosperous future as a better version of a pending present backfires when the future proves to be no less disappointing than the past or bland and stagnant than the present. The auspicious ship of the future, rigged out with golden hopes and expectations, never arrives: ‘it never anchors; it’s / No sooner present than it turns to past’ (pp. 31-31). But old habits die hard and some persist even ‘Right to the last’ incorrigibly:

We think each one will heave to and unload  
All good into our lives, all we are owed  
For waiting so devoutly and so long. (p. 32)

The philosophising voice could not help mocking and deracinating a position where waiting, being a force of habit, promoted as a privileging practice, is expected to pay off.

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<sup>40</sup> Anthony Thwaite, *Contemporary English Poetry* (London: Heinemann, 1957), p. 148; *Twentieth-Century English Poetry: An Introduction* (London: Heinemann, 1978), p. 106.

<sup>41</sup> John Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, p. 89.

However, this mild satire soon relapses into bathos when the question of time is ontologically pressed. Future holds no prizes for ‘us’; it only brings death closer:

Only one ship is seeking us, a black-  
Sailed unfamiliar, towing at her back  
A huge and birdless silence. In her wake  
No waters breed or break. (p. 32)

To drive home this intimation, Larkin welds wit, ‘Elizabethan gusto’, and ‘the full-riggers of some inauthentic Hollywood period-romance’ which the poem translates ‘into ominous symbolist abstractions’.<sup>42</sup> Besides, each stanza has a punch line with ‘an air of authority,’ that keeps ‘hopes’ monitored by the vigilance of ‘our rational selves’.<sup>43</sup>

The poem closes with an ‘existentialist view that’ being oblivious to the shortness of time and finality of death makes people waste ‘life’s limited but real possibilities’. Further, ‘Next, Please’ is suggested to subsume ‘a Heideggerian orienting of the self to the poignant, delible fact of now and here’.<sup>44</sup> Congruent with philosophical readings of the poem, it remains unknown whether Larkin’s nihilist persona preaches, or even, recommends Horace’s *carpe diem* to the loitering populations despite its futility and inapplicability, which the consequent argument with ‘holding wretched stalks / Of disappointment’ (p. 31) substantiates. The romance of a fulfilling future or ‘the figurehead with golden tits / Arching our way’ is dismantled altogether. Extinction is the only reality that exists and duly unfolds with the approach of the future. The loss is indomitable let alone that it is always too late to make amends. The freedom from ‘illusion’ and, in the long run, from deception is the only reward the wavering mind is apt to collect in the end.<sup>45</sup>

The serious, though dismissive, tone of ‘Next, Please’ is again adopted in ‘Triple Time’, a poem that explores the three-fold time along three verses. Larkin devotes ‘Triple Time’ to reflecting on time in the abstract as an uninterrupted and stretching continuum or

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<sup>42</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Writer*, p. 141.

<sup>43</sup> William Van O’Connor, *The New University Wits and the End of Modernism* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1963), p. 25.

<sup>44</sup> John Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, p. 89.

<sup>45</sup> Stephen Regan, *Philip Larkin*, p. 89.

medium in which past, present, and future blend and flow into each other ubiquitously. The comeuppance of such a handling is the unwholesome realisation that humankind is trapped in an inescapable, tight cycle or rather a temporal bubble. According to the theory the poem suggests, time is an illusion and a perceptual hoax, for the present soon ceases to be so and this same observation applies to the future. Therefore, instead of a linear, isotropic time heading forward and scoring a progress, Larkin's poem with its emphasis on the 'fat neglected chances' of the past postulates that time is always scurrying backward and retreating. While it seems, at first glance, reductionist, this treatment embraces a holistic, ontological model of time. The present and the future are constantly sucked into the black hole of the irretrievable past. The past, eventually, seems to be the only real coordinate that exists as it is, as an immutable anchorage point. It is also the temporal lobby that excites the debater's senses by ironically inspiring regret for not being the typical time opportunists. It is the past that emerges as 'A valley cropped by fat neglected chances / That we insensately forbore to fleece' (p. 40). The present proves to be insipid because of its very accessibility and availability, just like the home 'we all hate' in 'Poetry of Departures', while the future is puerile and phantasmal. The present is wasted and consequently lamented when it becomes a past. Ironically, both the past and present were once a future freighted 'with adult enterprise'. The status quo is marked by 'blandness' and indistinctness; it turns into 'a valley' of 'neglected chances' once it mutates into the past:

Like a reflection, constitute the present—  
A time traditionally soured,  
A time unrecommended by event. (p. 40)

The use of the word 'reflection' with the 'mimetic play on... [its] visual meaning', according to Petch, 'is crucial' as it names 'a process of consciousness' and defines 'the relationship of future and past.'<sup>46</sup> Hence, the ontological argument backfires, as the narrator intends it to, for being fallacious at the very essence. If the present is bland, sour, and

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<sup>46</sup> Simon Petch, *The Art of Philip Larkin*, p. 42.

uneventful, or in other words, a state of nothingness, then nothing is syllogistically squandered and the whole thesis is null, an inference that does not go wide of the poem's mark with its absurdist, but still existential, approach to the concept of time. In consequence, the notion of tripartite time is unhoused altogether in theory and practice. Instead of speaking about separate temporal chunks, Larkin's analysis endorses a notion where triple times co-exist. All in all, emerging towards the end, the *we*, in whose tongue the narrator argues, experiences in a single fleeting moment the blandness and sourness of the present which will soon pass, the remorse over the past, and the naivety of futuristic 'threadbare perspectives'. In brief, all triple facets of time lie unspent and unused. This is the time bubble of regret and waste forever encircling Larkin's personae, whose mentalities learn lessons, imbibe information, and grow mature and less deceived at the costly price of blissful ignorance.

While the previous two poems advance the hollowness and bleakness of time without a personal commitment on the part of their narrators, 'Age' and 'Skin' point towards a more individualistic and subjective voice in the former and a dialogic tone in the latter. These poems, too, reiterate notions of maturity and disillusionment to shrug off, this time, self-deception. Listed among Larkin's 'cryptic lyrics', 'Age' is marked by its 'near-symbolist obliquity.'<sup>47</sup> Larkin contrives to phrase a philosophical statement regarding ageing, which chimes in with 'his own poetics.'<sup>48</sup> The poem inaugurates its argument with childhood or rather infancy, bidden farewell, as a 'white swaddling' floating 'in the middle distance', far and high like 'An inhabited cloud' (p. 37). The narrators have grown world-wise, though adulthood seems to be welcomed with reluctance and distaste. Again, ageing is set against the backdrop of gains and losses. As an adult and already half way towards

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<sup>47</sup> Bernard Bergonzi, 'Davie, Larkin, and the State of England', *Contemporary Literature*, 18/3 (1977), 343-60, at p. 355.

<sup>48</sup> Héctor Blanco Uria, 'The Topic of Ageing in Philip Larkin's Poetry', p. 3.



middle age, the poem's persona is aware that he has to meet certain demands. The world dictates specific measures, regarding achievement and success, tasks he confesses utter failure to accomplish. The enterprises of a competitive adult life exhaust him and drain him of energy in a way that makes him concede to mediocrity and inferiority, as does the majority of the world:

I bend closer, discern  
A lighted tenement scuttling with voices.  
O you tall game I tired myself with joining!  
Now I wade through you like knee-level weeds,

And they attend me, dear translucent bergs:  
Silence and space. (p. 37)

Once more, set against the antithetical knee-deep weeds of tangible and immediate reality, the future hopes and projects or the 'dear translucent bergs' are greeted with the nothingness of 'Silence and space' and hence remain even further removed. A heroic future does not lie in wait for any of Larkin's personae, who are, much to their credit, always acutely aware of their mediocrity and limited resourcefulness. Hence, the endeavour is essentially ontological and its failure costs very dearly. The poem's persona is flustered by the extent of mental fatigue and depth of the loss incurred upon him, which the mind, fractured under the pressure, registers and retains: 'By now so much has flown / From the nest here of my head'. He is left to grapple with the sense of unworthiness and the challenges are basically internal. Referring back to time, 'Age' portrays a personal anxiety about ageing so that it emerges as a mental obsession with what marks one makes while ageing and how time is best put to one's use. The poem's closure, with its allegorical imagery, tries to examine and assess what one has already managed to achieve and which determines and defines identity and existence: 'To know what prints I leave, whether of feet, / Or spoor of pads, or a bird's adept splay' (p. 37).

In three stanzas to demarcate the temporal stages through which age progresses, 'Skin' discloses a dramatic monologue addressed to the dermal and most conspicuous

agent of temporal deterioration. Having discussed age and time on ontological and intellectual levels, the speaker in 'Skin' embarks on reflections that are half cosmetic and half spiritual. But like 'Age', the argument rounds back to an earlier obsession with opportunities wasted and precious and irreplaceable assets of youth mishandled and squandered. The eponymous skin degenerates from 'That unfakable young surface' that must learn its 'lines— / Anger, amusement, sleep' (p. 44) like an actor on a stage. With the double play on 'learning' to espouse knowledge as well as memory, the addresser parallels knowledge and maturity with the lines of ageing the skin betrays. Time, however, is named as the agent behind 'Those few forbidding signs // Of the continuous coarse / Sand-laden wind' (p. 44). Now that the skin has thickened with age, 'roughened', and turned to 'an old bag / Carrying a soiled name', the owner observes that whether put to its full advantage or not, the skin, nevertheless, continues to develop signs of use. In consequence, the debater laments the waste of opportunities and apologises for not parading the once radiant and youth-oozing skin when it was at its best. In 'Skin', as well as in the three other time poems, the addressers grapple with the anxieties, regrets, and disappointments a mid-life crisis introduces. They look back into the past to descry losses and misses populating their better and superior days with a vision of a bleak and inferior future and a consciousness of unattractive present immediacy. A philosophical and abstract approach glues together the time quartets of *The Less Deceived*.

### III

In continuation with the non-conformist motif present in the early unpublished poems and which debuts in *The North Ship*, Larkin reiterates the notion of rootlessness in 'Places, Loved Ones'.<sup>49</sup> Larkin's poetry tends to advocate 'the ambivalent attitudes towards home, belonging, work and women,' which enact 'Larkin's "inner émigré" stance and also give

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<sup>49</sup> A journeying outcast mentality that finds no stability or settlement dates from such poems as 'The house on the edge of the serious wood', 'So, you have been despite parental ban', 'A bird sings at the garden's end', XXII, and XXXI, *The North Ship* (Chapters One and Two).

rise to his characteristic use of elusive personae'.<sup>50</sup> Another derelict protagonist contemplates mental, psychological, and romantic vagrancy. What differs here is that the narrator has given up all hope on the chase. Presented with what seems to be all mediocre options and alternatives, the arguer chooses not to choose as the only act of will available to him, hence 'choice' emerges as a mere illusion and the 'universe' is basically 'deterministic'.<sup>51</sup> The poem, Swarbrick reflects, 'seems to be about how we choose to deny ourselves choice so as to avoid real responsibility for our lives' and suggests that once one embarks 'on one track of self-justification, [s/he] switches to another.'<sup>52</sup> This line of thought is compatible with an obvious commitment phobia that the poem iterates. Thus, in order not to dodge commitment, being 'a moral', obliging 'act' to use Kubby's justification, Larkin's persona abstains from choice in an almost fatalistic reliance.<sup>53</sup> He rationalises, growing surer that the utopia and perfect romance are figments of the imagination and nowhere to be found. Prompted to dress the part, the peripatetic persona snaps and replies with a definite 'No, I have never found / The place where I could say / *This is my proper ground, / Here I shall stay*' (p. 29). The italicised lines reiterate a fervent wish by the speaker to get his hands on a stable, static but satisfactory existence and make one prone to wonder at the alleged standards of propriety. The assumption is a bit preposterous given that Larkin, unlike his globe-trotting persona, rarely ventured outside the UK, though he juggled with more than one love partner.

A constantly sure and confident tone permeates the three-stanza poem, comprising six quatrains rhyming abab in iambic dimeter and trimeter. The tone, confessional and unreserved, is made even more persuasive through the enjambment which runs on to the sixteenth line where a full stop appears. The argument as well is straightly couched in terse

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<sup>50</sup> John Goodby, 'The Importance of Being Elsewhere', or 'No Man is an Ireland: Self, Selves and Social Consensus in the Poetry of Philip Larkin', *Critical Survey*, 1/2 (1989), 131-38, at p. 143.

<sup>51</sup> Philip Gardner, 'The Winty Drum', at p. 37.

<sup>52</sup> Andrew Swarbrick, *Out of Reach*, p. 63.

<sup>53</sup> Lolette Kubby, *An Uncommon Poet for the Common Man*, p. 63.

lines with neither complexity nor fluctuation, since the reflector's thoughts flow with neither reticence nor hesitation. Confidence and certainty override any reluctance with which Larkin's persona could have struggled. The poem is a statement of the inability to belong anywhere and with anybody in this world, and epitomises psychological and geographical incompatibility: 'Nor met that special one / Who has an instant claim / On everything I own / Down to my name' (p. 29). It unfurls an instance of a prodigal son in a permanent exile who has lost belief in the potentiality of settlement. So anywhere would do for him and he cannot afford to be picky or fastidious. In the second stanza, Larkin introduces 'you' as the addressee in a technique that effects universality and detaches the initiator of the argument, admitting the other as a partner in the fellowship of distress. The switch in address is found to be confounding in terms of the number of 'changing voices of the speaker(s)' in the poem, for 'the effects, and the possibilities, are multifold.'<sup>54</sup> What begins as a private and intimate revelation soon becomes public and universal as if everybody's worry and concern. Thus the speaker plays on empathy as his best persuasive aid. The 'you' is recruited, too, as a successful manoeuvre towards self-acquittal and consensus where any failure or mismatch is devolved on the other: 'So that it's not your fault / Should the town turn dreary, / The girl a dolt.' However, despite flawed partners and desolate towns, one has to keep the act going and pretend: 'As if what you settled for / Mashed you, in fact' (p. 29). The speaker suggests that he has not even settled for the second best and 'that his sound reasoning had been rationalization.'<sup>55</sup> Trapped by his paralytic logic, the expatriate, native to no place on the map, enlists pretension or even self-deception, quite aware of its urgent necessity. As he abandons the strenuous struggle to find himself a home and a soul mate, pretension lulls the mind and keeps perspective reflections at bay:

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<sup>54</sup> Gillian Steinberg, *Philip Larkin and His Audiences* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 58, 59.

<sup>55</sup> Lolette Kuby, *An Uncommon Poet for the Common Man*, p. 63.

And wiser to keep away  
From thinking that you still might trace  
Uncalled-for to this day  
Your person, your place. (p. 29)

‘Places, Loved Ones’ is an affiliate of ‘I Remember, I Remember’, despite the former’s philosophical lack of specificity which the latter dispels. With its double emphasis, ‘I Remember, I Remember’ (a parody of Thomas Hood’s poem of the same title) contests and refutes not only the notion of belonging to a definite place by virtue of birth, but also the expected idyllic attachment to childhood and the nostalgic adoration of which Hood’s poem stands as a representative.<sup>56</sup> Larkin’s mind searches for whatever contradicts and gives the lie to Hood’s declarations. For instance, while Hood dwells on the innocence and purity of the child which places him nearest to heaven in a Wordsworthian sense, Larkin disperses the claimed innocence by conjuring up hypothetical non-platonic and even semi-erotic details from these early days: ‘the girls all chest’ and ‘where she / Lay back, and “all became a burning mist”’ (p. 42). Likewise, Larkin parodies and casts doubts on glamorous accounts of childhood in the fiction of Lawrence, for example.<sup>57</sup>

Uniting ‘complex, large scale rhyme’ and stanza schemes with a conversational idiom, the narrative weaves personal retrospection, self-recognition, and indifference.<sup>58</sup> The passer-by explores the feeling, impromptu, that finding himself near his birth place gives rise to. Coming face to face with his native town, the passenger’s mind fails to remember. Ironically, the mind, going blank at first, is soon stimulated and dismal contemplation pours out, which revolves around the inexistence of so-called memories. When retrospective thoughts are articulated, they make no flattering memoirs. Larkin’s use of ‘personal history’ in such a poem as ‘I Remember, I Remember’ is cast in the form of ‘of someone considering the intrusion of the past on the present and the present’s manipulation

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<sup>56</sup> Janice Rossen, *Philip Larkin: His Life's Work*, p. 39.

<sup>57</sup> A. Kingsley Weatherhead, ‘Philip Larkin of England’, *ELH*, 38/4 (1971), 616-30, at p. 624.

<sup>58</sup> David Timms, *Philip Larkin*, p. 81.

of the past.’<sup>59</sup> Embarrassed and cornered, Larkin’s persona feels compelled to recall an emptiness which he would have rather kept obscure and he himself enjoyed an uncompromising anonymity.<sup>60</sup> Larkin’s protagonist is aware of the awkwardness of the sardonic situation. Andrew Swarbrick talks about ‘I Remember, I Remember’ as a ‘comedy’ made ‘out of misery’ where ‘the cause of our misery, the structure of time, the recurring cycle of expectancy and disappointment, is itself inherently funny.’<sup>61</sup> It is only when the train accidentally takes a different line that the traveller finds himself near Coventry, a place he has obviously forgotten and shoved out of the immediacy of his adult life. Besides, it is the psychological pressure that lends that persona his voice.

From its very title to its closure, ‘I Remember, I Remember’ is a forced mental, reflective journey into the abandoned, empty past, ironically inaugurated ‘early in the cold new year’. Hence, it becomes more like an unintentional new year resolution to look behind instead of ahead and the speaker does fully honour it. The act of remembering is more like going against his personal moral code. A ‘wry self-consciousness’ operates in Larkin’s poetry which is also marked by the ‘adult and reasonable view’ of its ‘detached observer’.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, any relapse into childhood as in the fortuitous encounter with Coventry must need be coupled with unpleasantness: coldness, physical strain, and cynicism:

I leant far out, and squinnied for a sign  
That this was still the town that had been ‘mine’  
So long, but found I wasn’t even clear  
Which side was which. (p. 41)

The tone is rather apologetic, for time has messed up the memories if any existed in the first place. The mediocrity of the place and the haziness of remote memories lend him

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<sup>59</sup> Gillian Steinberg, *Philip Larkin and His Audiences*, p. 67.

<sup>60</sup> Andrew Motion, in *Philip Larkin: A Writer’s Life*, quotes from a letter Larkin sent to Blake Morrison on 22 October 1982, in which he expresses his regret for saying far too much about himself [and Coventry] that he did not want to include ‘Not the Place’s Fault’ in *Required Writing*, pp. 500-1, 550.

<sup>61</sup> Andrew Swarbrick, *Out of Reach*, p. 61.

<sup>62</sup> Janice Rossen, *Philip Larkin: His Life’s Work*, p. 40.

excuses to justify the dismissal of his native town. The mind has experienced a momentous blackout, much to the speaker's disadvantage; his recollections of the place are fragmentary. Probing his memory, he finds lacunas and emptiness. He finds consolation in focusing on the little, spurious pleasantness his mind can muster at the moment, which he casts interrogatively to spill out uncertainty. His manner reeks of affectation, even as he wonders: 'From where those cycle-crates / Were standing, had we annually departed / For all those family hols?' One cannot help noticing the link between 'number-plates' of the first stanza and 'cycle-crates' in the second, which seem to sum up Coventry. Likewise, the familiarity of the station stigmatises the narrator as a drifter rather than settler. Besides, the only pleasant memories that he stores and retrieves to salvage the otherwise dreary situation seem sarcastically to revolve around yearly departures rather than home returns. However, awareness dawns upon him along with perplexity and embarrassment: 'I sat back staring at my boots'. Rhyming with 'boots', 'roots' in the second line seals the deal:

'Was that,' my friend smiles, 'where you "have your roots"?' (p. 42)

The ready answer does no credit to the place and the speaker is probably too embarrassed to deliver it anyway. However, it emerges as a virtual contemplation: 'No, only where my childhood was unspent, / I wanted to retort, just where I started'. This 'unspent' childhood echoes through Larkin's later declaration in 'Dockery and Son' (*The Whitsun Weddings*) that 'life is first boredom, then fear'. In all, Coventry falls short of being the perfect native town and is 'dismissed in a doggedly negative listing of all the things that didn't happen there.'<sup>63</sup> It is a place from which he has been absent for years, but the absence has no power to gloss over unpleasantness or create a halo of romance and idyll as usually happens. The place is neither romanticised in the custom of the Romantics, nor even reminisced about with loyalty and gratitude, typical of doting natives. Too aware of the flaccid, inexpedient milieu the town supplies, or even perhaps embarrassed by it, the passing ex-native re-

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<sup>63</sup> Stan Smith, 'Margins of Tolerance', p. 178.

experiences faintly a déjà vu of the drabness and has his distaste and dislike, unmitigated by the long absence, eventually confirmed. Any counter argument is null and void.

‘Roots’, however, does the trick. It rejuvenates the immobile mind which has so far been stuck in its almost voluntary, local amnesia, jolts it back to work, and launches *phase two* of the meditation: ‘By now I’ve got the whole place clearly charted.’ Reminiscences flow, but the memory reverses the situation to validate the narrator’s hypothesis of the unlived or ‘unspent’ childhood. However, ‘the zealous dismantling of childhood’, in Swarbrick’s words, is conducted privately in the speaker’s ‘own head.’<sup>64</sup> Unlike the suppressed retort, the speaker’s articulate asperity flows unchecked. When a virtual memory rushes back, it seems rather selective, not eclectic, singling out dreariness and desolation that the mind associates with the place. The mind even twists and bends things to acquit the speaker of any feeling of inadequacy or guilt and to play down the share he contributes to the insipidity of the place. His critical mind, bent by prejudice perhaps, names sarcastically a bunch of amenities the place seemed not to host:

that splendid family

I never ran to when I got depressed,  
The boys all biceps and the girls all chest,  
Their comic Ford, their farm where I could be  
‘Really myself’. (P. 42)

The speaker musters and juxtaposes hypothetical pleasant and bitter memories to define a spent versus ‘unspent’ childhood. As such, the uplift in the non-existent ‘splendid family’ is demoted by the factuality of getting ‘depressed’, and the haven-like, self-assuring farm exists nowhere for him. The boys and girls are described physically with a wry twist of humour, making them rather cartoonish. The place also reminds him of his naivety and inexperience on all levels: personal, romantic, and poetical. Despite the serious tone, the list of the place’s so called failures is a bit frivolous. The exaggerated, fanatic attitude compensates for the embarrassment the speculative mind experienced. As the narrator

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<sup>64</sup> Andrew Swarbrick, *Out of Reach*, p. 61.



abandoned his childhood place, he shoved behind worries regarding his future poetical career for instance. Migrating, he forgot about might-have-been hits and misses. In short, the speaker seems to make the point that the present man, his success and achievement, bears no relation to the child he was in that place. Coventry is bluntly denied and disowned, though he seems to do that rather equivocally. His birth and childhood place bears unfavourable associations with its stifling atmosphere and his family's mediocre standards, from whose shadow the expatriate is keen on extricating himself. He has uprooted himself from its inadequacies and bondage. The migrant, so to speak, is hardly the returning Native, but a mere passer-by whose relation to the place is a source of neither pride nor confidence. But when his companion pronounces the place as 'Hell', 'it's not the place's fault' the speaker adds rather apologetically, for 'Nothing, like something, happens anywhere', a reconciliatory *mot juste* on the credit side, which rehearses warily the same disillusionment and reservation expressed in 'Places, Loved Ones'. Albeit the seeming casualness of the line, it 'opens out haunting depths of meaning. Out of context it becomes a Wittgensteinian linguistic puzzle.'<sup>65</sup> It is a poignant comment designed to compromise; it also exposes the dialectical, antithetical nature of the argument, being equivocal and polemical in essence. While the speaker comes so close to condemning his birth place, his remorse (which could be his suddenly awakening patriotism) makes him adopt a position where the entire world is plagued with tedium and banality.

Rarely do Larkin's personae have a surefootedness with respect to any of their arguments which, after a commonplace starting point, tend to become transcendental and caustic. If Coventry is summoned to the memory, it should be in relevance to the migrant's auspicious, immediate absence not the paltry, past existence in it. Eventually, it is his absence from such an unwieldy life phase and time span, not to mention, spatial dimension

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<sup>65</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: The Poet's Plight*, p. 6.

that the speaker rejoices and revels in. Absences are axiomatically quoted in disfavour and antagonism, but this is hardly the case in Larkin's 'I Remember, I Remember', and even less so in 'Absences'. When asked about what he intended to express in the latter poem, Larkin replied that the idea of places after his absence thrills and intrigues him once he imagines them.<sup>66</sup> Larkin's persona would dote on his absences rather than presence anywhere. Bent towards the sublime, the mind is invigorated by infinite emptiness of the turbulent, climatic atmosphere of clashing wall-like waves, ship-less sea, and the 'shoreless day, / Riddled by wind'. Into the wilderness of the aquatic panorama, the mind landslides to dwell on 'Such attics cleared of me! Such absences!' (p. 42) in an attempt to be 'explicit about what is inexplicable.'<sup>67</sup>

However, 'Poetry of Departures' exposes a less prejudiced and a far less romantic mental view of absences. It evens the scale which was somehow dipped against home and its conventionality in 'I Remember, I Remember'. It also redresses a situation in which choice and fate are dialectically held against each other. The poet is back as well to a motif that his early poetry explores, where a romantic, adventurous bohemianism is promoted as a rewarding, not to mention ecstatic, but also far-fetched version of existence. It targets escapism by recreating 'in an appealing imagery, the speaker's stock of dreams and illusions before sweeping them out of the mind as so much mental rubbish.'<sup>68</sup> The poem operates on a contrast between banal, realistic and hypothetical, romantic levels. Again the mind toys with possibilities and potentialities and starts with a rather comic posthumous conjuration:

Sometimes you hear, fifth-hand,  
As epitaph:  
*He chucked up everything*  
*And just cleared off...* (p. 39)

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<sup>66</sup> Philip Larkin, *Further Requirements*, p. 17.

<sup>67</sup> Merle E. Brown, *Double Lyric: Divisiveness and Communal Creativity in Recent English Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 73.

<sup>68</sup> Terry Whalen, *Philip Larkin and English Poetry*, pp. 37-8.

A first person narrator sprinkles with humour and sarcasm a narrative which he relates to a you-persona and which he has picked up from yet another third party. On the one hand, the awareness that the core narrative is bandied around reinforces its commonality and minimises its authenticity. On the other, the double play on 'chuck up' and 'cleared off' along with 'epitaph' as one semantic set cannot be missed. Both the adventurous and the deceased tend to chuck up and clear off dramatically, a point the speaker makes almost tongue-in-cheek. Heroism is forced to be compatible with the colloquial clichés in italics and 'the envy' he expresses towards what he conceives of as 'a braver' version of himself is toned down by 'a deflating glance' cast 'at the anti-hero'.<sup>69</sup> A mild, masked criticism follows to invalidate any ready-made, ironic, and conventional assumption of approval, cut and dried:

And always the voice will sound  
 Certain you approve  
 This audacious, purifying,  
 Elemental move. (p. 39)

Such revolutionary, dauntless personalities, the mind affirms, are to be lauded and idolised. Their feats are to be appraised as if dictated by nature and instinct and their praises are sung, but equally mythologised. Such stories are often passed on second-hand, as the beginning of the poem suggests, for a hero of such a calibre is only rumoured, fictional, and hardly met in person. It seems that there is a mental and psychological stance in which departure and abandonment are perfunctorily and unjustly set against monotony, immobility, and stasis, hence the defence of 'home' that ensues. This time, 'it's not the place's fault' is fully charged and justified with 'We all hate home' in the heels of the misleading, hesitant 'And they are right, I think.' The simple rationale follows smoothly, alternating between 'we' and 'I', spilling over, but forsaking personal involvement, registering an aphoristic uplift. The mind is aware of the challenge a simple, conventional,

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<sup>69</sup> Janice Rossen, *Philip Larkin: His Life's Work*, p. 134.

Lilliputian but secure life has to rise to. It contorts the argument towards self-delusion and dreaminess, which the cliché-ridden and euphoric banalities of ‘*Like then she undid her dress / Or Take that you bastard*’ tend to induce. The effect is that of a mediocre masquerade of ecstasy, fake and short-lived, and neither enduring nor even noble. It typifies what Whalen calls ‘images of fanciful happiness... (in their very attractiveness)’.<sup>70</sup> When the speaker postulates that he too could make that move and chuck up and clear off, the undercurrent is cynical:

Surely I can, if he did?  
And that helps me stay  
Sober and industrious. (p. 39)

In so claiming, the protagonist fleetingly seeks to be identified with that heroic icon who ‘achieves retrospective glory’.<sup>71</sup> He flatters himself on his logical reasoning and awareness, which save him the trouble of an adventurous life and, in brief, hold vagrancy at bay. He cannot afford the luxury of being swept off the ground; besides the version of non-conformity is stripped of glamour with ‘Crouch in the fo’c’sle/ Stubbly with goodness’. It looks as drab and stereotypical as conventional life, only messier and less comfortable. In so being, the effect of the ‘surgical attempts to unbend the mind from its worse and most self-deceptive habits of thought’ is driven home.<sup>72</sup> He ‘could have walked out on’ his secure, trite life if only ‘It weren’t so artificial’ as his prudence and sensibility of ‘the difficulties involved’ inform and warn him.<sup>73</sup> Such a radical step would feel foreign and abnormal to a person whose mind, incorrigibly calculating, interprets and flips over possibilities. Otherwise, it is certainly tantalising to daydream of being offered a chance to go backwards and perfect one’s life. But the typical Larkin persona has his rational side triumph and resist the temptation.

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<sup>70</sup> Terry Whalen, *Philip Larkin and English Poetry*, p. 39.

<sup>71</sup> Janice Rossen, *Philip Larkin: His Life’s Work*, p. 134.

<sup>72</sup> Terry Whalen, *Philip Larkin and English Poetry*, p. 39.

<sup>73</sup> Janice Rossen, *Philip Larkin: His Life’s Work*, p. 134.

Toying with ifs and 'if onlys' populates 'Toads', which seems to pick up where 'Poetry of Departures' left off, i.e., potential adventure or in another word, vagrancy. Marsh discusses the adaption of the variant anapestic and dactylic metres to 'the argumentative and convincing tone of voice' which he later characterises as 'irascible' and charged with 'pent-up anger'.<sup>74</sup> The poem adopts 'the form of a debate between two sides of his personality – with the rebellious, freebooting, anti-authoritarian aspect having the first say.'<sup>75</sup> The mind plays with far-fetched hypotheses and the argument that rises reinforces the idea the poem questions. For one thing, a six-day per week job is unquestionably boring and uninspiring. It weighs people down and clips their wings. Once one settles in the rut, it takes effort and guts to get out. Lacking in the adventurous, gambling personality, the poem's persona has to make do with the insipid existence available to him. But the counter version of the toad-free life is barely enticing when poverty, starvation, and homelessness are in the picture. The mind is already inventing excuses for keeping the toads on the throne, hence the two onset questions which are self-inquisitive. Ultimately, the 'wit' the speaker seeks help from, but also doubts and questions in the first stanza – 'Can't I use my wit as a pitch fork / And drive the brute off?' (p. 38) – turns against the initial claim and debunks the entire rationale. His argument depicts, as well, a prejudiced or even one-sided mental view, focusing on nothing other than the unwholesomeness of a toad-free life which he is supposed to advertise and endorse. Though he cites lecturers first as toad-free, the other role-models cited do no credit at all to the alternative suggested. Marsh traces the origins of the 'I' words in the stanza from Chaucer or Shakespeare to Middle and early modern English, affirming that Larkin is keen

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<sup>74</sup> Nicholas Marsh, *Philip Larkin*, pp. 76-7.

<sup>75</sup> Andrew Motion, 'Philip Larkin and Symbolism', p. 38.

to expose ‘the archaic’ and ‘literary education’ of his hero to make sure, one is tempted to think, that all should notice what a bore the toad man must have been:<sup>76</sup>

Lots of folk live on their wits:  
Lecturers, lispers,  
Losels, loblolly-men, louts –  
They don’t end as paupers... (p. 38)

The mind is deliberately fishing for the most derogatory examples it could find to make the possibility of *chucking up* and *clearing off* ghoulish and uninviting. It makes one wonder if the speaker is talking himself out of it for fear that his mind might slide into this obnoxiousness. Lerner quotes James Sutton, one of Larkin’s closest friends, telling Larkin in a letter that ‘a change might do you much good’ and advising that ‘physical’ labour, ‘farming’ for instance, would help to calm down his ‘self-conscious mind’. He even suggests, rather humorously, that Larkin might try ‘tramp’ life and volunteers to join him ‘in either of these ventures.’<sup>77</sup> Sutton knew his friend well enough to tease him about the potential of leading a bohemian life which, Larkin seems to contemplate abstractedly and repeatedly, but always with renewed reluctance.<sup>78</sup> Given Larkin’s attitude, the wishful thinking, reiterated throughout the poem, comes across as impersonal and impartial. The incredibility of the intimation does not escape the speaker’s mind and he himself shortly after dispels it, quoting Shakespeare’s Prospero.<sup>79</sup> Indeed, Larkin’s hero needs magic to be transformed from a toad to a desperado:

Ah, were I courageous enough  
To shout *Stuff your pension!*  
But I know, all too well, that’s the stuff  
That dreams are made on... (p. 38)

‘Toads’ is a poem of ‘accidental self-revelations’, hence the unreserved self-critical frankness it espouses.<sup>80</sup> Self-knowledge alerts him to the insincerity of the meditated

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<sup>76</sup> Nicholas Marsh, *Philip Larkin*, pp. 77-8.

<sup>77</sup> Laurence Lerner, *Philip Larkin*, p. 16.

<sup>78</sup> Lerner (*Philip Larkin*, p. 17) mentions Larkin’s hate of Bohemianism; however, Larkin’s early poems bear witness to his interest in a non-conformist and/or adventurous life (see Chapter one).

<sup>79</sup> Nicholas Marsh, *Philip Larkin*, p. 78.

<sup>80</sup> Andrew Swarbrick, *Out of Reach*, p. 65.

intimation and the possibility of a toad-free existence rings hollow. But the knowledge the toad-bound speaker refers to is that of self-consciousness and self-realisation. In this context, there seems to be nothing strikingly transcendental about it. However, when the voice gets more intimate and internal, the mind is no longer evading the unwholesome awareness of self-impotence. The lucidity of the first stanzas is absent from the last, making it seem ‘disarmingly compact.’<sup>81</sup> As such, transcendentalism is attained: ‘For something sufficiently toad-like / Squats in me, too’ (p. 38). Being inward, the toad proves even more difficult to drive off. Its stasis, if not regression, has so far cost the speaker: ‘The fame and the girl and the money’. His dreams are not only romantic and purely mundane, but also typical of consumerism. The mind starts the ascent to self-recognition and the clues to the riddle start to fall in place. In the end, the initial questions are inadvertently answered along with the assertion of the speaker’s ‘more orthodox and self-critical instincts’.<sup>82</sup> The physical lethargy imposed on the civil servant, if the narrator is indeed one, soon makes room, paves the way, and pales next to a more compelling spiritual handicap. Two matching toads, not only one, loom menacingly on the horizon. Hand in hand, the two infect life with torpor, but help the speaker remain grounded, also acutely sober, and aware. The barrier between him and the toad-free life rises even higher and he has preferred not to cross over. Nevertheless, he keeps speculating about and ceaselessly interrogating the possibility. It is what Motion describes as ‘solemn realization’ that his are unanswerable queries.<sup>83</sup> Fanciful and adventurous pursuits suit better toad-free minds among which the speaker obviously does not list himself.

The rationalising voice in ‘Reasons for Attendance’ considers crossing to the other side, which beckons enticingly to the outsider. However, his ‘rational approach to his

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<sup>81</sup> Andrew Motion, ‘Philip Larkin and Symbolism’, p. 38.

<sup>82</sup> Andrew Motion, ‘Philip Larkin and Symbolism’, p. 38.

<sup>83</sup> Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, p. 237.

situation conceals considerable self-doubt.’<sup>84</sup> Being a paranoid persona, he is torn between the outside and inside or austerity and hedonism they stand for consecutively. Hesitation and indeterminacy, dispensed with later as superficial and pretentious, mark the internal monologue on which the poem relies heavily. On the level of structure, the poem ‘has the neatness of an expertly organized essay in verse’, with its well-balanced phrases and the rhymes building ‘toward an effective dry conclusion.’<sup>85</sup> From its own very title, the poem presents an aware and volitionally conscious course of thought and consequent action. Regan finds the title ‘curious’ and its significance is registered in the rationalisation the speaker indulges in upon watching dancing couples. This rationalisation sharpens his awareness and keeps him on guard or fully attentive lest he stoops and compromises his better judgment.<sup>86</sup>

The title, as well, is a case in point with regard to indecision and ambivalence. While one quarter of the poem does justice to the title and probes for reasons for attendance, the other three quarters argue against it in the abstract. As in ‘Toads’, the poem’s persona, being psychologically tied down, opts for abstinence. The voyeur gloatingly watches the feast-like slice of youthful, energetic life that he wishes he could partake in while he is utterly excluded. A likely older and less energetic persona presides that is more compatible with what Timms describes as ‘the academic university librarian, just old enough to feel out of touch with the students with whom he deals’ than a fellow student.<sup>87</sup> Behind a flimsy glass barrier (but a crash mental barrier), noise, light, dance, smoke and sweat sum up the voluptuous Epicureanism. In contrast, scepticism and, perhaps, age sum up his end of the bargain. With his nose pressed against the glass, he is first carried away by the intensity of passion and sensual fulfillment the dancers seem to be overwhelmed with and which their

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<sup>84</sup> S. J. Perry, “‘So unreal’: The Unhomely Moment in the Poetry of Philip Larkin”, *English Studies*, 92/4 (2011), 432-448, p. 436.

<sup>85</sup> William Van O’Connor, *The New University Wits*, p. 27.

<sup>86</sup> Stephen Regan, *Philip Larkin*, p. 94.

<sup>87</sup> David Timms, *Philip Larkin*, p. 86.



‘flushed’ faces betray. Shortly after, he regains the sobriety and balance as well as the clarity of mind to see through the fallibility of the erotic routine:

– Or so I fancy, sensing the smoke and sweat,  
The wonderful feel of girls. Why be out here?  
But then, why be in there? Sex, yes, but what  
Is sex? Surely, to think the lion’s share  
Of happiness is found by couples – sheer

Inaccuracy, as far as I’m concerned. (p. 30)

‘The conflict between the seer and the voyeur’ seems to be resolved in favour of the former. Dismissing the ‘saturnalian dancers’, he ‘relies on the imagination’ in ‘I fancy’ to transcend reality; he gives up the duality and is no longer ‘crawling between earth and heaven’.<sup>88</sup> In this poem, too, the gap widens between physical activity and mental transcendentalism. Though the onset pictures him in two minds, the line of argument he soon develops wins him over to the latter. As in XXXII in *The North Ship*, art is thrust into the equation: ‘What calls me is that lifted, rough-tongued bell / (Art, if you like) whose individual sound / Insists I too am individual.’ The rough bell of art, announced rather sceptically with ‘if you like’, is set in antithesis against ‘the trumpet’s voice, loud and authoritative’ of the first line. Art and romance are sketched as unreconciled contraries and bitter rivals, if not sworn foes. Art, in its abstraction and elusiveness, challenges the heaving presence of corporeal indulgences. In the end, art emerges triumphant and the speaker shrugs worldly pleasures off to worship in loneliness at its shrine. The mind philosophises to reason and justify the choice. It is not purely a question of arranging one’s own priorities, so art tops the list, nor is it that art presides by sheer monopoly. The issue goes deeper to betray a dogma and a doctrinal faith:

Therefore I stay outside,  
Believing this; and they maul to and fro,  
Believing that; and both are satisfied,  
If no one has misjudged himself. Or lied. (p. 30)

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<sup>88</sup> Theo D’haen, “‘Realist or Romantic?’ Philip Larkin’s Modes of Writing”, in *Linguistics and the Study of Literature*, ed. Theo D’haen (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1986), 27-41, at pp. 34, 28.

Within ‘critical doctrines stressing order, neatness and understatement’, the argument moves smoothly and effortlessly ‘from the commonplaces of the opening lines, through the cleverness and rationality of the middle stanzas, to the grandly imagined scene of the conclusion’.<sup>89</sup>

The argument betrays an ideological hiatus of *me* versus *others*. The speaker snubs the others, a majority as they are, and waves their carousing delights aside with an inkling of fanaticism and bigotry, or prejudice at the very best. Despite the general sweeping dismissal, the speaker’s awareness rises to the occasion and has a sting in its tail. The perfect picture of contentment and complacency he pleads is chipped at severely by scepticism. There is no guarantee that logical persuasive arguments are not also spuriousness. The last couple of lines acknowledge ‘the possibility of self-deception’ as Augustine concludes, and the abstainer admits himself into the potential wide majority of ‘self-deceivers.’<sup>90</sup>

#### IV

A good part of the argumentative tenor in *The Less Deceived* stems from the contemplation of abandoning one’s safe comfortable zone and crossing to another that proves to be perilous and taxing. This invasion of forbidden grounds remains most of the time unrealised and virtual except on rare occasions when the narrative persona makes the unguarded gesture and ventures in. ‘Church Going’ is such an instance. The contemplative calibre, the sophistication of the poem, which emerges as ‘a self-ironic meditation on the place of spirituality in a world without God’, and in the long run, its ambience of sobriety are widely acknowledged.<sup>91</sup> The poem spins out an argument to incarnate the narrator’s ‘ratiocinative process’, but ‘not so much the narrator’s stream of consciousness, with its

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<sup>89</sup> William Van O’Connor, *The New University Wits*, p. 26.

<sup>90</sup> John H. Augustine, ‘Tentative Initiation in the Poetry’, in *Philip Larkin: the Man and his Work*, ed. Dale Salwak (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), 112-17, p. 117.

<sup>91</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: the Poet’s Plight*, p. 125.

random flux of sensation' and 'this *rendering thought visible* tips the poem towards reason rather than belief, philosophy rather than theology.' Larkin's narrator ends up preaching his own version of faith. Nevertheless, the poem is an intellectual crusade to endorse pondering and questioning as the verb 'wonder', three times used in the poem, invites readers to do.<sup>92</sup>

The narrator tells blankly about his furtiveness stepping into the church: 'Once I am sure there's nothing going on / I step inside, letting the door thud shut' (p. 35). He is anxious to assert his agnosticism so that his readers should know beyond doubt that this is not a pilgrimage nor an occasion for piety. The various arguments are glued together by the awareness that it is a purely secular visit and that the church is appreciated not for its religious value, but for its aesthetic, architectural, and archeological assets. Indeed these senses are summed up by his next shrewd, but derogatory observation– 'Another church: matting, seats, and stone, / And little books'– and an inventory of various odds and ends of the church contents unfolds, which earns him justly the title of 'a wry reporter'.<sup>93</sup>

The narrator defines his position and specifies his mental attitude very early to forestall and refute any misconceptions. He does not want to be confused with regular worshippers, yet the title portrays church going in the sense of disappearing as well as churchgoing, only of a peculiar type. The 'tense, musty, unignorable silence, / Brewed God knows how long' or habit, and not necessarily a residual faith, imposes the mock solemnity of taking the cycle-clips off. The physical, aesthetic, and tangible purports of the visit are placed in focus as he runs his eyes like a tourist and antiquarian around the furniture and the roof and passes his hands over the font. He ends up confessing his ignorance ('Someone would know: I don't' (p. 36)) at such an insignificant thing as the state of the roof, but it defines an ignorance of a more disconcerting nature. The physical dimensions

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<sup>92</sup> John Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, p. 95.

<sup>93</sup> Terry Whalen, *Philip Larkin and English Poetry*, p. 15.

are wrapped up in haste with his derisive, articulate 'Here endeth' as if to seal in disbelief, signing the book, and donating 'an Irish sixpence'. In so doing, the visitor adheres to superficial worship routines he is expected to unscrupulously flout.

More important, however, is his reflection that 'the place was not worth stopping for', pronounced as if to ward off any thoughts contrary to his opening thesis. The antecedent and ensuing arguments give the lie to the narrator's claim of disinterestedness for the visitor is undoubtedly filled with curiosity 'about his surroundings' and the argument is structured around 'a strategy of discovery, a desire to find an intelligibility to the world that surrounds the speaker.'<sup>94</sup> Thus, what follows is an endeavour to rationalise, analyse, understand, and force logic onto existence, religion, and on this habit of his: 'Yet stop I did: in fact I often do, / And always end much at a loss like this'. The narrative modulates into a 'reflective monologue, which is almost confessional' with the tense shift ushering the reader as 'confidant(e)'.<sup>95</sup>

For somebody who has lost his faith, stopping by churches must seem nostalgic or even regressive. Therefore, he is keen to shake off the intimation and channel his thoughts into a direction he estimates to be more impersonal and less threatening. The strategic wondering hardly does the trick. The 'pattern of situation, question, exploration and recognition' which Tolley assigns to the poem is faithfully realised.<sup>96</sup> The mind is stimulated to explore further, implementing 'wondering' or perhaps wandering into what Booth calls 'a mock-heroic futurist panorama of the Decline of Faith, with perhaps a faint hint of the rationalist prophecies of H. G. Wells behind it.'<sup>97</sup> Accordingly, the mind runs into such a tight crevice like 'wondering, too, / When churches fall completely out of use'

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<sup>94</sup> Terry Whalen, *Philip Larkin and English Poetry*, p. 17.

<sup>95</sup> Katie Wales, "Teach Yourself "Rhetoric": an Analysis of Philip Larkin's "Church Going", in *Twentieth-Century Poetry: From Text to Context*, ed. Peter Verdonk (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 87-99, at p. 91.

<sup>96</sup> A. T. Tolley, *My Proper Ground: A Study of the Work of Philip Larkin and its Development* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1991), p. 81.

<sup>97</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: the Poet's Plight*, p. 126.

(p. 36) and lands on a prosperous quarry that will enrich the reflective pensiveness the poem expounds. It is a process of ‘peeling away stock attitudes from the surface of’ the persona’s ‘mind’.<sup>98</sup> Stepping into the inquisitive arena, the interrogator has to consider objectively the pros and cons for persuasive purposes. So the ‘if’ prospect of ‘a few cathedrals’ kept ‘chronically on show’ for purely aesthetic and archeological ends is taken for granted. His mind tells him that this will be the case if churches fall into disuse, become ‘rent-free to rain and sheep’ or it is his wishful thinking that paints such a desolate future of religion. The question appended: ‘Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?’ then hardly seems a surplus, even when viewed in relevance to or placed almost on par with the ensuing contradictory questions with a mixture of healing and superstitious vocations tagged on:

Or, after dark, will dubious women come  
To make their children touch a particular stone;  
Pick simples for a cancer; or on some  
Advised night see walking a dead one? (p. 36)

‘But superstition, like belief, must die’, the narrator admonishes and consoles his faith-bereft self. Such a declaration reflects ‘the intellectual and emotional honesty necessary to sustain the balance of this courageous scepticism’, which epitomises ‘Larkin’s philosophical position.’<sup>99</sup> A far deeper antithesis is thrust in ‘And what remains when disbelief has gone?’, etching further on the scenario of churches falling into disuse. It is his ‘disbelief’ that lures him to frequent churches so as to double-check, perhaps, the truthfulness of the disbelief that he has embraced. But when disbelief is replaced by indifference or something even more extreme, as when disbelief is dispensed with both as concept and dogma, the church will become indiscernible. Its mass will be gradually overgrown with plants and weeds to the point of disguise and camouflage: ‘A shape less

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<sup>98</sup> R. N. Parkinson, “‘To Keep our Metaphysics Warm’: A Study of “Church Going” by Philip Larkin’, *Critical Survey*, 5/3 (1971), 224-33, at p. 224.

<sup>99</sup> Alun R. Jones, ‘The Poetry of Philip Larkin: a Note on Transatlantic Culture’, *Western Humanities Review*, 16/2 (1962), 143-52, at p. 150.

recognisable each week, / A purpose more obscure.' The mind finds this picture barely sufficing. Until the churches turn virtually into obscure grassy knolls, a speculation unproven so far, they will continue to attract and magnetise.

Church going will not cease even then, a point the narrator fleshes out with more detail. The mind puts together an inventory of the hypothetical church goers. The categorisation revolves around knowledge and passion, and spirituality and secularity as the subtle dividing yardsticks. So, there must be some 'who / Will be the last, the very last, to seek/ This place for what it was'. This is not necessarily the informed, knowledgeable in their own pedantic way, nor the largely faith-sure, but an ex-church crew, nostalgic and well-versed in churches. There will be also the relic collector, 'ruin-bibber, randy for antique', who is artistic in proclivity. While habit and nostalgia define the former's stance, the Christmas-addict is someone fond of the accessories of the church, i.e., music and decorations, and hence also artistic one way or another. The latter has ardour and passion in place of knowledge as the vehicle of appreciation. The third, the present churchgoer's type 'Bored, uninformed', is an individual professing a vision clouded with neither bias nor belief. This churchgoer is an innate, but self-denied, or undercover, philosopher. S/he has long since arrived at a different calibre of knowledge that refutes and debunks knowledge itself and revels in the knowledge of one's own ignorance. It is a philosophy that endorses 'the search for self-knowledge', which is in itself 'the most fundamental of all intellectual' Socratic 'inquiries'.<sup>100</sup> Notwithstanding the boredom he confesses, the narrator lets 'his mind run more imaginatively and more philosophically as the poem progresses on a variety of projected speculations, expressed through a complex pattern of

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<sup>100</sup> M.W. Rowe, *Philosophy and Literature*, p. 99.

self-questioning,’ and ‘is eventually overcome, almost despite himself, by the serious-minded and respectful persona who has the last word in the final stanza.’<sup>101</sup>

When the cynical narrator dabbles with charting the reasons why churches should survive, reasons turn out, quite disappointingly, to be as primal and skeletal, let alone, cliché-ridden as ‘marriage, and birth, /And death’ (p. 36) which itemise ‘compulsions as destinies’, according to Tolley.<sup>102</sup> After all, the speaker who cuts an admirable figure of awareness and sophistication leans in his rationale on rudimentary and elemental rituals and fails to be inventive and innovative. The indifferent philosopher confesses his ignorance when he finds no convincing justification for his frequenting churches other than the charlatanic ‘It pleases me to stand in silence here’; as such he almost gives in to the superstitions which he calls upon to die earlier (p. 37). He could not have claimed that he finds in the church silence, tranquility, and peace, for his mind can hardly be described in these terms. The quiet of the church has stirred a turmoil of thoughts. However, the closure strikes a more sublime note:

A serious house on serious earth it is,  
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,  
Are recognised, and robed as destinies.  
And that much never can be obsolete,  
Since someone will forever be surprising  
A hunger in himself to be more serious,  
And gravitating with it to this ground,  
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,  
If only that so many dead lie round. (p. 37)

Church going, according to this account, imparts knowledge and imposes seriousness and gravity. Inspired by his church visits, the frequenter grows more curious and inquisitive if not indeed wiser and better informed. Under its roof and among its rickety junks, Larkin’s persona finds his voice and dissects his own impulses and drives and so he becomes better self-acquainted. The poem’s church which had rather a lame, derisive start contrives to assert its power towards the end. It is barely the exercise of free will for Larkin’s narrator.

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<sup>101</sup> Katie Wales, ‘Teach Yourself “Rhetoric”: an Analysis of Philip Larkin’s “Church Going”’, p. 92.

<sup>102</sup> A. T. Tolley, *My Proper Ground*, p. 81.

His mind is plagued by the hollow that the absence of faith has left. He needs to bridge the rift one way or another, creating his own version of faith or secular cult. Larkin's persona suggests 'that transcendental questions are becoming a matter for individual reflection rather than Church governance'.<sup>103</sup> So, whether the church is sublimated as an ecclesiastical symbol of faith and worship or snubbed as superstition-ridden and pretentious, there will always be people drawn to it. Such people will continue to be hypnotised by its magnetic atmosphere, though the church has to adjust a little if it is to endure.

In all, 'Church Going' traces, despite denial, a compelling mysticism and intellectual pilgrimage. The mind starts with a preconceived notion of the worthlessness and inefficiency of the church to those who have chosen to part ways with belief. Yet, it nearly ends up in an attitude no less pious and ritualistic than that of the worshippers whom the narrator categorises as unsuspecting and non-intellectual. Hence, though alien to religion and intolerant of its rituals (as the impatient loud 'Here endeth' indicates), the sceptic mind ironically seeks in the church sanctuary and consolation and is often gratified, though in rather mysterious or inadvertent ways. The pilgrimage ends not in restoring religious faith and reinstating the renegade back into the flock, but still quite happily in sketching plausible and convincing conclusions why the church should survive, as it is, as one compact, intact even long after its original purpose is gone. Such a pensive coda rehearses a view of waywardness where what starts as defunct, superficial, and extravagant is found, upon profound consideration, urgent, inherent, and incumbent. Such a position is not to be attained without threading through winding and discomforting arguments. Many points in the argument touch upon self-deception as a self-defence mechanism to acquire spiritual balance and to find comfort. However, the narrator's awareness fails to disperse the mysterious effect of churches on him. The poem presents 'raw footage of a spirit in

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<sup>103</sup> Stephen Cooper, *Philip Larkin: Subversive Writer*, p. 142.



struggle, sensing something greater than itself but unable to embrace it.’<sup>104</sup> The narrator would continue to rebut and dispute the religious hocus-pocus in his detached way. The effect is hardly bewildering, especially if measured against a backdrop of a growing atheism or at the very least agnosticism.

## V

This category of self-deception is taken up to the next level and beyond standard expectations in ‘Deceptions’. The poem is very reflective, unusual, and erratic, and partially echoes Yeats’s ‘Leda and the Swan’ in which a similar act of violation is conducted. While Yeats mythologises the event, Larkin actualises it, picking a true slum story from *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861), a book by Henry Mayhew, and he ‘dramatises an internal debate about desire and suffering’.<sup>105</sup> The purely aesthetic reading of Yeats’s poem goes wide of the mark for Larkin’s. Mayhew’s is a sociological case study where a shabbily dressed prostitute recalls her rape at sixteen and her subsequent downfall.<sup>106</sup> Larkin’s treatment of the subject operates on a different level; the girl stands out while the shabby prostitute goes into hiding. The poem employs, to Larkin’s credit, this subtle but radical shift in voices and sympathies from one extreme to the opposite, a shift necessitated by having to sketch what he seems to perceive as the grievances of two inflicted parties. The move is accomplished smoothly and in a masterly way by an extradiegetic narrator who is keen to strike an objective, impersonal balance. In the attempt to do so, he seems to have enrolled the satisfaction and approval of none. Such a handling of the situation is carefully and deeply deliberated on the part of the poet. Larkin must have considered all options and alternatives. The easy way out is to side with the victim and demonise the oppressor. But Larkin makes a difficult choice and expresses a kind of

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<sup>104</sup> Kateryna A. Rudnytsky Schray, “‘To Seek This Place for What It Was’: Church Going in Larkin’s Poetry”, *South Atlantic Review*, 67/2 (2002), 52-64, at p. 62.

<sup>105</sup> Andrew Swarbrick, *Out of Reach*, p. 57.

<sup>106</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Writer*, p. 109.

charitable attitude towards the wrongdoer, not to acquit the latter of the blame as much as expose the fact that humans are sometimes hapless slaves and quite at the mercy of uncontrollable, mysterious, and erratic mental and psychological drives. Sadism is not an option that can be turned down, the poem intimates, but a tyranny and despotism.

The first stanza does full justice to the epigraph. It even penetrates more deeply and sympathetically than the first-person narrative: ‘Even so distant, I can taste the grief, / Bitter and sharp with stalks, he made you gulp’ (p. 41). Of course, the narrator’s attempt at empathy could be met with eye-rolling and eyebrow-rising, if not hostility and incredulousness as both affected and preposterous. This is why perhaps Larkin abandons the polemical stance two lines after in preference to a less entangling identification. Before long, the poem returns to dwell on the inward anguish the rape inflicted on the victim and which must have been excruciating by all measures. But more important is the social and cultural crucifixion, summarised in the cliché ‘ruined’, and the realisation that she would be subject to it as long as she lived. The next morning light cruelly and brutally exposes her fresh wounds, suggesting that darkness and obscurity are the only consolers available to her. Larkin captures adeptly the moment of awaking the day after the rape to that horrendous discovery.<sup>107</sup> Light, recognition, and memory as agents of awareness and knowledge team up to weigh the victim further down:

The sun’s occasional print, the brisk brief  
Worry of wheels along the street outside  
Where bridal London bows the other way,  
And light, unanswerable and tall and wide,  
Forbids the scar to heal, and drives  
Shame out of hiding. (p. 41)

The above run-on lines capture poetically and philosophically how alienated the girl must have thought herself now after being violated. She, by no fault of her own, no longer belongs to ‘bridal London’, hence the widening hostile ‘perspective’ that Swarbrick identifies in the poem’s ‘wider frame of reference’, which starts with ‘sunshine, then the

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<sup>107</sup> Andrew Swarbrick, *Out of Reach*, p. 58.

noise of the traffic outside widening to include a whole community'.<sup>108</sup> The girl has parted ways for ever with a cultural and social canon and accordingly been cast away into uncharted London. Larkin masterly adapts 'My thoughts are all a case of knives, / Wounding my heart' from 'George Herbert's "Tentation" (i.e. "Temptation")' to embody the victim's mental agony.<sup>109</sup> In effect, the victim's mind operates practically and takes more account of the consequences and corollaries of the rape than the act itself, a point Larkin drives home effectively: 'All the unhurried day / Your mind lay open like a drawer of knives.' The aftermaths are inextricable and she is even denied the comfort of lying hidden. The 'drawer of knives', as a simile, recreates cogently 'the almost Plathlike pain of her mind'.<sup>110</sup> She would live always reminded equally through both sympathy and condemnation of her shameful ordeal: 'Slums, years, have buried you.' Therefore, the speaker realises the futility and withholds even virtual consolation: 'I would not dare / Console you if I could.'

What happens next is that the removed commentator mediates between victim and offender, dubiously in favour of the latter. Larkin's persona does not take his cue from expected conventional models, but forges a different position when he apportions time and sympathy to the rapist tentatively and hence inquisitively at first, asking if, 'where / Desire takes charge, readings will grow erratic?' His defence merely leans on a contemplation of a hysterical, delusional state of mind where sanity is suspended at least temporally and held captive to an overriding desire. In the commentator's view, self-deception is worse than the physical or mental agony experienced by the victim. This is the species of consolation Larkin's persona offers the victim who 'would hardly care', addressing her directly while removing the assaulter further as an absent, hazy outsider: 'That you were less deceived,

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<sup>108</sup> Andrew Swarbrick, *Out of Reach*, p. 58.

<sup>109</sup> Tom McAlindon, 'Cathedral Musings: Larkin, Wilder, and the Mutability Tradition', *English*, 63/241 (2014), 115-31, at p. 117.

<sup>110</sup> Roger Bowen, 'Poet in Transition: Philip Larkin's "XX Poems"', *The Iowa Review*, 8/1 (1977), 87-104, at p. 93.

out on that bed, / Than he was'. It was he who was staggeringly drugged and robbed of his senses, not her, by an animalistic frenzy that he has no consciousness or will strong enough to keep curbed and checked; he was not spared the moral downfall. However, this reversal of roles is made more stringent with Larkin using 'stumbling' and 'breathless' to simulate a toxic virtual picture of the transgressor: 'stumbling up the breathless stair / To burst into fulfillment's desolate attic.' It also offers the mind a fresh and unorthodox source of thoughts. Despite the compassion bestowed on the offender, the serious, solemn tone and the abandonment of 'satire' bear testimony to what Rossen describes as 'a tenderness, even reverence toward women.'<sup>111</sup>

'Deception' goes in retrospect to a distant era, digs out a persona from the slums, dresses it up to fit in with the role the poet assigns to it. Larkin could not have picked a contemporary victim and, in reverting to a Victorian background, he establishes a strict and specific time frame. Without being dislodged from her time zone, the female persona is imported to the advantage of a public, more flexible and less indicting. As such, the poem contains a critique (not in a purely feminist sense, though) of the patriarchal milieu that promoted a sexist ideology of 'a marginalised and exploited female'.<sup>112</sup>

*The Less Deceived* continues to comb through the different and various facets of sexual desire. 'Dry-Point' is an unsettled commentary on 'fear and panic' and 'disappointment and frustration' as 'the aftermath' of 'the physical experience'.<sup>113</sup> It reveals Larkin's abstractionist tradition and inclination towards symbolism.<sup>114</sup> The title, imported from 'engraving', and the 'sterile' sexual 'aridity' it connotes, insinuates that 'vulgar raucousness lurks below the beautiful surface'.<sup>115</sup> The entire poem is an internal penetration of a psychological stance, worthy of Freudian analysis. With its intensive use of sexual

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<sup>111</sup> Janice Rossen, *Philip Larkin: His Life's Work*, pp. 87, 88.

<sup>112</sup> Stephen Cooper, *Philip Larkin: Subversive Writer*, p. 128.

<sup>113</sup> Stephen Regan, *Philip Larkin*, p. 96.

<sup>114</sup> Steve Clark, 'Larkin's Sexual Politics', p. 105.

<sup>115</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Writer*, p. 104.

symbols and intentional obscurity, the poem disguises a subject matter that is in itself polemical and troublesome. Larkin contrives to promote a theme employing almost vulgar imagery with phallic puns, but also have it very well masked. While the poet argues in practical and concrete terms, he manages to do so in linguistic abstractionism. Sexual puns replace the lucidity, candour, and simplicity of 'Reasons for Attendance', which is why, perhaps, Larkin places 'Dry-Point' immediately after it. In the former, sex is treated with neither shame nor reluctance in almost brusque bluntness, with the speaker adopting an indifferent, abstinent, and arrogant stand. The stoicism of 'Reasons for Attendance' is abandoned in favour of a direct and unchecked indulgence, which is found far from perfect or fulfilling. In 'Dry-Point', the articulate voice is that of experience and first-hand knowledge and lacking the universal airs of the other poem. Likewise, crude sexual innuendoes and almost clinical knowledge replace the abstract, ponderous treatment the subject receives in 'Reasons for Attendance', where the speaker theorises and philosophises behind a glassy pulpit. In 'Dry-Point', the experiencer reflects from the middle of the 'biological' experience that has always perplexed and drained him.

The poem promotes a mental perspective more affiliated to dreams and hallucination or at best the stream of consciousness rather than sobriety or factuality. Despite Booth's observation that it treats sex as an 'imperious', 'biological force', the mind is on alert to analyse and dissect so as to deflate and disperse illusions.<sup>116</sup> The speaker skims across one oblique image after another, beginning with 'the bubble', along through 'the wet spark', 'ashen hills', 'salted, shrunken lakes', the 'leaden'-looking 'ring', the 'sunscrubbed room', and closes in on 'the padlocked cube of light'. The pejorative nature of most of the imagery conducted basically by adjectives reveals a mind that thinks in contrariness to body. Though the mind is temporally dimmed by the biological drive, it is yet fully aware

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<sup>116</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Writer*, p. 104.

of its infertility and sterility. Sex, then, is compelling, but futile. The masked analysis of eroticism endeavours to strip it of its glamour and magic. For one thing, the mind is aware of its tyranny and totality and hence the inescapability of the experience:

A bubble is restively forming at your tip.  
Burst it as fast as we can –  
It will grow again, until we begin dying. (p. 31)

Sex, being repetitive and insatiable, but also transient, steals into one's physical and mental apparatuses and paralyses them until the fever is abated only to be renewed soon after. The thoughts that reflecting on the sexual act inspires are antithetical and absurd. The speaker admits to the urgency and absolutism of the sexual desire which needs to be answered 'as fast as we can' and he condemns its importunateness as 'Bestial, intent, real.' Once the furtive urge is met, the consumer is acutely aware of and impatient to flee its enclosing and enslaving effect. The physicality of the act itself is dwelt upon as both casual and informing. Despite reservations and restrictions, the philosophising mind perceives sex as a natural ordinance rather than a choice, for 'what sad scapes we cannot turn from then'. The prospects of liberating oneself of this ordinance prove to be illusive and surreal and akin to 'a remote and unattainable transcendence'.<sup>117</sup> Therefore, the poem's coda weaves a dreamy, nonexistent, spacious stark room and a pillar of light as equivalent to purity where desire is neutralised and sex is banned and denied: 'And how remote that bare and sunscrubbed room, / Intensely far, that padlocked cube of light' (p. 31). Despite the complaint against its authoritative and mandatory drives, sex is barely regretted since it is 'real' and defines life versus 'dying' in the fourth line; what is lamented, in effect, is the bleakness that encloses it. The speaker is conscious of its inability to take him anywhere else beyond it as it is experienced, for it is a mere 'wet spark' since 'the dream of a

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<sup>117</sup> Stephen Regan, *Philip Larkin*, p. 97.

concentrated, glowing perfection immune to historical destiny remains remote as ever.’<sup>118</sup> It is an end by itself and a blind alley leading nowhere else and, by being so, it feels like a waste, intemperance, and eventually cumbersome. For a critical mind, sex brings no increase, but reduction, hence the images of barrenness in the third stanza, let alone the counterfeit, chintzy, and vulgar ambience of romance in ‘Birmingham magic all discredited’. The overall atmosphere is bursting, ‘blown’ and collapsing and provisional. If anything, sex is an inevitable dilution and a distraction.

## VI

Like many other poems in the collection ‘At Grass’ invokes memory as a major motif. Reminiscences are neither comforting nor exhilarating, but tormenting agents when memory preserves and plays back the bliss and glory of a long lost past, resulting in ontological reflections on life and existence. The poem itself has evoked a variety of critical assessments that attempt to penetrate its psychological and intellectual layers. ‘At Grass’ is a poem in which ‘the conscious thought’ presides and so does the narrative detail.<sup>119</sup> Virtual nostalgia pervades ‘At Grass’, but besides being retrospective, the poem is also seen to fall in neatly with the Jungian psychoanalysis Larkin imbibed during his Oxford years. In this vein, Cooper traces the germ of the poem to Larkin’s ‘Record of Dreams’ where horses appear racing in Dream 43 and hence the theme is brewing in the subconscious, long before watching the Brown Jack documentary in 1950.<sup>120</sup> According to Booth, the poem demonstrates ‘Larkin’s characteristic imaginative processes’ and ‘offers a test-case for the ideological reading of Larkin’ where ‘critics have detected in it a subtext of conservative nostalgia.’<sup>121</sup> The nostalgic, ideological reading of ‘At Grass’ is claimed to pay homage, even though inadvertently, to an idealised ‘empire and Edwardian’ past, at

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<sup>118</sup> M. L. Rosenthal, *The Modern Poets: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Oxford University press, 1960), p. 223.

<sup>119</sup> A. T. Tolley, *Larkin At Work*, p. 27.

<sup>120</sup> Stephen Cooper, *Philip Larkin: Subversive Writer*, p. 135.

<sup>121</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Writer*, p. 79.

odds with the '1950s England' which 'appears dull, pinched, banal and second-rate.'<sup>122</sup> Dubbing it as 'a poem of post-imperial *tristesse*', Blake Morrison attributes its 'popularity' to Larkin's use of horses as symbols for 'loss of power', tapping 'nostalgia for a past' glorious England.<sup>123</sup> By the same token, 'the poem could be read as marking the distance between ideological Thirties hubbub and apolitical Fifties quietism', a reading that culminates in categorising it as 'a radical antithesis between History and Being.'<sup>124</sup> A humanitarian reading of the poem, as an outrage against animal exploitation in human entertainment, is equally present in the poem.<sup>125</sup> This streak is further endorsed with *The Less Deceived*, which includes two more poems in whose imagery animals saliently feature, which are 'Wires' and 'Myxomatosis' ('Toads' excluded). Given its allegorical shades, 'At Grass' hosts a blend of thoughts, philosophies, ideologies, and psychological strains.

Despite the almost critical consensus on nostalgia, the instance the poem promotes is hardly confined to elegising and sighing over past glories of the empire. Nostalgia is dislocated and destabilised in favour of a universal, timeless ontological philosophy. On one level, both the present and the future are implied in the wake of a past, revisited or a glamorous experience, reappraised. Nonetheless, it is the mind that transcends the immediate present and situation, though odd and alternative scenarios, contrary to the one the poem sketches, are not perpetuated. Provided that the horses are allegorical symbols, the poem persuasively argues that even though temporally glorious and thriving, worldly pursuits and conquests are ultimately greeted with failure, or, at best, reducible to oblivion and anonymity, hence 'At Grass' is a 'poem about oblivion'.<sup>126</sup> An anthropomorphic

<sup>122</sup> Tom Paulin, 'Into the Heart of Englishness', in *Philip Larkin*, ed. Stephen Regan, 160-77, at pp. 163-64.

<sup>123</sup> Blake Morrison, *The Movement: English Poetry and Fiction of the 1950s* (London and New York: Methuen, 1980), pp. 82-3.

<sup>124</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: the Poet's Plight*, p. 119.

<sup>125</sup> Stephen Cooper, *Philip Larkin: Subversive Writer*, p. 135.

<sup>126</sup> Andrew Swarbrick, *Out of Reach*, p. 62.



reading sees the horses as ‘shades of all human ambitions and triumphs.’<sup>127</sup> The rise/fall phenomenon is ineluctable and the higher the rise through the ranks, the more devastating the fall. In its empathetic strand, ‘At Grass’ envisages horses galloping in an Elysium-like field, a fate not necessarily apportioned to humans after retirement. On its philosophical sphere, the poem may be read as a catharsis and warning to, or even sympathy with, *homo sapiens* who are apt to lose themselves in the hectic, racing competitiveness of the world.

Despite their prominence, memory and retrospection do not remain locked into the confines of a lost past or an insipid present, but steer ‘At Grass’ into a space of visionary projection. This is one of the senses to which Swarbrick’s suggestion that ‘the poem attempts to project a particular state of mind’ applies.<sup>128</sup> Watching a documentary about an ex-race horse, Larkin, some critics speculate, must have found himself brooding about the transience of consumerist benefits and what happens when one-time celebrities are archived, shelved, and sent into a compulsory retirement, landing on a theme that strikes a universal appeal. According to Rossen, Larkin picks ‘a subject close to him’, aiming to achieve ‘a new and more thoughtful, diverse perspective on it’.<sup>129</sup> Or to use Swarbrick’s rendition, one may suggest that ‘At Grass’ gave Larkin access to contemplate the ‘fame he had failed to achieve’ at the time ‘as a novelist’.<sup>130</sup> The trajectory of fame may very well decline along with recognition and appreciation and after a brilliant career, one is jostled into the very margins or to some lonely patch of grass. As such, ‘At Grass’ is assumed to rehearse one of Larkin’s major mental strains relevant to the durability and stability of worldly pursuits and rewards, which are, in his view, all doomed and destined for oblivion. The dread of losing the honours lavished generously stipulates a mental attitude of scepticism and distrust. Accordingly, what matters to the observing speaker in the poem, if

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<sup>127</sup> C. B. Cox & A. E. Dyson, *Modern Poetry: Studies in Practical Criticism*, p. 138.

<sup>128</sup> Andrew Swarbrick, *Out of Reach*, p. 62.

<sup>129</sup> Janice Rossen, *Philip Larkin: His Life’s Work*, p. 17.

<sup>130</sup> Andrew Swarbrick, *Out of Reach*, p. 62.

not to Larkin himself, is not the forgotten glory of the retired horses as much as a personal concern of being himself prone to a similar fate when out of the spotlight and having to live on a past fame. However, it is rather inconvenient to think of Larkin contemplating the decline of his hypothetical personal fame rather than fame and recognition in their abstract and allegorical claim. In fact, writing 'At Grass', Larkin was 'not slipping his name but making it'.<sup>131</sup> Biographical interpretations dismissed, Larkin's commentator strikes a detached and impersonal poise and remains focused on the horses, which the sight describes hazily from a distance.

To capture the drama of victory and futility, the narrator plays with memory, cinematic and detached. Memory is regrettably as myopic as the strained eye that 'can hardly pick them out / From the cold shade they shelter in,' undisturbed, unheeded, and unattended 'Till the wind distresses tail and mane' (p. 45). With 'distress' in the focus instead of '*tousle*' to quote Eduard Vlad, a mental rather than physical shaking is envisaged.<sup>132</sup> For a moment their anonymity seems to fade with one of the ex-champions, zoomed in. The scepticism of 'seeming to look on' warrants the ensuing analeptic release. The busy, hectic world of the past is rewound and captured in a time-lapse sequence and animated by sight and sound as if the eye could pick the distant picture and the ear the noise and cheers of the crowds. The horses have seen glorious days and won honours and titles. They have been pursued, spied on, photographed, and filmed. They have been mythologised and doted on by the luxurious elitism in the race course ritual, which is basically human: 'Numbers and parasols: outside, / Squadrons of empty cars'. But these reminiscences unfold with the awareness that they belong to a human observer, about the horses occupying a spot in the centre of the human world before they are dislocated and marginalised. Their reminiscences, if any, remain obscure, invincible, and tightly shut.

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<sup>131</sup> Merle E. Brown, *Double Lyric*, p. 80.

<sup>132</sup> Eduard Vlad, *The Glory and the Gloom: Philip Larkin Between Deconstruction and Logocentrism, the Movement, and The British Poetic Tradition* (Constanta: Mondograf, 1997), p. 44.

Upon speculating again on the part of the observer, memory is a burden and a chamber for disturbing thoughts, hence the legitimate wondering: 'Do memories plague their ears like flies?' (p. 46), echoing the precedent 'distress'. Larkin would rather have his persona answer the rhetorical question with 'I don't know'.

The poem reflects as well on the notion whether sweet memories alleviate or aggravate estrangement when it happens. It considers the question whether a blissful episode from the past consoles the bereft or otherwise makes one shudder in distress and pain, as in 'Wires'. Further, 'At Grass', in essence, rehearses existential themes, which surface in many poems in *The Less Deceived*. On top is anonymity, which is after all releasing and unburdening, unlike fame and renown that harness the beasts to human calendars and gadgets (summers, race courses, stop-watches, and fieldglasses which are props of the human world). Besides, anonymity entails oblivion or even a limbo-like status, for 'to give up one's name and slip free of consciousness is to relinquish one's awareness of reality and be blind to the movements of time'.<sup>133</sup> And while the speaker anthropomorphically sympathises with the horses almost to the point of empathy, one may still wonder to what length the human projection goes and how genuine it may be. The horses began a career as the renowned champions of races and end up ironically pretty much the same as the anonymous stars of Larkin's show. Larkin, thus, has for good thwarted 'their escape into perfect invisibility and anonymity'.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> John Reibetanz, 'Lyric Poetry as Self-Possession: Philip Larkin', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 54/3 (1985), 266-84, at p. 274.

<sup>134</sup> Merle E. Brown, *Double Lyric*, p. 80.

## Chapter 4

### *The Whitsun Weddings: a Journey across Existence*

#### I

Published in 1964, almost a decade after *The Less Deceived*, *The Whitsun Weddings* was greeted with critical and public welcome and praise, receiving favourable reviews from ‘the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *New York Review of Books*, the most widely read organs in Britain and the U.S.A.’ and winning the Queen’s Gold Medal for Poetry.<sup>1</sup> The collection came as a witness to ‘the changing social and cultural climate of the 1950s and early 1960s in an extraordinary way.’<sup>2</sup> The volume is well-designed to conduct ‘the reader, with artful contrasts of comic, tragic, reflective and dramatic, from the opening chords of “Here”, through the gloomy meditation of “Dockery and Son” to the yearning finale of “An Arundel Tomb”.’<sup>3</sup> The poems were hailed as enlightening and awakening with their ‘audacious images and steadily revealing narratives, and because the author rewards the reader with promise and illumination’. The poems tend to ‘cling to the memory like a bad dream; they force horrors of realization about lonely, aging, superficial mankind’ through, one may assume, ‘the energetic perceptions’, and perhaps the absence of ‘delphic’ airs is compensated by carrying ‘picture and idea into consciousness with the directness of posters.’<sup>4</sup>

*The Whitsun Weddings* navigates through a consciousness, so sensitive of and reactive to the varied and multiple angles of the world. The poems typify the attempt of alert observers to define themselves against a backdrop of an energetic, but unsatisfactory existence. They also explore anxieties, fears, uncertainties, and dreams which populate the human mind as it wavers between ignorance and knowledge and/or scepticism and

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<sup>1</sup> David Timms, *Philip Larkin*, p. 92.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Regan, *Philip Larkin*, p. 101.

<sup>3</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> William Stafford, ‘Losses, Engagements, Privacies’, *Poetry*, 106/4 (1965), 294-95, at pp. 294, 295.

certainty. *The Whitsun Weddings* opens with 'Here', a poem that explores the varied and versatile topography of a place to which a 'swerving' or a series of swervings lead. Despite its being understood as a poem about Hull, Stan Smith argues that it is in fact about 'hereness' as a 'general condition' and 'contingency' where the 'attention' is arrested by 'a given world... in all its provincial otherness.' The concreteness of the details is dismissed in favour of a more abstract visionary thrust; therefore, the poem does not offer 'a slice of life', Smith insists, but rather a 'pastoral' of 'mind' as captured in the last stanza.<sup>5</sup> Being an intellectual conjuration, the 'Eden'-like space of the poem 'is both "Here" and nowhere, and attainable only in imagination, not in fact.'<sup>6</sup> A heightened and almost transcendental perceptiveness characterises the observing eye of the narrator, who 'almost loses himself in the excitement of sense-awareness'.<sup>7</sup>

The mental stance of the occasion is already weighty and arduous with the train of thought, one may as well assume, swerving three times in the first stanza where 'the repeated gerunds... create a slow-building climax.'<sup>8</sup> In four stanzas of eight lines each and an alternating rhyme scheme of ababcdc and abbacdd, an intellectual, kaleidoscopic journey is undertaken in which straightforwardness is abandoned in favour of deflection, despite what Regan detects as 'the straightforwardly mimetic and descriptive way' according to which 'the poem appears to be working'.<sup>9</sup> 'Here' rehearses, though inadvertently, one of Larkin's major themes in *The Less Deceived*, which is the search for home and a native place. In 'Places, Loved Ones' and less directly in 'I Remember, I Remember' and 'Poetry of Departures', the central personae flirt with the notion of place, home, and belonging. The sense of restlessness, exile, and to some extent rootlessness

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<sup>5</sup> Stan Smith, 'Margins of Tolerance', pp. 181-82.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Motion, 'Philip Larkin and Symbolism', at p. 51

<sup>7</sup> M. L. Rosenthal, *The New Poets: American and British Poetry Since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 241.

<sup>8</sup> Booth, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*, p. 264.

<sup>9</sup> Stephen Regan, *Philip Larkin*, p. 103.

overrides that of settlement, home, and belonging. In 'Here', the fever seems to have abated and the mind no longer toys with the idea of nomadic vagrancy, but settles into the contemplative serenity and peace which the poem invokes. In this sense, 'Here' does credit to the 'antidote' role perceived in it by John Osborne, which remedies an earlier place poem ('Places, Loved Ones'), marked by its derogatory air.<sup>10</sup> Further, 'Here' may be interpreted as an existential treatise on being, where the spatial coordinate triggers all other coordinates including the temporal and hypothetical. The so-called 'hereness' defines being, in the abstract, or the 'unfenced existence', and substantiates it, despite its slippery and elusive ambience. And if this 'here' could unleash all this flux of thought and introspection, then it is indeed a rationalisation of existence par excellence.

The poem looks like an ode to, or perhaps a psalm of, a locale on its own accord, along with its occupiers. It is a sagacious celebration of diversity of a 'social history' that binds together 'different cultures and life styles'.<sup>11</sup> Each epoch has left indelible, lingering marks in the fabric of life and architecture. 'Here' bears testimony to dialectical aspects of space and fashion in which oddities are catalogued together; the history of slavery, embodied in the slave museum, for instance, coexists with 'tattoo-shops, consulates, grim head-scarfed wives'. Likewise, 'domes, statues, spires, and cranes' have to cohere with 'Plate-glass swing doors' leading to 'cheap suits, red-kitchen ware, sharp shoes, iced lollies,/Electric mixers, toasters, washers, driers'. In listing factual details, Larkin affirms 'the metonymic mode' and the realistic landscape, which will be replaced by a 'metaphoric re-organization of reality' in the last stanza.<sup>12</sup> Within the spatial domain, the hazy specificity of 'Here' nominates it to be a universal 'vignette', in Booth's words, and 'an archetype of the social existence' to which all readers relate regardless of their individual

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<sup>10</sup> John Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, p. 147.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Cooper, *Philip Larkin: Subversive Writer*, p. 158.

<sup>12</sup> Theo D'haen, "Realist or Romantic?" *Philip Larkin's Modes of Writing*, p. 6.

whereabouts.<sup>13</sup> The poem is also designed to take the mind of the reader back and forth uninterruptedly between pastoral and urban imagery and natural and industrial landscapes, where the one leads or extends to the other, hence ‘The piled gold clouds, the shining gull-marked mud, / Gathers to the surprise of a large town’ (p. 49). The word ‘surprise’ defines best the reaction of the mind to the eye, admiringly combining the magnitude of wilderness that overshadows urbanity; the mind is rewarded with the elation that follows the eureka of discovery. It is the sense of ‘solitary wonder’ Whalen finds to reflect ‘the disposition’ of the observing persona.<sup>14</sup> The atlas of the *here* of the poem fulfils the requirements of ‘a kind of sanctuary’, a place whose main asset is ‘solitude’ and loneliness.<sup>15</sup> In so doing, the poem revives a romantic interest in the vast and sublime, which the final stanza portrays to perfection:

Here silence stands  
Like heat. Here leaves unnoticed thicken,  
Hidden weeds flower, neglected waters quicken,  
Luminously-peopled air ascends;  
And past the poppies bluish neutral distance  
Ends the land suddenly beyond a beach  
Of shapes and shingle. Here is unfenced existence:  
Facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach. (p. 49)

The finale captures ‘the speaker’s intuitive superamental perception of an infinite reality beyond the finite.’<sup>16</sup> The earthly place worthy of such litany-like address feels celestial, majestic, and transcendental. Indeed, it is a place where earth and heaven meet and blend into a bluish infinite horizon and the ‘imaginative journeying...carries’ the observer ‘to a deeper, underlying awareness.’<sup>17</sup> Underhill intimates that ‘the impetus of the journey’ in ‘Here’ is not bound by ‘the physical destination’; it extends to comprise ‘a metaphysical one’. However, the poem’s momentum culminates in the realisation that the ‘beyond’,

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<sup>13</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*, p. 265.

<sup>14</sup> Terry Whalen, *Philip Larkin and English Poetry*, p. 63.

<sup>15</sup> Janice Rossen, ‘Philip Larkin Abroad’, in *Philip Larkin: the Man and his Work*, ed. Dale Salwak (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), 48-53, at p. 50.

<sup>16</sup> Sisir Kumar Chatterjee, *Philip Larkin*, p. 234.

<sup>17</sup> R. P. Draper, *An Introduction to Twentieth-Century Poetry in English* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), p. 231.

which the poem plots ‘is just where the poet does not wish to go.’<sup>18</sup> Whether the poet wishes or ‘does not wish to go’ makes his persona no less infatuated by the intangibility of the azure. Though the launching point of the meditation is *here*, the mind overruns the confinement of *here* to access what is ‘out of reach’ and worthy of silent reverence. The symbolic ‘spiritual liberation’, which ‘pondering the magnitude of the universe’ confers upon the viewer, is epiphany incarnate.<sup>19</sup> The concluding lines carry a yearning to ‘escape from the “scrupulous meanness” of the disillusioned intelligence’.<sup>20</sup> In all, ‘Here’ is not an Atlas of the place, as much as of mind and a chart of how the barometer of thought fluctuates in response to the diverse tenors of the world.

The notion of place as an existentialistic coordinate and a definition of being and identity is once more explored in ‘The Importance of Elsewhere’. This poem traces how Larkin manages to transform his ‘somewhere’ into a ‘nowhere’ here, as it ‘explores his problematic Englishness.’<sup>21</sup> While in ‘Here’, the place inspires boundless and immeasurable dimension of thought and contemplation, ‘The Importance of Elsewhere’ affirms the ideology of estrangement and non-conformity. Ireland in the poem is one more point in the curve of spiritual homelessness which goes by unnoticed and uncensored by virtue of Ireland being ‘not home’. Away from home, the expatriate of the poem is not tried and judged as an outsider or an alien on the grounds of intellectual difference and dissension. The appellation ‘outsider’ is intended literally as well as spiritually and psychologically as his safety glass. Among the others, individual freedom and non-conformity go uncensored and ‘the epithet “stranger” is his passport to the special

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<sup>18</sup> Underhill, Hugh, ‘Poetry of Departures: Larkin and the Power of Choosing’, *Critical Survey*, 1/2 (1989), 183-93, at p. 187.

<sup>19</sup> Terry Whalen, *Philip Larkin and English Poetry*, p. 63.

<sup>20</sup> Seamus Heaney, ‘The Main of Light’, in *Larkin at Sixty*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), 131-38, at p. 135.

<sup>21</sup> Ingelbien, Raphaël, “England and Nowhere”: Contestations of Englishness in Philip Larkin and Graham Swift’, *English*, 48(1999), 33-48, at p. 42.



privilege' of not being taken to task for being what he truly is'.<sup>22</sup> In so arguing, Larkin's persona is constructing an individual selfhood, based on an awareness of his difference and separateness from others. Landing on an individual identity, Larkin's persona can then derive 'a sense of community'.<sup>23</sup>

Rationalising his outsider status, the expatriate is persuaded that being an outsider may 'exempt' him 'from the reproaches of his peers and of his own conscience.'<sup>24</sup> The subtle differences in thought and temperament, so traduced by fellow countrymen, have lost their edge among such other differences as speech and customs, which he experiences somewhere else. Thus, foreignness is a perfect cover and camouflage, so the speaker neither needs to wear a disguise, nor feels ashamed of his unconventional bent of mind. His alienation is not an impeachment that he needs to defend himself against or at best justify and explain, and neither is solitude. Goodby perceives the poem as providing 'a rationale for Larkin's characteristic isolated, onlooker person; without it the mature poetry is unthinkable.'<sup>25</sup> This is perhaps the only way in which 'Strangeness made sense' and 'To prove me separate, [was] not unworkable' (p. 64). The double negative of 'not unworkable' employed in place of 'workable' rings with triumph against the epithet 'unworkable', uttered in conjunction with his going against 'social consensus' to quote Goodby.<sup>26</sup> In both statements, being a pariah seems to be a self-conviction, if not indeed self-choice. The expatriate betrays no scruples regarding his being apart from his peerage. Difference feels more like a gift to be cherished and treasured, especially as it proves convenient elsewhere. Strangeness emerges as a pretext of and warrant for detachment,

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<sup>22</sup> Lolette Kuby, *An Uncommon Poet for the Common Man*, p. 64.

<sup>23</sup> Nigel Alderman, "'The Life with a Hole in it': Philip Larkin and the Condition of England", *Textual Practice*, 8/2 (1994), 279-301, at p. 281.

<sup>24</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*, p. 211.

<sup>25</sup> John Goodby, 'The Importance of Being Elsewhere', p. 133.

<sup>26</sup> John Goodby, 'The Importance of Being Elsewhere', p. 132.

arrogance, and social antagonism. It is a perfect occasion to reflect on his own culture and to question ‘*what* precisely constitutes national identity and selfhood’:<sup>27</sup>

Living in England has no such excuse:  
These are my customs and establishments  
It would be much more serious to refuse.  
Here no elsewhere underwrites my existence. (p. 64)

One may wonder if these lines are an apologia for feeling no homesickness, for the blurred ‘national identity’, and for the preference to measure oneself against a social backdrop of otherness. Like ‘Here’, ‘The Importance of Elsewhere’ defines the existence of its soloist in terms of the existential adverb *here*. It is *here* where he stands so apart as a misfit, so that his existence is assured and asserted, in reliance on a self-conviction of peerless singularity and individuality. However, Swarbrick draws the attention to ‘elsewhere’ as symbolic of ‘an imaginative space, contiguous with experience but never actual’.<sup>28</sup> Elsewhere flashes an unattainable paradise, like ‘the unfenced existence /... out of reach’ in ‘Here’. This is one of the rare occasion where an ‘aesthetic meaning’ is assigned to ‘travels between Britain and Ireland’ or more significantly to elsewhere and place change, though ‘Larkin is not usually hailed as a theorist of “difference.”’<sup>29</sup> In all, ‘it is a realm of escape, of fulfilment, of fantasy and its presence is everywhere in *The Whitsun Weddings*.’<sup>30</sup> Both ‘Here’ and ‘The Importance of Elsewhere’ contemplate an identity polemic and seem to tentatively pass on the idea that *where you live may tell who you are*.

## II

*The Whitsun Weddings* registers an almost paranoiac anxiety regarding identity and individuality in a world growing more collective and uniform by the day. The theme is often approached from a dialectical perspective, with the acute awareness that to stand out in the middle of pluralism entails sacrifices and losses in psychological and social terms.

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<sup>27</sup> Stephen Regan, *Philip Larkin*, p. 122.

<sup>28</sup> Andrew Swarbrick, *Out of Reach*, p. 94.

<sup>29</sup> Edna Longley, *Yeats and Modern Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 151.

<sup>30</sup> Andrew Swarbrick, *Out of Reach*, p. 94.

‘Mr Bleaney’ is a biography of a mediocre man who could stand for the majority of humankind. The biographer is no other than Bleaney’s successor and peer and the narrative is his journey through the denial and detachment of the first stanzas to the compromise and perplexity of the final stanzas. The eponymous Mr Bleaney serves as an apparatus of self-measure; by first opposing it and then converging with it, the narrator sets out to ‘define his own identity’.<sup>31</sup> Whether he likes it or not, the biographer is harnessed to the same social codes of behaviour and habit which have previously enslaved Mr Bleaney and his likes. This is why, the yarn is as much about the narrator himself as about the narrated, for both cut very much similar figures notwithstanding the disparate intellectual standards of the current tenant. The title with its elision of ‘bleak’ and ‘mean’, the seven quatrains rhyming abab, and the iambic pentameter affirm a stereotypical, sterile pattern of life, a fellowship of wretchedness, and a commonality of destiny. Though the poem is basically a monologue, ‘the interaction between’ the narrator’s ‘thought patterns and the speech patterns of the landlady creates an impression of dialogue’, blurring, at times, the borders where speech ends and thought takes over.<sup>32</sup> Dismayed and parrot-like, the new tenant introduces his new accommodation by identifying its former occupant in a quote before proceeding into listing the place’s faults, tackiness and vulgarity:

Flowered curtains, thin and frayed,  
Fall to within five inches of the sill,  
  
Whose window shows a strip of building land,  
Tussocky, littered. (p. 50)

It seems that Mr Bleaney lived in squalor and humility, which do not escape the keen observing eye of the potential tenant. It is a budget room, possessed of an air, not of austerity as much as thriftiness, distaste, and destitution, with its outmoded and uncomfortable, chintzy furniture of basics only, as suggested in ‘Bed, upright chair, sixty-

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<sup>31</sup> Janice Rossen, *Philip Larkin: His Life's Work*, p. 137.

<sup>32</sup> Stephen Regan, *Philip Larkin*, p. 108.

watt bulb, no hook / Behind the door, no room for books or bags'. As such, there is an initial undercurrent of criticism and even contempt in the way the narrator explores Mr Bleaney's former abode, which he was forced to vacate, otherwise the narrator could not have leased it. Paradoxically, the perfect room of 'Poetry of Departures' is detested for being too perfect for the needs of its occupant, just as Bleaney's is snubbed for being not up to the standards of luxury and sophistication. The never-quenched human craving surfaces here as the mental and psychological hurdle to access happiness, and not the barely or perfectly fitted room.

Mr Bleaney's room, which is 'a figure for failure', to quote Booth, infects its occupants with the failure it is loaded with.<sup>33</sup> Despite the current tenant's awareness of the despicable mode of life that Bleaney embraced, he seems to blink at the fact that he has stepped in exactly where Bleaney left. This turn of events justifies dubbing the poem as Larkin's 'first full excursion into mordantly dark comedy'.<sup>34</sup> And while he seems to take Bleaney to task for not being acutely aware or particularly displeased with the personal circumstances to which he apparently adjusted, the new tenant takes measures to affirm that, unlike Bleaney, he betrays no sign of pleasure or contentment. Nonetheless, his analysis overlooks the possibility that Bleaney ended up differently from how he started. That is, Mr Bleaney might have expressed similar sentiments against the place and the landlady before he acclimatised and embraced his lot if ever he had. Further, Mr Bleaney is neither naive nor witless (though not bookish), for he seemed to have known what he bargained for and learnt to reap benefits, influencing the landlady, for instance, if he chose to do so. Notwithstanding his inarticulate objection, the narrator has already fallen into the routine of the former tenant the minute he voices:

'I'll take it.' So it happens that I lie  
Where Mr Bleaney lay, and stub my fags

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<sup>33</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*, p. 209.

<sup>34</sup> Richard Bradford, *First Boredom, Then Fear*, p. 149.

On the same saucer-souvenir, and try

Stuffing my ears with cotton-wool, to drown  
The jabbering set he egged her on to buy. (p. 50)

Though discussing Bleaney ‘as an empty automaton, a space for speculation’, the narrating persona affirms that he replaces Bleaney as ‘his double’.<sup>35</sup> Thereupon, in the Bleaney of the room he rented, the narrator can see and recognise his virtual image mirror-like in years to come when the critical and analytical mentality perishes in favour of a more comforting and less discriminating one. Unlike Bleaney who chose to take the good with the bad, the present narrator demonstrates in ‘Stuffing my ears with cotton-wool, to drown / The jabbering set he egged her on to buy’ a mentality of passive resistance. This is partly because ‘his superego’ warns him against the disappointment which he will suffer, if he descends ‘to Bleaney’s level.’<sup>36</sup> The narrator is aware that he has already taken a step, irrevocable, towards Mr Bleaney’s world. The conversion is evidenced by his resort to direct speech to report Bleaney’s habits in place of the indirect report of the opening stanza.

The present tenant professes knowledge and proclaims that ‘I know his habits – what time he came down’, as if he intuited the information by sheer hindsight. But it is actually the landlady who keeps mentioning Bleaney. It is she, not the room, who has the new tenant learn Mr Bleaney’s habits by rote in the hope of, probably, converting him into a full-time Bleaney surrogate and the virtual, insinuated *ménage à trois* is confirmed. The narrator camouflages the original source of the information, which is the landlady, probably as a strategy to maintain an illusory independence and detachment. Or at the very least, both narrators’ visions merge and their characteristic sketches blend and synthesise. When the mind sifts through Mr Bleaney’s timetable, food preferences, vacations, and holidays, the life frame does not really seem to deviate from the norms of a typical English

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<sup>35</sup> Paul Hendon, ‘Larkin and the Logic of Replacement’, *Critical Survey*, 1/2 (1989), 164-71, at p. 165.

<sup>36</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*, p. 210.

wage-earner of the time. And certainly, the present narrator, though of a subtler intellectual calibre, is fully aware of the camaraderie he shares with Mr Bleaney's type. He is even more conscious of the gradual slipping into somebody else's garments which threatens to suck him into its stagnancy so that his individual identity is threatened. Such unvoiced speculation brings forth the awakening or transcendence the narrator experiences in the concluding stanzas:

But if he stood and watched the frigid wind  
Tousling the clouds, lay on the fusty bed  
Telling himself that this was home, and grinned,  
And shivered, without shaking off the dread

That how we live measures our own nature,  
And at his age having no more to show  
Than one hired box should make him pretty sure  
He warranted no better, I don't know. (p. 50)

Triggered by 'but', the contrast unfurls to do Mr Bleaney justice so that he is not entirely dismissed as heedless, unaware, and unsophisticated. Yet, 'how we live measures our own nature' is barely Mr Bleaney's catechism despite the pluralism professed in the collective pronoun and the aphoristic air conferred thereupon. However, the likes of Mr Bleaney would not normally be so aware as to engage their minds in reflections of this calibre. They would not tend to assess the standards that measure existence, 'let alone "grin" at the Socratic complexity of all this'; therefore, 'these elegantly crafted musings are Larkin's'.<sup>37</sup> These lines document 'a sudden collapse of his [the poetic persona] own morale' in conjunction with 'a chilling awareness' and 'fear' regarding his being a Bleaney by nature, hence the 'speculative attribution of the speaker's feelings to Mr Bleaney'.<sup>38</sup> Between objection and protest with 'frigid wind / Tousling the clouds', submissive contentment ('lay on the fusty bed'), and self-deception ('Telling himself that this was home'), the reflective, current tenant rationalises that Mr Bleaney managed to fit into the

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<sup>37</sup> Richard Bradford, *First Boredom, Then Fear*, p. 151.

<sup>38</sup> David Lodge, 'Philip Larkin: the Metonymic Muse', in *Philip Larkin*, ed. Stephen Regan (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), 71-82, at pp. 79-80.

insipid pattern, shrugging off any doubts regarding his inferiority. Bleaney seems to have fared tolerably well, run the gauntlet, and emerged almost unscathed. Much to his own advantage, Mr Bleaney possesses a pragmatic mentality that does not let him drift away with theorisation and idealism. The narrator's instance remains purely theoretical and cognitive in nature for after all he is Mr Bleaney's duplicate. As such, Mr Bleaney lends 'the philosophising narrator' a hand 'to draw a sense of desolate isolation from the fragmented parts of his predecessor.'<sup>39</sup> Ultimately, no matter how much the narrator cringes from the repetitive life pattern to which people of his calibre seem to be destined, he finds the comparison inescapable and the analogies outstanding. Therefore, his bruised ego edges him out of the common stream as he almost condemns Mr Bleaney's fate as well-deserved, if not for the reminder that he is currently occupying the 'hired box' Mr Bleaney vacated.

The last two stanzas joined by the enjambment make one 'awkward, difficult-to-say sentence' whose grammar/structure 'mimics the reluctance of the mind to reach conclusion about its own worth or lack of worth.'<sup>40</sup> Hence it is wise not to take Mr Bleaney for granted and condemn him as inferior and mediocre. If Mr Bleaney occupied the room until his death as the poem faintly suggests, the man remains a riddle, unravelled by mere posthumous estimates based on cut-price props and hearsay. In this vein, Janice Rossen argues:

For all his transparency, the departed Mr Bleaney remains a mystery. It is impossible to know what he thought. This poem has the strange, lucid quality of a murder mystery or spy novel, where the investigator tries to reconstruct a dead or departed man's life and thoughts.<sup>41</sup>

The 'I don't know' of the finale debunks the earlier, glib, and one may venture to say, vain 'I know' with its impressive air of confidence and certitude. It marks 'a significant shift of

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<sup>39</sup> Paul Hendon, 'Larkin and the Logic of Replacement', p. 171.

<sup>40</sup> Donald Hall, 'Philip Larkin, 1922-85', in *Philip Larkin: the Man and his Work*, ed. Dale Salwak (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), 165-68, at p. 168.

<sup>41</sup> Janice Rossen, *Philip Larkin: His Life's Work*, p. 137.

perspective... in the speaker's mind'.<sup>42</sup> So, the two men after all prove less dialectical than they first appear. It is also an acknowledgement of defeat and impotence on the part of the narrator whose mind hits a deadlock in its attempt to navigate through and conjure up someone else's mind. Bradford condenses the effect of the poem by charting its poetical borders, affirming that 'Mr Bleaney himself is pure invention, but the poem is a record of Larkin's imaginings.'<sup>43</sup> 'Mr Bleaney' is an intelligent exploration of a failed scheme and a lost endeavour to make ends meet. The poem falls in with other poems that explore the concept of home and belonging to a certain place. It questions indirectly the notion of 'home' in the abstract and whether it is 'now an obsolete concept' that needs a fundamental reappraisal; home may be only 'an illusion, useful for sanity, to conceal the fact that, in the long run, 'the Cemetery' is the only home waiting for everyone.'<sup>44</sup> But more importantly, it is a statement on existence, choice, possibilities, coercion, and compromises. The antagonism the new tenant probably feels towards Bleaney is a last shield before he loses his self-esteem.

'Self's the Man' is another existential statement that relies again on dialectics ('the husband/bachelor dichotomy', as Osborne suggests), forcing the narrator to compare identities, this time with Arnold, a living acquaintance and not a total stranger like Mr Bleaney.<sup>45</sup> The poem is charged with 'Freudian insights into the necessary burden of civilisation, the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction,' which 'are acted out in an inglorious suburban context.'<sup>46</sup> In a conversational, impatient style and regular quatrains rhyming aabb, Arnold's personality and life choices are pitted against the narrator's so that the two stances ultimately diverge rather than converge. The *in medias res*, epigrammatic 'Oh, no one can deny / That Arnold is less selfish than I' (p. 58) combines 'a common-

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<sup>42</sup> Stephen Regan, *Philip Larkin*, p. 108.

<sup>43</sup> Richard Bradford, *First Boredom, Then Fear*, p. 150.

<sup>44</sup> Stan Smith, *Poetry and Displacement*, pp. 20-1.

<sup>45</sup> John Osborne, *Larkin Ideology and Critical Violence*, p. 109.

<sup>46</sup> Steve Clark, 'Larkin's Sexual Politics', p. 101.



sensical wobble of rhyme, a humorous wisdom, [and] practical lyricism'.<sup>47</sup> The aphoristic statement, a cliché in itself, is double-edged, nonetheless. As a retort or comment, voiced in self-defence to dismiss charges of egoism laid against the speaker, it triggers the ensuing penetrating and witty psychoanalysis of the two specimens. With the comparative 'less selfish', the defender is alert to the fact that Arnold, being a human, can never be altogether selfless. The wittiness of the expression lets him temporarily off the hook. In all, the thesis of the poem is established, which a logical and rational argument investigates and puts to rout before the poem ends.

The difference between the two men lies in essence in the way each perceives himself in terms of, and is perceived by, the milieu both belong to. While Arnold is gauged and pronounced, by common social measures, a model citizen and a faithful conformist, and hence a paragon of altruism and self-denial, the objector is aware of his being judged as a dissenter, individualistic, and self-absorbed by the same standards and hence braces himself for defence or rather a counter-offence. From the very beginning, the sophism of stereotypical social ideologies is meant to be exposed and logically deflated. At first glance, the narrator's personal philosophy, unlike Arnold's, consists in self-complaisance and egoism. Arnold seems, according to the narrator, to have chosen to contribute to the patriarchy by complying with its stereotypes and hence traded and even lost his individual identity in the upheaval of family life. In consequence, Arnold performs perfectly well, down to the letter, in the Human Comedy which he enrolls in willingly and impulsively. His daily routine of humdrum, enslaving, and uninspiring tasks seems to drain him of energy and leaves no room for self-indulgence.

However, Arnold's hard-luck-story solicits no sympathy from the debater with his twist of humour and streak of satire as he appraises the stalemate Arnold has got himself

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<sup>47</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations*, p. 165.

into. Even a faint whiff of gloating can be traced in the comic profile of Arnold's patriarchal duties:

He married a woman to stop her getting away  
Now she's there all day,

And the money he gets for wasting his life on work  
She takes as her perk  
To pay for the kiddies' clobber and the drier  
And the electric fire... (pp. 58-9)

Arnold's hardships, in the opinion of the speaker, have been introduced to him ever since he laid eyes on his then bride-to-be, rehearsing the classical idea of Adam's paradise of loneliness being ruined by the advent of Eve. Despite the misogynistic implication, Arnold and not the woman is behind the compromising bargain. To keep that woman in his possession, he has made an unrelenting commitment. According to the lifetime contract, labelled matrimony, he plays and attends to the roles of bread-winner, handyman, son-in-law, and nanny altogether. His existence is sealed down and individual identity sabotaged. Arnold has to juggle with borrowed multiple identities which seem fake and taxing to the observer. His true identity, long buried under the dust of daily monotony, surfaces in his articulate grumblings which the speaker relates in the third person and one has reasons to think them reported rather than conjectured by the misogynist friend. What sets the narrator and Arnold apart is the fact that while the former is reconciled to his own choices and hence has no complaints to make public, Arnold is not:

And when he finishes supper  
Planning to have a read at the evening paper  
It's *Put a screw in this wall* –  
He has no time at all,

With the nippers to wheel round the houses  
And the hall to paint in his old trousers  
And that letter to her mother  
Saying *Won't you come for the summer*. (p. 59)

His multiple domestic roles not only prove to be a source of discomfort, exasperation, and annoyance, but also get in the way of his mental improvement, stunt his ingenuity, and leave him to wallow in intellectual stagnancy. Robot-like, the paterfamilias, Arnold goes

about performing his desiccated tasks, devolved upon him by the marriage pact that he signed. His 'romantic dreams rebounded on him' and he has now to live the nightmare he did not have the wit to foresee and forestall.<sup>48</sup>

It goes without saying that, according to the common social code, family men like Arnold are put on a pedestal while bachelors like the speaker are demonised, in the sense that 'To compare his life and mine / Makes me feel a swine' (p. 59). When sure that the account of Arnold's daily routine has almost enlisted the sympathy of the reader, though mixed with contempt, the interlocutor turns the tables on Arnold, attacking the very premises of his alleged sainthood. In essence, both specimens fall in neatly with each other and the professed antagonism appears fallacious. With the direct address 'But wait, not so fast', the once defensive dialogue transforms into an offensive logic, trying 'an entirely different approach' to persuade a facet of the mind that appears 'unconvinced'. Landing on 'a reason that seems at once more intelligent and more defensible' and resorting to 'rationalization...based upon a working hypothesis that all acts are motivated by self-gratification', the defender gains the upper hand.<sup>49</sup> Arnold 'was out for his own ends / Not just pleasing his friends' and so are all people. While Arnold probably entertains regrets in regard to his social commitments, the debater seems to find Arnold's haplessness a source of personal, self-congratulatory solace if he ever feels a twinge of regret or a qualm of compunction in respect of his unattached status. The bachelor's self-portrait exposes a mind, instinctively armed with precocious knowledge and insight that guide his life choices and ward off long-term contrition. Arnold acted on an impulse and his decisions were probably misjudgements, deterministic and irreversible:

And if it was such a mistake  
He still did it for his own sake,  
Playing his own game.  
So he and I are the same... (p. 59)

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<sup>48</sup> Philip Gardner, 'The Wintery Drum', *Phoenix*, 11/12 (1973/4), 27-40, at p. 36.

<sup>49</sup> Lolette Kuby, *An Uncommon Poet for the Common Man*, p. 97.

The uncertainty of the conditional structure gives credit to the narrator's awareness of the slippery and mysterious nature of choices and the consequences that they entail. The observation that they both made life-changing decisions makes the two seemingly asymmetric human samples appear more collateral and reconciled than one is tempted to think. Nonetheless, Arnold and the narrator possess disparate intellectual calibres which set them apart. Therefore, the narrator congratulates himself on his 'better' beforehand, theoretical knowledge of the final shapes which pursuits of the world are to settle into and hence dispenses with belated, pragmatic knowledge. The pre-knowledge, which the narrator celebrates, operates more like a hit-and-miss sleight of hand (Only I'm a better hand / At knowing what I can stand'). This is a tactic and strategic reversal according to Osborne's deconstructive four-fold interpretative chart of the poem, which begins with 'the conventional hierarchy' that hails Arnold as less selfish, then shifts to an 'equilibrium between binary opposites' before the 'reversal of the conventional hierarchy' and the final 'deflation of the binary opposition'.<sup>50</sup> In brief, a hypothesis of no self-deception is offered only to be invalidated in due course. Nonetheless, the narrator admits the limitation of his hindsight and betrays hesitation and reluctance, especially as the argument seems to prepare the ground for the contemplation of death. No matter how strong the speaker builds his 'series of lengthy and subtle rationalizations', the notion of death causes the 'collapse' of 'all the preceding assertions'.<sup>51</sup> The introduction of death into the equation throws it out of balance and 'I suppose' succeeds 'I'm a better hand / At knowing', another 'dialectical reversal' that rejects the knowledge or 'less deceived' hypothesis.<sup>52</sup>

The claims of knowledge that Arnold's adversary flatters himself on having is refuted and put to route in 'Ignorance'. The poem is constructed around a philosophical thesis as old as eternity, where ignorance parallels inception and the search for knowledge

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<sup>50</sup> John Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, p. 111.

<sup>51</sup> Lolette Kuby, *An Uncommon Poet for the Common Man*, p. 97.

<sup>52</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*, p. 237.

defines existence and shapes identity. Once the question of identity is probed, ‘the quest for one’s true identity leads to further inquiries into the reality of human existence, discovering an enormous ignorance of life.’<sup>53</sup> At the heart of the quest for knowledge lies the ontological relativity where knowledge is never absolute, unlike ignorance which seems to rule unrivalled. Therefore, the wondering voice exclaims, ‘Strange to know nothing, never to be sure / Of what is true or right or real’ (p. 67), registering the ascendancy of scepticism and the precarious status of truth. Like many a Larkin poem, ‘Ignorance’ pivots around a lacuna or an ‘ellipsis of meaning, the spectre of thought or speculation which fades out in the face of the void.’<sup>54</sup> In this sense, ‘it is doubt that makes the world go round, the meaning of life expressing itself in the form of a question’.<sup>55</sup> As ‘a creative principle’, ‘uncertainty’ (and ‘indeterminacy’ one may add) is viewed as the basic foundation of existence and ‘the dynamic’ according to which ‘experience’ is structured.<sup>56</sup>

To circumvent scepticism and, in the long run, ignorance and to assert identity, the poem suggests resorting to cliché-ridden assumptions. Lost for words, Larkin’s persona is ‘forced to qualify *or so I feel, / Or Well, it does seem so: / Someone must know*’ (p. 67). The last, which is akin to ‘I don’t know’ in ‘Mr Bleaney’, is a confession of personal intellectual impotence, though by assigning knowledge to others. As to ‘*Well, it does seem so*’, the juxtaposition of emphatic ‘does’ with the aporetic ‘seem’ produces a humbling sensation of instability and volatility. On the one hand, self-awareness is endorsed; the individual is almost caught red-handed, wallowing in ignorance. Hence, the mind is trapped in what Welz describes as ‘awareness of ... ignorance’ or ‘an enormous ignorance

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<sup>53</sup> Dieter Welz, “A Winter Landscape in Natural Colours”: Some Notes on Philip Larkin’s Vision of Reality’, *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*, 39 (1972), 61-73, at p. 72.

<sup>54</sup> Danielle Pinkstein, “The Summer of “Essential Beauty”: Larkin in Search of “Wild Oats””, *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)*, 9/2, (2003), 63-79, at p. 67.

<sup>55</sup> John Osborne, ‘Postmodernism and Postcolonialism in the Poetry of Philip Larkin’, in *New Larkins for Old: Critical Essays*, ed. James Booth (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), 144-65, p. 153.

<sup>56</sup> G. J. Finch, ‘Larkin, Nature, and Romanticism’, *Critical Survey*, 3/1 (1991), 53-60, at p. 58.

of life'.<sup>57</sup> Paradoxically, being aware of ignorance is found to be a polemic with which the mind has to grapple. Hence, the contemplator draws the attention to the bizarreness of the situation as early as the opening line. These 'clichés of unknowing', to quote Watson, are standard everyday common phrases whose frequent iteration bears testimony to the work of the subconscious. On the other hand, it reflects the mind's endeavour to figure out a decent way to escape the cleft stick, unscathed before defeat with '*Someone must know.*'<sup>58</sup>

'Strange' also heads the second stanza and concludes it as a gesture thrown in despair, since 'Yes, it is strange' is a tautological affirmation. Though it is an indefinite agency that is dubbed strange, it is the speaker's outside vision as 'an unsure figure' reacting to an 'ultimately incomprehensible world.'<sup>59</sup> Marvelling at being 'ignorant of the way things work/ Their skill at finding what they need' is a glorification of natural instinct where 'everything from biological programming to sexual need to the possibility of psychological change' are 'all implied' in the 'wonderfully slippery, categorical generalities' of the second stanza.<sup>60</sup> The congenital, perhaps even chromosomal, knowledge is praised in terms of the 'sense of shape, and punctual spread of seed, / And willingness to change'. To conclude, the exclamatory voice dwells on knowledge which seems to fracture into ignorance:

Even to wear such knowledge – for our flesh  
Surrounds us with its own decisions –  
And yet spend all our life on imprecisions,  
That when we start to die  
Have no idea why. (p. 67)

With 'decisions' recalling the 'indecisions' in 'Prufrock', the puzzled voice describes the human predicament even with the assistance of impulsive knowledge.<sup>61</sup> Whether ignored or

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<sup>57</sup> Dieter Welz, "A Winter Landscape in Natural Colours", p. 72.

<sup>58</sup> J. R. Watson, 'Clichés and Common Speech in Philip Larkin's Poetry', *Critical Survey*, 1/2 (1989), 149-56, at p. 155.

<sup>59</sup> J. R. Watson, 'Clichés and Common Speech in Philip Larkin's Poetry', p. 155.

<sup>60</sup> Alan Williamson, 'A Poetry of Limits: Philip Larkin (1922-1985)', *The Threepenny Review*, 30 (1987), 6-9, at p. 6.

<sup>61</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 14.

heeded, such knowledge fails to justify the advent of the prolonged process of death. Hence, ignorance is born with humans and seals their end. Knowledge and ignorance are dialectically attending to the phantasmal existence of humankind.

‘Dockery and Son’ employs, like ‘Self’s the Man’, the dialectical approach to clear any identity confusion and the fallacy of the pedigree and lineal continuity. It is a poem that appeals to the intellectual as well as the common readers. Similarly, Morrison reports the success of the poem in capturing ‘the demands of the two audiences’ of the Movement.<sup>62</sup> The poem, being ‘a triumph in the realistic meditative narrative form’, pivots on ‘the articulation of psychological and social perception’.<sup>63</sup> Tijana Stojković finds the narrative stance in ‘Dockery and Son’ as a medium where ‘the reflexive “heart” of the poem takes place’; the opening three lines make a compact exposition, supplying key ‘information about the kind of circumstances we are to imagine.’<sup>64</sup> James Booth sees Larkin regaining ‘his philosophical poise’ in ‘Dockery and Son’, nonetheless ‘only to deliver a verdict of withering comfortlessness’.<sup>65</sup> It also embraces what Ward describes as the ‘psychological advances in the experience of self-consciousness and self-knowledge.’<sup>66</sup>

The title itself, a mimesis of names given to companies and businesses run by families, hosts an ideology according to which existence is reduced to business. Thereupon, procreation, organised and codified, becomes a mere job and investment, conducted to ensure continuity and fend off extinction. Recalling Charles Dickens’s *Dombey and Son*, Larkin’s title betrays an abortive rather than prosperous endeavour. Carrying the legacy, no matter how humble and mediocre, from father to son lies at the

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<sup>62</sup> Blake Morrison, *The Movement*, p. 141.

<sup>63</sup> A. T. Tolley, *Larkin at Work*, pp. 110-11.

<sup>64</sup> Tijana Stojković, ‘Unnoticed in the Casual Light of Day’: *Philip Larkin and the Plain Style* (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 88-9.

<sup>65</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Writer*, p. 152.

<sup>66</sup> John Powell Ward, *The English Line: Poetry of the Unpoetic from Wordsworth to Larkin* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), p. 186.

heart of patriarchy. Like 'Self's the Man', the poem targets stereotypical social roles and the patriarchal image promoted.

In 'Dockery and Son', personal and subjective reflections fracture into an interior monologue that unfolds right after the visitor-mourner, prompted by impatience perhaps or even boredom, slips into voluntary absent-mindedness. Losing track of the Dean's speech which trails into silence and, in other words, muting the Dean, the narrator takes over and offers his own personal version. The poem embodies 'the silent speaker's shocked process of thought' in action:<sup>67</sup>

'Dockery was junior to you,  
Wasn't he?' said the Dean. 'His son's here now.'  
Death-suited, visitant, I nod. 'And do  
You keep in touch with -' ... (p. 65)

The Dean intends his remarks, passed under the disguise of phatic communication and catching up on updates, to turn the light on the visitor's flaws. While Dockery has performed his role perfectly well producing a son, Dockery's senior colleague, being a bachelor and sonless, has violated the social canons and cut a non-conformist figure. The narrator is aware of how the Dean, a symbolic authorial arbiter, makes it sound like it is a sure failure on his part not to contribute a son to the college like Dockery did. Therefore, Dockery's model is weighed dialectically against the narrator's with the scale tipping in favour of Dockery.

The visitor feels rejected and finds himself inadvertently upbraided, if not indeed, scorned. His old room door is locked, the sudden, unpleasant realisation that 'he cannot simply open the door and walk back into his youth' leaves him not incensed as much as nonplussed.<sup>68</sup> On his way out, 'the lawn' looks dazzling and wide, clouding his vision and aggravating even further his confusion, helplessness, and alienation despite the 'known bell' chime. Between the locked door and the return train there is framed 'wonderfully a

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<sup>67</sup> Barbara Everett, 'Larkin and Dockery: The Limits of the Social', in *Philip Larkin 1922-1985: a Tribute*, ed. George Hartley (London: The Marvell Press, 1988), 140-52, p. 148.

<sup>68</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*, p. 282.



human dream about “dreaming spires”, “the city of lost causes”, the place where the constrained mathematics don, Lewis Carroll, wrote about the magic garden that the innocent could never lastingly get into’.<sup>69</sup> But such a glamorous city does not feature in the poem; the retrospections ooze dreariness. The dejection and dismissal which culminate in boarding his ‘train, ignored’, if not indeed mortified, commence to fade and recede as colleges go out of sight to let the door wide open before reflections that assess and appraise the rub. The railings and ‘the Oxford’, revisited then hurriedly left, are intellectually and symbolically designed to promote the awareness of how one may wander away from ‘home’ and set out on ‘differently-routed journeys towards the common terminus of death.’<sup>70</sup>

What follows next is a philosophical investigation proper, headed by two consecutive questions; the first is exclamatory in nature, set to capture the narrator’s incredulity while the second is more concerned with identity:

If he was younger, did he get this son  
At nineteen, twenty? Was he that withdrawn  
  
High-collared public-schoolboy, sharing rooms  
With Cartwright who was killed? (p. 66)

Both questions harbour satire, intolerance, as well as impatience and calls for revelation. In the first, the interrogator appears incredulous regarding the haste and impetuosity with which Dockery embarked on contributing a son to the population. Dockery’s son is suspected to be precocious and probably an uncalculated accident. In the second, Dockery himself is caricatured as a stiff, ceremonious, conservative, boring schoolboy. The only point of distinction is his roommate whose death by murder, perhaps in the war, must have shaken the schoolmates then and secured his ongoing memory. The narrator’s edgy inquisitiveness soon runs out of steam and trails into ‘How much ... How little...’ in search

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<sup>69</sup> Barbara Everett, *Poets in Their Time: Essays on English Poetry from Donne to Larkin* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), p. 251.

<sup>70</sup> Philip Gardner, ‘The Wintry Drum’, p. 39.

of a faithful assessment, before yawning and sleep dismiss the thought momentarily. The narrator is either too bored to pursue the train of thought further or he has exhausted retrospective information and the mental memoir of the young Dockery has to come to a halt. This lacuna within the thought process is syntactically rendered, Bayley observes, in how ‘each regular eight-line stanza ends in mid-sentence, a hesitation turned into hiatus, indicating, as it were, the yawns in a thought process already sufficiently familiar and boring to the thinker.’<sup>71</sup> These disruptions mark ‘tonal shifts’ that do ‘not only dramatise the speaker’s thought-process but also lend plausibility to the workings of his mind, the flux and reflux of his psyche.’<sup>72</sup> Still, this disturbing ‘idea’, cut short before it is ripe, keeps simmering until it ‘returns when he awakens as conscious and inadmissible thought.’<sup>73</sup>

Upon waking up (an epiphany proper, and symbolic of recovered consciousness), having to change trains and consuming ‘an awful pie’ recreate the unpleasantness the earlier thoughts introduced. But the reflection of ‘a strong // Unhindered moon’, suggesting a liberality of thought and sensibilities, balances the equation back to neutrality. This juxtaposition makes the narrator grow more aware of the potential positiveness inherent in the negative bits of the experience and hence defer passing a verdict. The visionary, moonlit nightscape with the ‘joining and parting lines’ (of life probably) lets the narrator into ‘a dynastic epiphany’.<sup>74</sup> Thereupon, the mind abandons Dockery briefly to embark on a concise reappraisal of personal life.

To have no son, no wife,  
No house or land still seemed quite natural. (p. 66)

Despite the derogatory inquisitiveness regarding Dockery, the narrator appears less sure that his model of existence should also be deemed as natural as Dockery’s. Speaking in

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<sup>71</sup> John Bayley, ‘Larkin’s Short Story Poems’, in *Philip Larkin 1922-1985: a Tribute*, ed. George Hartley (London: the Marvell Press, 1988), 272-83, at p. 273.

<sup>72</sup> Sisir Kumar Chatterjee, *Philip Larkin*, p. 214.

<sup>73</sup> Lolette Kuby, *An Uncommon Poet for the Common Man*, p. 101.

<sup>74</sup> Steve Clark, ‘Larkin’s Sexual Politics’, p. 102.

terms of 'have' and 'have not', the narrator equates his sonlessness to ontological bankruptcy if not insolvency or 'the absence of property', to quote Clark.<sup>75</sup> Such a thought betrays his fear of being judged as abnormal or as a non-conformist failure, which is by itself a derailing setback, documented in his ensuing reflection that 'Only a numbness registered the shock / Of finding out how much had gone of life, / How widely from the others.' It also betrays a moment where the sonless speaker is caught, not only confessing regret with respect to the unorthodox model of existence he opted for, but thinking it a waste and an aberration. This brief self-confrontation reveals a further intellectual derailment and a shake of the supposedly firm premises of belief. Caught between regret and self-derogation, the traveller escapes the damage by tugging at Dockery again. The narrator's endeavours to 'rationalise disappointments' does not seem to pay off.<sup>76</sup> He has to land on a comforting line of rationalisation in which Dockery, like Arnold, is portrayed as a man, business-like, who went for and got what he wanted. It is a question of personal priorities, needs, and choices, irrelevant to talent or capability. It is, in addition, an issue of conviction in terms of 'how / Convinced he was he should be added to!', dictated usually by inherited standards and measures as the 'should' insinuates. When Dockery's alumnus throws his second round of questions, he has already figured things out as usual in favour of his own pattern of existence. Unlike the first dual questions, the interrogator has cogent answers in store, which verge on philosophy:

Why did he think adding meant increase?  
 To me it was dilution. Where do these  
 Innate assumptions come from? Not from what  
 We think truest, or most want to do:  
 Those warp tight-shut, like doors. (p. 66)

An ontological, rational critique unfolds, recruiting logic, philosophy, and exigent commonsense. Free far-reaching better judgement aids the enlightening exploration and validates 'knowledge' and 'self-knowledge' and hence leads to 'an increase in human

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<sup>75</sup> Steve Clark, 'Larkin's Sexual Politics', p. 102.

<sup>76</sup> Sisir Kumar Chatterjee, *Philip Larkin*, p. 183.

wisdom', itself being a 'point of arrival' of 'the train-poem'.<sup>77</sup> In this rationale, the 'subliminal awareness' takes root to 'Platonise' and 'impose' 'an inspired guess' and a hypothetical apologia. While it inflicts pain, it expands recognition and clear-sightedness in relevance to 'a tragicomedy of multiplicity' the human race is committed to carry on.<sup>78</sup> The sand-cloud-like social template of hardened habits and secular conventions collapses, being no more than 'a style / Our lives bring with them'. The theory of will and choice crumples in the face of 'destiny taking a decided form' as suggested by 'harden'. The latter also implies 'obduracy...with a sense of denial and limitation' leading to what is perceived as 'psychological profundity: life is finding out what you can do, not implementing what you think you want.'<sup>79</sup> Upon inspection, the 'hardened' convictions, the interlocutor proceeds, lose their substantiality and recede. Essentially gossamer-like, the condemned dogma-like habits are powerful enough to produce a son for Dockery, but weak enough to beget the speaker 'nothing'. The poem concludes with an elaboration on that ironical 'nothing':

Nothing with all a son's harsh patronage.  
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. (pp. 66-7)

Aphoristic and pluralistic, the coda consoles the sonless voice in the poem. In the assumingly pervasive 'nothing', a philosophical 'something' lurks, an esoteric designation that makes the picture even hazier and more complex and insinuates the pernicious and vicious nature of existence. As such, the argument of the finale is intellectually cast and philosophically contrived to make existence tumble and spiral downward along with procreation and increase. But on top, the mind has to be liberated from hereditary habits and misconceptions which have grown into social pillars.

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<sup>77</sup> Barbara Everett, 'Larkin and Dockery', pp. 148, 150.

<sup>78</sup> Frederick Grubb, 'Dragons', *Phoenix*, 11/12 (1973/4), 119-36, at p. 124.

<sup>79</sup> A. T. Tolley, *My Proper Ground*, p. 99.

### III

Pertinent to the concept of procreation condemned in 'Dockery and Son', love and romance stand out as cardinal themes in *The Whitsun Weddings*. Romance either takes on the form of libidinal excursions (which mark *The Less Deceived*) or idyllic introspections with a transcendent philosophy. Poems like 'The Large Cool Store', 'Sunny Prestatyn', and 'Wild Oats' fall in with the first category, while 'Love Songs in Age', 'Broadcast', 'An Arundel Tomb', and 'The Whitsun Weddings' argue in terms of the second.

When 'The Large Cool Store' opens, one is tempted to think of it as a social, class, and economical treatise and a mouthpiece on behalf of those 'Who leave at dawn low terraced houses / Timed for factory, yard and site' (p. 61). Clark points to the oracular power inherent in the verb 'conjure' used in conjunction with the store, which 'evokes the whole environment' of its populace: 'employees and customers' alike.<sup>80</sup> Workers, sailors, and constructors or the cut-price crowd shop for their wear from such large stores which are both 'cool' and 'cheap', a quite eccentric combination with the colloquial twist in 'cool'. The way 'cheap clothes' are 'Set out in simple sizes plainly / (Knitwear, Summer Casuals, Hose, / In browns and greys, maroon and navy)' betrays a vulgar taste, and the disarray of 'heaps of shirts and trousers' is a symptom of tackiness. Yet, from this 'drab reality' comes the ascension 'through the ideal escape world of sexy night-clothes, to a lyrically expansive meditation on' male 'unreal fantasies' as well as the 'yearning for an impossible world'.<sup>81</sup> Likewise, Regan views the poem as a revelation of 'how the most intimate dreams and desires are manipulated by the rampant consumerism of the early 1960s', implicating 'issues of class and gender'.<sup>82</sup> The poem carries the window-shopper's aware musings on the 'social paradox' germane to 'the way intimate erotic dreams are

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<sup>80</sup> Steve Clark, 'Larkin's Sexual Politics', p. 120.

<sup>81</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Writer*, p. 123, 125.

<sup>82</sup> Stephen Regan, *Philip Larkin*, p. 119.

ruthlessly exposed in the marketplace', which is 'both comic and pathetic' when the privacy of 'the bedroom' is publically invaded and paraded in the market.<sup>83</sup>

The store is intended to be paradigmatic of the immediate era and environment. It further attests to the change or rather metamorphosis that the social standards and ideologies have undergone. An ideology of florid consumerism and schlocky affordability has burgeoned to dislocate and supersede the delicacy, incandescence, and elegance of the past. The poem presents a slice of a milieu in which value change is not reserved to couture and attire, but overwhelms all morals and ethics. The shift in fashions and colours would have gone unnoticed if not for being a barometer of a more profound paradigm shift in mentality and psychology, two areas of delicacy and danger. Nightwear, indicative of bedroom dress code, is the best witness of the ethical shift from propriety, modesty, euphemism, and demureness to audacity, exposure, gaudiness, and temerity:

But past the heaps of shirts and trousers  
Spread the stands of Modes For Night:  
Machine-embroidered, thin as blouses,

Lemon, sapphire, moss-green, rose  
Bri-Nylon Baby-Dolls and Shorties  
Flounce in clusters. (pp. 61-2)

In this carefully assembled catalogue, the mind is summoning up 'the candy-floss society', which is 'rooted in the sustained, casual prosperity of English life in the 1950s and early 1960s'.<sup>84</sup> It is also a 'fantasy-haunted world' to use Falck's description; in such a world, imagination is given free rein.<sup>85</sup> The intriguing and original element in the situation is that 'the gaudy mass-produced glamour of chain store lingerie' is found to trigger 'a tentative, uncondescending meditation on the mystery of sexual allure'.<sup>86</sup> Though it looks like a chichi display of provocative nightwear, still the energy and attractiveness are retained. Likewise, the preservation of categories in the capital letters of the original labels recreates

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<sup>83</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Writer*, p. 124.

<sup>84</sup> Eric Homberger, *The Art of the Real*, p. 75.

<sup>85</sup> Colin Falck, 'Philip Larkin', p. 108.

<sup>86</sup> David Lodge, 'Philip Larkin: the Metonymic Muse', p. 74.

the images in the mind most enticingly so that their dazzling, visionary appeal continues intact. In consequence, the mind weaves virtual episodes of excitement and vigour causing expectations to skyrocket. In this sense and guided by the verb ‘conjure’ once more, ‘the store... magics up through spells, a world of illusion for them all to inhabit, a sorcerer, benign or otherwise.’ This illusory, mediating zone does not place ‘drab realism’ in opposition to ‘pathetic fantasy’ since ‘both worlds are equally constructs, products of incantations’.<sup>87</sup> However, with the mention of ‘machine-embroidered’, the spell is broken, at least, as far as the reader is concerned; the magic soon wears out and the flooding thrill recedes. In the same vein, the tawdry and unsophisticated nature of the nightwear display is pervasive and ineluctable in the observation that the ‘machine-embroidered’ items replace the every-stitch-hand-made, piece-of-art-like articles of haute couture clothing. The mind is by no means unaware of the flawed romance implied in the cheap and imitative materials from which these enticing knockoffs are made. Instead of the genuine fabrics, i.e., silk, satin, chiffon, and muslin which are shrouded in romance and charm, the night dresses of the poem are the by-products of industrial consumerism.

The designs themselves ‘thin as blouses’, ‘Baby-dolls’ and ‘Shorties’, indicative of ‘meagreness’, deepen the ‘anaemic, undernourished’ ambience.<sup>88</sup> Nevertheless, Kuby finds ‘the pastel and gossamer, light-as-air clothing’ to usher ‘an ideal world which makes no concession to considerations of warmth or wear-and-tear’.<sup>89</sup> The designs, also betraying the liberality, expedition, and unscrupulousness of love-making, dethrone the long, flowing, rich garments of the demure courtship. Hence, the thrill and excitement, anticipated and painted in bright colours, have to be induced artificially and the spontaneity is marred and hindered. Yet the range of colour with its infinite shades and the variety of the inventory invests a dreamy and boudoir-like atmosphere. It is a world ‘suggestive of jewels and

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<sup>87</sup> Steve Clark, ‘Larkin’s Sexual Politics’, p. 120.

<sup>88</sup> Steve Clark, ‘Larkin’s Sexual Politics’, p. 120.

<sup>89</sup> Lolette Kuby, *An Uncommon Poet for the Common Man*, p. 83.

flowers and fairy-tales in which dolls and sprites come alive at night' and the world of 'Light Isoldes' or 'the never-attained Perfect Beauty of man's imagination.'<sup>90</sup> Further, a subtext of exotic pleasures and euphoric romances coexists, which displaces the alluring pieces and removes them from the immediacy of casual procurement. Hence, though their actuality is indubitably testified, still the mind is sceptical as to whether they, along with their symbolic fetishism, typify a tangible, traceable reality. The narrator is agonised over the disparity between romantic idealism and stark reality. It is an agony of the kind that 'often results in paralysis or misanthropy.'<sup>91</sup> However, frustration, scepticism, and disbelief feature as the end results of this agony:

To suppose  
They share that world, to think their sort is  
Matched by something in it, shows  
  
How separate and unearthly love is... (p. 62)

James Booth attributes what he calls 'a surprising [thematic] gravity' to 'the careful meditative intricacy of the syntax' of the last stanza.<sup>92</sup> In a parallel vein, Bradford sums up the effect of the poem's coda in that the long final sentence 'leaves in its wake a sequence of hybrid registers: complaint and resignation, condescension and affiliation'. It also enacts 'a mock battle between the esoteric philosophy of love and its erotic counterpart, with the former never standing a chance.'<sup>93</sup> This is the working of a mind typical of scepticism and disillusionment whose cautiousness and penetrating alertness do not fail to detect the poignancy, looming out of sight. The juncture marks a shift 'from commodity fetishism to a quasi-Platonic realm'.<sup>94</sup> With 'suppose' and 'think' to orient the rationalisation, the personification of nightwear items redounds to the far-fetched plausibility of the intimation to follow next, which is to find love or rather women 'or what they do' that match the

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<sup>90</sup> Lolette Kuby, *An Uncommon Poet for the Common Man*, p. 83.

<sup>91</sup> James Naremore, 'Philip Larkin's "Lost World"', *Contemporary Literature*, 15/3 (1974), 331-44, at p. 337.

<sup>92</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Writer*, p. 125.

<sup>93</sup> Richard Bradford, *First Boredom, Then Fear*, pp. 162-3.

<sup>94</sup> Steve Clark, 'Larkin's Sexual Politics', p. 120.



ecstasy and thrill the erotic window parade promises. Regrettably, dream and reality in romance do not converge. Realistic romance is found to be ‘synthetic, new, / And natureless in ecstasies’ (p. 62), in line with the cheap wear that the large cool store sells to the indiscriminating masses. Romance in this synthetic age is plagued with affectedness, artificiality, and insincerity. The window-shopper, typical of a generation straddling two ages, has to survive the sharp, perplexing transition in ethics and values. Sorting things out on a rational and logical level helps the observer cross with as little damage as possible.

‘Sunny Prestatyn’ picks up where ‘The Large Cool Store’ has left off, that is, the dream woman that embodies and breathes life into masculine erotic fantasies. In ‘Sunny Prestatyn’, Larkin makes a return to ‘the meditation on Platonic perfection’ according to Booth, although Whalen finds the poem an angry attack on ‘the false Platonism’.<sup>95</sup> The poem is intriguingly contrived to expose an overlap of genres in Booth’s view, where ‘it is an “ekphrastic” poem, a description of visual art’ though not the classical sense of meritorious art. As ‘an Eros-Thanatos elegy’, the poem juxtaposes ‘sex and death’. And finally, it is another rendition of ‘the “death and the maiden” motif of Western art’.<sup>96</sup> In brief, ‘Sunny Prestatyn’ proves to be an intellectually charged poem despite its frivolous surface.

A hoarding that invites people to taste the pleasures of a Prestatyn beach resort is loaded with innuendoes which the passers-by effortlessly decipher and interpret. Understanding and anticipating the mentalities of the potential vacationers, the designers play on man’s unrealised, perhaps even inarticulate, desires and fantasies. As the night dresses are offered for cheap prices in the previous poem, romance and amorous adventures are offered likewise for a price. Sex as a commodity is promoted and advertised according to purely commercial standards where the unearthly girl takes the initiative,

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<sup>95</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*, p. 278; Terry Whalen, *Philip Larkin and English Poetry*, p. 43.

<sup>96</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*, p. 279.

enticingly beckoning and inviting. And like the window shopper in ‘The Large Cool Store’, the narrator is a voyeur and a spectator of the erotic drama, virtually unfolding before his mind’s eye:

*Come To Sunny Prestatyn*  
Laughed the girl on the poster,  
Kneeling up on the sand  
In tautened white satin. (p. 64)

The promise in the poster is too perfect to be credible and ‘the girl is a delusion’.<sup>97</sup> In addition, this amorous Eden of ‘Prestatyn is a direction untaken, an unfulfilled / unfulfillable promise’; as to the poster, it ‘is a falsifying dream’.<sup>98</sup> The girl is a nameless nymph in a fraudulent paradise; she is an object of the imagination that caters to every ‘male fantasy’.<sup>99</sup> Despite the knowledge and realisation, the mind goes along with the artificial, bogus tantalisation and concedes to deception. The scenery is designed to look exotic and insular as if the place was summoned from the imagination to serve the paying customer. The girl is a faithful incarnation of romance and ecstasy, promising to offer the very best: perfect physical beauty draped in satin, not mere cheap, synthetic bri-nylon. She is the optimum choice for a rejuvenating vacation, incognito, guilt-free and footloose. She is also the threshold and mediator of the exciting world; she is wedged in between the watcher and the hotel and palm coast, which stretches far behind her. Prestatyn of the poster promises a fantastical span in a limbo or asylum of thrill and elation and an escape from the drabness of daily existence. No matter how the male mind is keen to believe the poster, it still sees through its sham and falsity. Hence, ‘the clash between reality and dream is more savagely pointed up’ in the poem and the euphoria of ‘seaside holidays’

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<sup>97</sup> David Timms, *Philip Larkin*, p. 115.

<sup>98</sup> Matt Simpson, ‘Never Such Innocence—a Reading of Larkin’s “Sunny Prestatyn”’, *Critical Survey*, 1/2 (1989), 176-81, at p. 177.

<sup>99</sup> Andrew Swarbrick, *Out of Reach*, p. 116.

proves 'hypothetical'.<sup>100</sup> It is no more than a 'Myth', to borrow Booth's expression, 'masquerading as Nature' or a lie made up to look true.<sup>101</sup>

The mind of the reader, likewise, goes, reel-like, over an inventory of delights with which the described poster is charged. The mind also savours the image of the model of perfect feminine beauty before that very paragon of wild bliss is subjected to vandalism at the hands of Titch Thomas, who, fictionally speaking, would be the villain of the story, but also the doting beau. 'Like Gulliver in Brobdingnag Land, Titch sees the hairs on the lip' and as a conscientious vandal, he is not blind to the flaws of this idyll or Eden of love and happiness, which looms agonising out of reach, hence his misogynist reaction.<sup>102</sup> The insertion of this episode of aggression is intended to impose the awareness that the poster girl, if real, is an alien to this world, hence 'She was too good for this life' (p. 65). It also contrasts two male mentalities competing to gain the upper hand. The first is that of the advertiser who weaves a delusion or hoax of absolute happiness to sell and profit from. The second is those to whom the hoax is sold and whose reactions range from passive sighs of frustration over the unattainability of the illusion to vicarious violence for being laughed at and reduced to idiocy. Thus, jacked up to a psychological level, 'the sadistic' violence is 'intended to satisfy an urge for revenge.'<sup>103</sup> In keeping with the psychological interpretation, Titch Thomas's excessive 'grossly parodically male' graffiti raises awareness 'of powerful ambivalences – the Gioconda smile beneath a surreal (faintly disturbing that!) moustache.'<sup>104</sup> It typifies, further, 'the "less deceived" mentality of the rebellious graffiti' where 'there is a phantom sceptic... who is sarcastic, unillusioned and satirical.'<sup>105</sup> However, if the girl is only a delusion, a work of art, Titch's crude caricaturing scatology

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<sup>100</sup> Philip Gardner, 'The Wintry Drum', p. 33.

<sup>101</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Writer*, p. 120

<sup>102</sup> Lolette Kuby, *An Uncommon Poet for the Common Man*, p. 130.

<sup>103</sup> Janice Rossen, 'Difficulties with Girls', in *Philip Larkin*, ed. Stephen Regan (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), 135-59, p. 143.

<sup>104</sup> Matt Simpson, 'Never Such Innocence', pp. 178-79.

<sup>105</sup> Terry Whalen, *Philip Larkin and English Poetry*, p. 44.

may be just as much a delusion. In a metaphorical, symbolic sense, he simply dismantles a false theory. The narrator, however, does not want the fact that the world is rather merciless towards beauty and perfection to escape the alert reader. The violence, distortion, and vulgarity to which the girl is treated commence long before the day the poster was hoisted up and prior to the marring it would undergo two weeks later, an observation that recalls to mind 'Deceptions'. In 'She was slapped up one day in March' (p. 64), the smacking is almost as literal as it is metaphorical. With 'March' summoning up nascent 'spring' to the 'minds' as well as 'every young man's fancy', an antithesis of making versus breaking or harsh reality versus festive dream is juxtaposed.<sup>106</sup> The girl in flesh and the paper miniature of her meet a similar fate. Being a vehicle of transient and versatile commercial pleasures, the girl has her future sealed in forgetfulness and on the scrap heap: a mere torn page:

Very soon, a great transverse tear  
Left only a hand and some blue.  
Now *Fight Cancer* is there. (p. 65)

With 'very soon' to orient the fast fading of the wild abandon and its transient pleasure, the narrator registers the irony of replacing the exotic paradise of Prestatyn with one of a quite antithetical nature. While the former promises a life of idyllic and amorous fulfilment, the latter is a reminder of poignant reality. Man remains trapped in between.

On the other side of the equation stands 'Love Songs in Age'. The poem is a contemplation of love and age and whether love changes meaning as one ages, where time, in Thwaite's words, is 'the gradual destroyer of illusions.'<sup>107</sup> In so doing, the poem enacts an inward journey of exploration and self-realisation. It approaches the themes of love, memory, and nostalgia from a feminine angle of thought. The themes and the feminine voice place it under the shadow of 'Wedding-Wind', almost as a hypothetical sequel.

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<sup>106</sup> Matt Simpson, 'Never Such Innocence', p. 177.

<sup>107</sup> Anthony Thwaite, 'The Poetry of Philip Larkin', at p. 55.

Retrospections are prompted by such tiny and imperceptible objects as song books, which the woman used to enjoy while young and in love. As her mind recalls the music and flips through memories, she learns more about herself as ‘she became “less deceived” but not bitterly disillusioned’ with ‘reality’.<sup>108</sup> The songs, in her old age and widowhood, recreate the sensations and emotions afresh, whether those of exultation or sorrow. Hence, they evoke a long lost past of youth, love, bliss, and companionship, but also remind her of her emotional status quo when love blessings lapsed. As ‘the young, romantic dreams of her courting days’ have fizzled, ‘the old ideal [is] revived as a memory’.<sup>109</sup> The woman’s mind tends to colour the presence of the fortuitously found records fantastically. Every detail relevant to the record is interpreted romantically and idyllically. For instance, the marks of age and degeneration the records show are indicative of use, endearment, care, joy, not neglect or recklessness as one is tempted to think. They document and commemorate places, events and people: for instance, her being a mother:

One bleached from lying in a sunny place,  
One marked in circles by a vase of water,  
One mended, when a tidy fit had seized her,  
And coloured, by her daughter ... (p. 51)

The rediscovery of the songs does not only recreate an endeared past of vigour and romance, but operates also as a vehicle of self-knowledge and self-assessment. It sends tantalising sensations, which are by themselves rejuvenating:

She found them, looking for something else, and stood

Relearning how each frank submissive chord  
Had ushered in  
Word after sprawling hyphenated word,  
And the unfailing sense of being young  
Spread out like a spring-woken tree, wherein  
That hidden freshness sung,  
That certainty of time laid up in store  
As when she played them first. (p. 51)

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<sup>108</sup> Lolette Kuby, *An Uncommon Poet for the Common Man*, p. 117.

<sup>109</sup> Lolette Kuby, *An Uncommon Poet for the Common Man*, p. 117.

The new energy is reflected in the shift in the ‘emotional gear’ that occurs as the first stanza ends; ‘the anticipatory pause’ that follows ‘and stood...’ is designed to simulate ‘the woman’s sudden arrested surprise’, as well as give the next stanza ‘the feel of a startled rush of emotion.’<sup>110</sup> The invigorating elements are carried further in the ‘spring-woken tree’ metaphor, which suggests freshness and youth, but also sets into motion a ‘Relearning’ exploration of the self. The meaning and significance escaped her in the past due to being carried adrift by the momentum of being young and loved or due to youthful inattentiveness and nonchalance. The second encounter with them now amends the negligence and proves to be schooling, remedial, and mentally enriching. When she embarks on a study of love, ‘that much-mentioned brilliance’, her analysis shows awareness, philosophy, and profundity. Her reappraisal of love, in the abstract, is both stringent and worldly-wise. The ‘sobering’ effect of the realisation that ‘the transforming power of love does not transform’, introduces knowledge that is by no means news for the readers in the sense that ‘we have known that all along.’<sup>111</sup> Upon ‘Its bright incipience’, love takes the world in its stride ‘Still promising to solve, and satisfy, / And set unchangeably in order’ (p. 51), but ‘It had not done so then, and could not now’ (p. 52). As such, things may, after all, tend to end conversely from what one, in youth and naivety, envisions with ‘That certainty of time laid up in store’ (p. 51). The world, however, proves to be too tough a nut even for love to crack.

While ‘Love Songs in Age’ pays homage to love and nostalgia, ‘The Whitsun Weddings’ is a celebration of love and ritual in an age of secularity and scepticism. It is an epic of life and ‘an Ode to Incipience’ as Booth dubs it.<sup>112</sup> Written ‘in the stanzaic form that Keats evolved for his great odes’, the poem ‘has the task of recording and reflecting on the imperfect, transitory experiences of mundane reality’ and ‘reveals the complexity of

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<sup>110</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: the Poet's Plight*, p. 55.

<sup>111</sup> Laurence Lerner, *Philip Larkin*, p. 24.

<sup>112</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*, p. 236.

Larkin's revision.'<sup>113</sup> However, 'The Whitsun Weddings' soars above the mundane and realistic experience to embrace a 'physical and metaphysical journey.'<sup>114</sup> Larkin's persona 'imagines the transformative experience' typified in the pivotal ritual and in so doing recreates it differently.<sup>115</sup> Besides being visionary, imaginative, and meditative, the poem is said to promote 'an otherness' which binds its persona to the community he belongs to, relinquishing his hegemonic, condescending attitude.<sup>116</sup> The 'imaginative participation and awakened sense of human interconnectedness' emerge in the wake of the observer's 'inclusion in this fruitful promise'.<sup>117</sup>

The parable-like wedding episode offers also a virtual journey of self-exploration, discovery, and self-education that culminates in a moral paradigm shift and reappraisal of human rituals. Parallel to 'Church Going', the experience educates or rather cures 'an initially detached speaker' of 'the inept wryness' and bestows on him a 'seriousness which releases his capacity for praise.'<sup>118</sup> It is a belated knowledge that comes in the line with the late train pulling out 'about one-twenty' past midday and almost empty. The lateness and emptiness are symptomatic of the delayed recognition and barren attitude prior to that providential ride, not to mention they furnish an 'isolated suspension in time'.<sup>119</sup> The train compartment transforms into an interval time zone or a limbo where temporal progress is held as if in abeyance. Despite the occasional references to the sun and measurements of time 'one-twenty', 'fifty minutes', 'this hour', the time frame of the 'sunlit' afternoon seems to stretch flexibly. The panorama which the poem skims is a blend of natural

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<sup>113</sup> John Reibetanz, "'The Whitsun Weddings': Larkin's Reinterpretation of Time and Form in Keats", *Contemporary Literature*, 17/4 (1976), 529-40, at pp. 530-31.

<sup>114</sup> Tijana Stojković, "Unnoticed in the Casual Light of Day", p. 98.

<sup>115</sup> DeSales Harrison, *The End of the Mind: The Edge of the Intelligible in Hardy, Stevens, Larkin, Plath, and Glück* (New York & London: Routledge, 2005), p. 112.

<sup>116</sup> Terry Whalen, *Philip Larkin and English Poetry*, p. 81.

<sup>117</sup> Patricia Ross French, 'Living by Bridges: Philip Larkin's Resisting Subtext', *South Atlantic Review*, 58/1 (1993), 85-100, p. 97.

<sup>118</sup> Terry Whalen, *Philip Larkin and English Poetry*, p. 81.

<sup>119</sup> A. T. Tolley, *My Proper Ground*, p. 95.

wilderness, urbanity, and industrialisation, and of land and water. It seems that the mind or the traveller's consciousness is all alert and sharp, picking, filtering, and juxtaposing an awkward hubbub of various and antonymous savours which are typical of the milieu of the time. It is noteworthy, that the train is heading south: 'A slow and stopping curve southward we kept' (p. 57). The mythical flora and fauna of the south, symbolic of warmth, bounty, and abundance are played against the barrenness of the northern frozen zones in 'The North Ship'. As in 'Here', the observing eye moves analytically from the smell of 'the fish-dock; thence / The river's level drifting breadth began, / Where sky and Lincolnshire and water meet' (p. 56) and 'Wide farms' where 'short-shadowed cattle' graze, to 'Canals with floatings of industrial froth' with sensations no less than wonder. The narrator moves back and forth between pastoral and urban landscapes, recording disparate perceptions:

A hothouse flashed uniquely: hedges dipped  
And rose: and now and then a smell of grass  
Displaced the reek of buttoned carriage-cloth  
Until the next town, new and nondescript,  
Approached with acres of dismantled cars. (p. 57)

Essentially, the chequered vista, commanded by the traveller, mirrors and deepens the reluctance with which the modernity of reeking carriages and junk yards is greeted. No matter how charmless, vexing, or irksome, the modernity which the senses perceive blends with the lingering pastoral and seraphic past. This reliance on perception and mobility is what makes Booth perhaps sum up the effect generated in that 'an intimate kinetic subtext counterpoints the literal description, just as in a figurative painting an abstract pattern of colour and shapes underpins the depiction of how things look.'<sup>120</sup> The hurried topographical survey is a token of the observer's impatience and even fatigue at times, but also occasional wonder about and relish for the intriguing eclecticism. The train journey through shifting views, symbolising life, and the descriptive details, which the narrator

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<sup>120</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: the Poet's Plight*, p. 145.



singles out to dwell upon while the train speeds or slows as fit, invoke a philosophical and introspective purport.

The traveller seems to be so absorbed by the contemplation of the hurrying landscape that he is oblivious of the noise of the weddings. While his awareness is most heightened when he detects and comments on the inanimate world, stations do not enrol an equal awareness. He dismisses them as nondescript, assuming, and even misjudging:

Each station that we stopped at: sun destroys  
The interest of what's happening in the shade,  
And down the long cool platforms whoops and skirls  
I took for porters larking with the mails,  
And went on reading. (p. 57)

Stations, symbolic of life's milestones and highlights when choices, changes, and decisions are made, do not engage the sophisticated traveller who gets even more immersed in his book, impatient to get past them one by one. However, the oblivious, disinterested mentality is soon jerked into what Whalen calls 'a burgeoning curiosity'.<sup>121</sup> The dismissed stations claim his attention for what Kubly describes as 'the symbolic quality of the scene', which effects change in the observer's 'state of mind'. Curiosity is triggered as an 'active cognition which transforms the world of surfaces, upon which the poem opens, into a world of meaning.'<sup>122</sup> The world around is translated into a revelation and vision. Ironically, what impacts his consciousness most are the snaps of 'grinning and pomaded girls' on the platforms:

In parodies of fashion, heels and veils,  
All posed irresolutely, watching us go,  
  
As if out on the end of an event  
Waving goodbye  
To something that survived it. (p. 57)

The first surviving impression is rather critical, casting aspersions on what he deems as tackiness and mediocrity, yet 'his consciousness' is 'penetrated' to use Draper's

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<sup>121</sup> Terry Whalen, *Philip Larkin and English Poetry*, p. 82.

<sup>122</sup> Lolette Kubly, *An Uncommon Poet for the Common Man*, p. 119.

vocabulary.<sup>123</sup> Waterman detects ‘nervous class-consciousness’ or ‘a certain nervousness’ and ‘an anxious awareness of the imminence of this vulgar presence invading his private space on the train’, which he later learns to overcome.<sup>124</sup> Nevertheless, deep down and intrinsically, innate perception gauges an event of a colossal significance, hedged between valediction and survival, which are, themselves, a unique, antithetical concoction. The mind works as a mediator and mitigator where the ‘detached consciousness’ of the observer has tampered with ‘these framed glimpses, caught through the window’ so that ‘they become poetic epiphanies.’<sup>125</sup> The antithesis also reflects the ontological dualism typified in pairing, marriage, life, and death, in the long run. When the awakening sensation takes hold of the indifferent traveller, the experience is both astounding and educating. His awareness and attention are seized, curiosity piqued, and he sees ‘it all again in different terms’. Stephen Regan discusses the re-invention of the experience:

Whitsun provides the opportunity for revelation and insight as the sceptical speaker repeatedly adjusts his attitude to the presence of the newly married couples with whom he shares his journey. Rather than insisting on its own empirical certitude, the poem draws attention to the perspectival nature of knowledge and the fallibility of perception. ‘The Whitsun Weddings’ is a quest for a unified vision and a shared system of belief in a desecralised world, but it is also a quest for social integration.<sup>126</sup>

Though ‘struck’ and animated, the account that the narrator gives is no less critical and fault finding than his earlier verdicts. The celebratory gathering is summed up as vulgar, cheap, and distasteful. The mind, weighed down by scepticism and disillusionment, is still resisting what the sensational and innate half finds arresting and even invigorating. Thus, the awakening is hardly accomplished at this stage, where the nonplussed observer has not yet fully converted. His mind has not yet figured out the source of the sensational wonder and elation exulting him. This blend of mediocre proletarians of ‘The fathers with broad

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<sup>123</sup> R. P. Draper, *An Introduction to Twentieth-Century Poetry in English*, p. 232.

<sup>124</sup> Rory Waterman, *Belonging and Estrangement in the Poetry of Philip Larkin*, R. S. Thomas and Charles Causely (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), p. 143.

<sup>125</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: the Poet's Plight*, p. 145.

<sup>126</sup> Stephen Regan, ‘Philip Larkin: a Late Modern Poet’, p. 155.

belts under their suits / And seamy foreheads; mothers loud and fat; /An uncle shouting smut' is an unglamorous spectacle. Yet, the commentary ensuing is festive and fair-like. The buzz and commotion, though plebeian and unsophisticated, have about them certain grace, which challenges the speaker's first unfavourable impression. Even when his attention is arrested by 'the perms', and then 'The nylon gloves and jewellery-substitutes, / The lemons, mauves, and olive-ochres that / Marked off the girls unreally from the rest', he is still clinging on to his derogatory pose. The girls, despite their impressive presence, are typical of the customers of the large cool store with its tawdry, cheap commodities.

The observer dwells upon the rest of the weddings' trappings until 'the last confetti' is 'thrown' along with 'advice' (which goes most likely unheeded) and couples board the train. The observer no longer cursorily surveys the dispersing crowd, but his penetrative vision omnisciently captures a lingering, transcendental perception of 'success' which is 'farcical' and happiness that is funeral-like. The spell, earlier cast, is still on and the celebrators have, thereupon, conceded their earthiness to claim clairvoyance and hindsight. Marriage ends one thing and begins another; it is a loss/gain event, hence the farcical, funeral-like ambience the parents fall prey to as they bid their goodbyes and girls 'gripping their handbags tighter, stared / At a religious wounding' (p. 58). Despite its pompousness and bathos, 'like a happy funeral' harbours a contagious influence, which the observer finds time to formulate wryly and cogently after the train resumes its journey in the italicised hypothetical '*I nearly died*':

We hurried towards London, shuffling gouts of steam.  
Now fields were building-plots, and poplars cast  
Long shadows over major roads, and for  
Some fifty minutes, that in time would seem

Just long enough to settle hats and say  
*I nearly died,*  
A dozen marriages got underway. (p. 58)

In his ontological stance as an outsider and uninvolved philosopher, the narrator defines marriage and death as facets of human existence that are hardly adversarial. In the

same venue, the poem, further, ‘reflects and re-reflects progressive movement’ of what is described as ‘Becoming’ by existential philosophers when they refer ‘to inner being’; and ‘the event’, documented, is ‘presented as a *Gestalt* whose end is beginning’. The train picks up its ‘full cargo’ as it ‘progresses through time and space’. So does the narrator whose Pentecostal experience reshapes his awareness and perception of existence.<sup>127</sup>

Towards the end, the landscape that the train traverses flips and changes intermittently from the rural with fields and poplars to the urban of ‘the Odeon’, ‘a cooling tower’ and ‘someone running up to bowl’ whose action is left dangling like the future of ‘the newly-weds’ on the train. Likewise, life and death juxtapose and alternate. This definition prepares the ground for the transcendental reflections to follow, where ‘the poet’s imagination boldly encloses the city in its egotistical embrace’.<sup>128</sup> The observer’s emotionality, pitched to match the sublime contemplation, romanticises to make ‘London spread out in the sun, / Its postal districts packed like squares of wheat: // There we were aimed.’ The journey draws to a close and the observer makes note of the receding residual segment of rail, Pullmans, and blackened moss:

and it was nearly done, this frail  
Travelling coincidence; and what it held  
Stood ready to be loosed with all the power  
That being changed can give. (p. 58)

The so-called ‘frail travelling coincidence’, designed as an apologia for what the persona used to regard frivolously, proves to harbour power within, dynamic enough to induce change. The passive voice of ‘being changed’ disguising the agent transformed by the experience is not a manoeuvre of denial as much as a showcase of incredulity and wonder, if not alarm, at the advent and extent of the change, unannounced and unsought. The anonymous ‘what it held’, indefinite and debatable as it stands, and which change prepares to unleash, interprets and locates the coincidence and the subsequent conversion in a

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<sup>127</sup> Lolette Kuby, *An Uncommon Poet for the Common Man*, p. 122.

<sup>128</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: the Poet's Plight*, p. 146.

different light. Nevertheless, the prelude, identified with the slowing train and the tightened brakes hardly seems to promise transcendence and vibrancy. The debacle is soon remedied and an unmistakable epiphany springs from the nondescript train proceedings, as ‘there swelled / A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower / Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.’ It is ‘a metaphorical leap into the visionary unknown’ resulting from ‘the gradually deepening responsiveness combined with discursive thoughtfulness’.<sup>129</sup> With its ‘vorticistic effect of the imagery’, the finale savours ‘a moment of transcendence’, of ‘wonder’, and ‘ambiguity’ that celebrates ‘the mystery of human *being*’ and the ‘grace’ of ‘ordinary life’.<sup>130</sup> There lodges between the two poles (the empirical/ordinary and sublime) ‘a philosophical conclusion about life firmly grounded in the recognizable or the commonsensical’.<sup>131</sup>

The thought the poem poses is transferred from a ‘dry idea’ to ‘thought as experience, thought as a living reality’.<sup>132</sup> The transcendental consciousness recreates the experience so that ‘the real becomes the imagined in a delicately blurred figure that follows the poet’s reverie from objective stimulus (the feel of the brakes), to inner sensation (falling), to remembered image (arrow-shower), and back to “reality” (rain).’<sup>133</sup> Rain, symbolic of life and fertility in tribute to the newly-weds, is described as falling out of the blue (considering ‘the sunlit Saturday’ of the onset), that is, another coincidence on par with being on board the same train with the Whitsun couples. Or in Spire’s words, the ‘pentecostal tongues of fire’ mutate ‘into falling rain, suggesting both a human falling off or failing as well as a shower of spiritual grace.’<sup>134</sup> After all, in ‘Water’, the articulate persona, prophet-like, ponders on a religion entirely constructed of water. In the example

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<sup>129</sup> R. P. Draper, *An Introduction to Twentieth-Century Poetry in English*, p. 233.

<sup>130</sup> Terry Whalen, *Philip Larkin and English Poetry*, pp. 86, 84, 87.

<sup>131</sup> Tijana Stojković, “Unnoticed in the Casual Light of Day”, p. 98.

<sup>132</sup> Terry Whalen, *Philip Larkin and English Poetry*, p. 88.

<sup>133</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: the Poet’s Plight*, p. 146.

<sup>134</sup> Elizabeth Spire, ‘Sacred Days: *The Collected Poems* of Philip Larkin’, *The American Poetry Review*, 19/3 (1990), 5-10, p. 7.

of Sabian Mandaism, the rituals subsume ‘fording’, ‘Images of sousing, / A furious devout drench’, and ‘A glass of water / Where any-angled light / Would congregate endlessly’ (p. 56). The Whitsun celebration is finally crowned with baptism in water, announcing beginning and offering benediction. Hence, there is a corresponding symbolic subtext in which the Whitsun weddings metamorphose from a ritual dictated by ‘the mundane exigencies of the English taxation system’ to ‘an almost sacramental irruption into the forms of ordinary existence.’<sup>135</sup> The antithetical ‘swell’ and ‘fall’ animate a mental impasse. The narrator is aware of both the ordinariness of the sources of elation, weddings and then rain, and the uniqueness of the sensations they resound with. ‘Arrow-shower’ suggests aggressiveness which underlies all aspects of the world, including love (mythically exemplified in Cupid’s Arrows). In all, residual scepticism still hangs in the air, though momentarily defeated and hushed by the majestic encounter with the Whitsun couples.

While ‘The Whitsun Weddings’ commemorates beginnings with the ends left bleak and loose, ‘An Arundel Tomb’ offers a denouement to the romantic story. ‘An Arundel Tomb’ is a meditation on art, love, and history, but also time, mortality, and death. The latter makes the poem an example of ‘graveyard musings’ or the elegies of the eighteenth century. Only Larkin’s ‘approach’ takes a ‘more philosophically adventurous’ turn to assert ‘the transcendence of death through...art.’<sup>136</sup> The artist had captured a moment of passion in history and had it preserved for eternity for other generations to ponder on and wonder about. Though scattering clues and evidence here and there, the artist had simply chiselled a question conferring on the poem this ‘quizzical’ ambience, to borrow Waterman’s term, where ‘Larkin’s medieval couple remain inscrutable’.<sup>137</sup> Because the monument is obscured by time, the narrator navigates through the ambiguity of thoughts

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<sup>135</sup> Neil Corcoran, *English Poetry Since 1940* (London: Longman, 1993), p. 92.

<sup>136</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Writer*, p. 143.

<sup>137</sup> Rory Waterman, *Belonging and Estrangement*, p. 89

the monument evokes. In all, the poem supports a mental strategy of ‘noticing, wondering and speculating’ where the imagination is given free rein so that ‘speculation is never-ending.’<sup>138</sup> Correlatively, the poem poses an individualistic apotheosis of romance and a paradigm of idyllic love that outlasts the lovers’ lifetimes or at least the effigy is thought to host these meanings. Carved in stone, suggesting strength and durability, the faces are barely recognisable as the details of the sculpture have faded. The same applies to ‘their proper habits vaguely shown’, not to mention ‘that faint hint of the absurd – / The little dogs under their feet.’ The observer rehearses the obvious thought that stone, which is here meant to preserve idealised love, is by no means immune to time and environment and neither is love. Besides ‘stone’, other tokens of what Osborne calls ‘the diction of longevity’ are designed to set the mind speculating and forming a sanguine hypothesis about immortal love before that same mind recoils at the thought.<sup>139</sup> Thence, the observer takes care to deal the major hypothesis a fatal blow and leave it dying.

The mental attitude the visitor adopts takes a sharp critical turn when unable to refrain from framing an intellectual reaction to the addition of faithful animals, labelling the gesture as ‘absurd’. After all, the sculpture remains a work of art behind which an artist stands along with his personal attitude and vision. However, the absurdity of ‘The little dogs under their feet’ (p. 71) is probably an exact replica of the pose and not an artistic whim to accentuate loyalty and fidelity as the observer wryly intimates. That same personal judgemental attitude will soon dismiss the monument for ‘Such plainness of the pre-baroque / Hardly involves the eye’. To the eye and mind of the sceptical observer, nothing falls out of the ordinary in this pre-baroque work with its heavy reliance on decorated style. The eye perceives that the Arundel tomb is by no means a rarity worthy of deliberating and almost inwardly announces that there is nothing to shout about until:

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<sup>138</sup> Bruce K. Martin, ‘Larkin’s Humanity Viewed from Abroad’, in *Philip Larkin: the Man and his Work*, ed. Dale Salwak (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), 140-49, at p. 148.

<sup>139</sup> John Osborne, *Radical Larkin: Seven Types of Technical Mastery*, p. 57.

It meets his left-hand gauntlet, still  
Clasped empty in the other; and  
One sees, with a sharp tender shock,  
His hand withdrawn, holding her hand. (p. 71)

It is again the perceptive eye as the initiative agent, proving that there is more to the Arundel tomb than meets the eye. As a token of faithfulness and adoration, the hand clasp shocks the observer and sends in him sentimental tremors. Booth draws the attention to 'the aspirated "h" alliteration' in 'His hand withdrawn, holding her hand', which 'takes the reader's breath away'.<sup>140</sup> Yet the aporetic mind advises against imposing a modern reading on a past relic. The poem boosts the awareness of the 'instability of historical values' and that 'nothing changes more frequently or more radically than the past, redefined in every present.'<sup>141</sup> The gesture is not strong enough, nonetheless, to melt away the stubborn scepticism with which he has so far regarded the statue. With the double meaning of 'lie', the commentator rehearses his earlier doubts, rationalising that 'such faithfulness in effigy' remains art-bound and idealistic, not to mention artificial and ventriloquistic. The mind intervenes, casting speculations of the kind that the gesture does not strike him as done impromptu, but:

Was just a detail friends would see:  
A sculptor's sweet commissioned grace  
Thrown off in helping to prolong  
The Latin names around the base. (p. 71)

The observer suspects fiction to have mediated between reality and art to create the additional dramatic touches, whether of the hand clasp or the crouching dogs at the feet, though he does not seem to think the former a surplus.

Therefore, he loses interest in the visual dimension, which, being appropriately dwelt upon, comes to an abrupt end, making room to intimations and evaluations of a weightier nature. Thinking on behalf of the effigy couple, the assessor's 'musing becomes more intense, even strenuous' as evidenced by 'the grammatical dislocation of stanza four'

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<sup>140</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*, p. 218.

<sup>141</sup> John Osborne, *Radical Larkin: Seven Types of Technical Mastery*, p. 58.



which Booth elaborates on.<sup>142</sup> The narrator makes a point of the survival of ‘the supine stationary voyage’ through changing times, seasons, people or ‘tenantry’, and culture (all ‘telescoped into a medley of kaleidoscopic images’).<sup>143</sup> The Latin of the carved names, which the sculptor contrived to give an adequate space to, is no longer commonly intelligible. The indirect temporal ‘how’ interrogatives in ‘how early’ and ‘how soon’ betray an inquisitive mood attributed virtually to the couple, but in fact worrying the observer. Endurance and memory are soon and effortlessly recruited to maintain and preserve not the people as much as the symbolism they stand for. Cast deep in history, their identity ‘washed at’ is irrelevant to the ‘unarmorial age’ and so is ‘their scrap of history’ (p. 72). The values of their armorial, idyllic age are lost to the *tenants* of the latest age, hence their stance is transformed into ‘untruth’. The illusory ambience surrounding their history coincides with the doubts the narrator earlier cast regarding what he later calls ‘The stone fidelity / They hardly meant’. Though ‘fidelity’ is pronounced an illusion and ‘untruth’, people cling to it instinctively and convert it to ‘almost true’. With its cleft question-answer structure, ‘What will survive of us is love’ is polemically poised against the scepticism that runs through the entire poem and shows the narrator in two minds. It may be an aphorism that rings with genuineness or a wishful thinking of an unattainable idealism. All in all, it keeps the poem’s world well balanced, for after all ‘An Arundel Tomb’ is about love that outlasts even art and forges itself against all odds and times.

#### IV

The thematic trajectory of ‘An Arundel Tomb’ touches upon death, whereas ‘Ambulances’ makes sure that *The Whitsun Weddings* does not skip Larkin’s most cherished theme. ‘Ambulances’ addresses the topic most acerbically. Rowland sees the poem as a ‘religious

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<sup>142</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Writer*, p. 144.

<sup>143</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*, p. 218.

discourse' in which secularity is invited, while religion, upon its failure, is dismissed. As it tackles the notion of 'non-being in a late twentieth century' perspective, it reports a gridlock in terms of formulating 'a representation of death in a secular context.'<sup>144</sup> In spite of its ' "timeless" and "universal" wisdom', the poem is found to promote 'ideas' of 'a very distinctive agnostic consciousness'.<sup>145</sup> The ambulance metaphor employed reads poignantly the notion that ambulances are not life-savers, but harbingers of death. In five stanzas and an almost reversed rhyme scheme of abcbca with the first and last line of each stanza rhyming together, the idea that the ambulances are moving coffins or 'closed like confessionals' is driven home. In so doing, claustrophobic death, which commences with the 'hired box' in 'Mr. Bleaney' and concludes with the tomb-monument of 'An Arundel Tomb', is given a triple emphasis. More like unwelcome apostles of death, ambulances go about their business rather furtively, 'giving back / None of the glances they absorb.' Personified, they emerge as carefree and indifferent, if not cruel and malignant:

Light glossy grey, arms on a plaque,  
They come to rest at any kerb:  
All streets in time are visited. (p. 63)

In short, filtered through the consciousness of an anxiety-struck narrator, ambulances lose their altruistic, benign air and acquire a cold-blooded and malicious ambience. It looks more like a Kafkaesque slice of psychic knowledge, where the entire being is plotting to send the human to non-being. Under pressures of death phobia, the mind of the narrator perceives in the ambulance a bogey of perdition and demise. The ubiquity of the emergency vehicles and the inevitability of their visit keeps everybody on tenterhooks lest it is their turn to be picked and 'stowed' in. Much to the dismay of a paranoid mind, the ominous messengers appear on the casual scene when least suspected, making 'children strewn on steps or road, / Or women coming from the shops' spectators of the

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<sup>144</sup> Antony Rowland, "'All Is Not Dead": Philip Larkin, Humanism and Class', pp. 6-7.

<sup>145</sup> Stephen Regan, *Philip Larkin*, p. 114.

unwholesome visit. They seem to be caught when oblivious of the lurking danger. The fatal encounter is even made more gruesome by the alliteration of *w* in ‘a wild white face’ indicating morbidity hand in hand with the colour shift in the next line, ‘Red stretcher-blankets’, suggesting blood and signalling danger. The person rolled into the ambulance is robbed of animate attributes, a loss evidenced in the inanimate *it* of ‘As it is carried in and stowed’, suggesting the dehumanisation which death brings about. Prompted by the ghastly visit, the narrator relapses into philosophy to absorb the shock and regain mental tranquillity. He also resorts to a mental vantage of detachment and impersonality reading the minds of the witnesses, woman and child, who ‘see’ the procedure:

And sense the solving emptiness  
That lies just under all we do,  
And for a second get it whole,  
So permanent and blank and true.

The use of ‘solve’ (an umbrella for ‘resolve’ and ‘dissolve’ as well as ‘solve’) to modify ‘emptiness’ marks an insuperable mental impasse rather than a panacea.<sup>146</sup>

Rehearsing the cathartic ‘*Poor soul, / They whisper at their own distress*’ with its religious connotation, the narrator resumes the transcendental realisation. On one level, murmuring the phrase, Andrew Swarbrick argues, the bystanders manage a feigned solidarity as hypothetical next runners-up, ‘vividly conscious of their own mortality’. The spectators ‘find themselves randomly caught up in someone else’s tragedy...which interrupts their mundane routine.’<sup>147</sup> On another level, the phrase, now purely colloquial, hammers home ‘the sense that recognition of death lies just beneath the surface at every moment’.<sup>148</sup> Humans live, overshadowed by death, though they pretend to play truant from it. A sudden perception of hollowness or nothingness sweeps and overwhelms existence, which is grievously lamented and the tone is prickly self-elegiac:

For borne away in deadened air

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<sup>146</sup> Andrew Swarbrick, *Out of Reach*, p. 121.

<sup>147</sup> Andrew Swarbrick, *Out of Reach*, p. 120.

<sup>148</sup> Nicholas Marsh, *Philip Larkin: the Poems*, p. 62.

May go the sudden shut of loss  
Round something nearly at an end,  
And what cohered in it across  
The years, the unique random blend  
Of families and fashions, there

At last begin to loosen. (p. 63)

The sudden loosening of what takes years and effort to cohere dismays the observer, but also awakens him to the truth. The knowledge and awakening are of no pragmatic use to him apart from growing even more conscious of and well-versed in the futility of human existence. Notwithstanding the collective shared destiny of death, each individual dies on his/her own 'Far / From the exchange of love to lie / Unreachable inside a room' (pp. 63-4) while others watch in passive submission and fearful predictability. The separateness and lonesomeness of death are fathomed out in the double-edged and contradictory realisation that what 'brings closer' ends up in dulling 'to distance' simultaneously:

Unreachable inside a room  
The traffic parts to let go by  
Brings closer what is left to come,  
And dulls to distance all we are. (p. 64)

The traffic-parting image visualises death and the befalling and enclosing oblivion is interpreted in terms of spatiality/distance rather than temporality. The latter image comprises a wry reference to speeding ambulances, growing smaller before vanishing in the horizon. Like an old picture or an outdated tape or a speeding vehicle, the human life fades into nothingness and smallness. 'Ambulances' is adroitly set to elegise this precarious existence.

It will not be beside the point to categorise 'MCMXIV' as an elegy, in memory of the pre-1914 era as the number reads. Its description as 'a "trick" poem, all one sentence & no main verb' by Larkin himself acknowledges its astuteness.<sup>149</sup> The Roman numerals, specific to cenotaphs or solemn undertakings, confer on the poem a memorial-like status and an almost pious invocation. The title is also subtly and artfully designed to create an

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<sup>149</sup> Anthony Thwaite (ed.), *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin: 1940-1985*, p. 367.

illusion of temporal remoteness of the pre-war age.<sup>150</sup> Deciphering the code and translating it into a familiar event redound to the poignancy and seriousness of the occasion. Though the poem explicitly refers back to 1914, an extendable temporal framework seems to be invoked in the cenotaph-like posture so that the pre-war history from the Domesday book to 1914 would be equally commemorated. Besides the deviousness of the title, the poem introduces more sly tactics:

Those long uneven lines  
 Standing as patiently  
 As if they were stretched outside  
 The Oval or Villa Park.... (p. 60)

It is a prelude proper with main characters and setting supplied, though the latter with its semi-simile reference (as if...) is only an approximation. The visual effect of the opening simulates a sepia photograph, which ‘can freeze a unique moment in history, allowing later scrutiny and meditation.’<sup>151</sup> The absence of the verb reinforces this cosmic limbo and the sense of ‘stasis’ where ‘the scene exists outside of our parameters of time, place and action’ with the war left ‘ominously unmentioned’.<sup>152</sup> The snap is barely military with ‘uneven lines’ and the carnival or Olympic games atmosphere which turns as the stanza ends into ‘An August Bank Holiday lark’, creating a frolic atmosphere contrary to the solemnity of the title and scaling up the irony of the moment the poem transcends to. The ‘grinning’ inexperienced rows of tyros, uninformed, ignorant, and clueless, line to finish up the slow recruiting procedure. The ‘moustached archaic faces’ recall an idyllic, but defunct era of ‘Domesday’ chivalry and knighthood, hence the ‘sense of wonder’ invested.<sup>153</sup> The narrator is bent on invoking a mosaic of references to ‘Domesday’, whose ‘Norman conquest’ implications refer backwards to ‘a millennium of social continuity’. But more importantly ‘Domesday’ refers ‘forwards to Wilfred Owen’s “Anthem for Doomed

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<sup>150</sup> Andrew Swarbrick, *Out of Reach*, p. 118.

<sup>151</sup> Rory Waterman, *Belonging and Estrangement*, p. 107.

<sup>152</sup> Rory Waterman, *Belonging and Estrangement*, p. 108.

<sup>153</sup> A. Kingsley Weatherhead, ‘Philip Larkin of England’, p. 624.

Youth”— or, more apocalyptically, to the Biblical Day of Judgement when the world will end.’<sup>154</sup> In the same vein, the poem shapes its own ‘new version of the myth of Fall’, where humankind is kicked out of its ‘paradisaal home’ or its Eden of innocence by ‘the serpent’ of the war; in so doing, the outdated myth is terminated rather than propagated.<sup>155</sup> The youthful, yet archaic faces also betray the innocence and romantic naivety behind the enlistment and depict the warfare in terms of virile, athletic competition or a medieval hunting adventure undertaken by unknowing youths.

The photographic opening functions as a stimulus to the flashbacks stretching over the next two stanzas which skim across the differences between the pre- and post-war eras. The hiatus, setting the two eras apart, is essentially apocalyptic rather than temporal. The ‘moustached archaic faces’ belong to a distant time and milieu of ‘The farthings and sovereigns, / And dark-clothed children at play / Called after kings and queens’. A carefree, merry atmosphere is depicted in ‘the pubs / Wide open all day’ and reinforced with the debut of commercial and artistic innovations: ‘The tin advertisements / For cocoa and twist’. The poem ushers in a defunct epoch of elegance, innocence, and conservatism with ‘fields / Shadowing Domesday lines’, ‘The differently-dressed servants’, ‘tiny rooms in huge houses’, and ‘limousines’ (pp. 60-1). The ‘elegiac pensiveness’ and nostalgic spirit are implied all over the second and third stanzas by the retrospective listing of the dead era hallmarks, exposing a discriminating and comparative mind.<sup>156</sup> It is in the third stanza that the elegiac voice becomes articulate, lamenting none other than the loss of innocence and exclaiming, ‘Never such innocence, / Never before or since’ before the final recapitulation of ‘Never such innocence again’, which ‘highlights the uniqueness of this naive Zeitgeist’ and ‘the ubi sunt motif of elegy.’<sup>157</sup> The year 1914 is ‘monumental’ as a ‘date’ that

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<sup>154</sup> John Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, p. 193.

<sup>155</sup> Blake Morrison, *The Movement*, p. 195.

<sup>156</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Writer*, p. 73.

<sup>157</sup> Rory Waterman, *Belonging and Estrangement*, p.110.

introduced changes in all fields of knowledge and ‘spawned the modern world’ and hence marks the ‘end of an age of innocence.’<sup>158</sup> The tidy gardens and ‘The thousand marriages / Lasting a little while longer’, which seem to do the demised past little credit, allegorically insinuate the anarchy and decadence of the ensuing mutant age or what Whalen points to as ‘cultural decline’.<sup>159</sup> This ‘liturgical’ lament of innocence is ‘self-consciously rhetorical and knows it is dealing in myths.’<sup>160</sup> It is the innocence that suffers the blow most and it is the awakening which the narrator finds irremediable.

The nostalgic pathos of ‘MCMXIV’ is preceded by ‘Days’ (p. 60), a ten-line poem that has no rhyme scheme and alternating iambic and trochaic dimeters. It invokes days in their brevity as a symbol of life and an allegory of the passage of time. As an ‘ontological riddle’, it ‘points to a pervasive interest in fundamental questions of being.’<sup>161</sup> In order to do so, the speaker reasons with ‘a series of intellectual questions and assumptions’.<sup>162</sup> The poem is built around a direct, terse question-answer template followed by succinct answers or rather series of definitions and a sarcastic meditation, which also include a second, exclamatory question: ‘Where can we live but days?’ Thereupon, the poem probes a polemical and philosophical area that relates to existence in its entirety via two childish questions. Although the speaker appears genuinely naive, ‘the background of his questioning is one of the basic problems of philosophy: the meaning of time.’<sup>163</sup>

In ‘Days are where we live’, days are defined spatially so that days are prison-like spaces to which being is confined. Along with the notion of imprisonment, the idea of imposition and absence of choice are equally implicated. Accordingly, days are receptacles of existence. When days are next defined temporally in ‘They come, they wake us / Time

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<sup>158</sup> Lolette Kuby, *An Uncommon Poet for the Common Man*, p. 124.

<sup>159</sup> Terry Whalen, *Philip Larkin and English Poetry*, p. 40.

<sup>160</sup> Andrew Swarbrick, *Out of Reach*, p. 119.

<sup>161</sup> Stephen Regan, ‘Philip Larkin: a Late Modern Poet’, p. 154.

<sup>162</sup> Tijana Stojković, ‘Unnoticed in the Casual Light of Day’, p. 110.

<sup>163</sup> István D. Rác, ‘Agnosticism, Masks and Monologues in Philip Larkin’, p. 103.

and time over', they are linked to the progressive as well as reiterative or cyclic awareness. The notion of days as heralds of literal awakening after a night's sleep is implemented to symbolise the learning humanity happens on as time or days advance. Days keep surprising people with novel knowledge, which they conceal and which people are to discover as long as they live. This is the concept of a future that people look forward to and which Larkin charts in 'Next, Please' and 'Triple Time'. However, it may be also that humanity fails to hold on to yesterday's knowledge and has to learn it all over again today and tomorrow. In 'They are to be happy in', the ideas of place and purpose are invested. However, when the speaker exclaims 'Where can we live but days?', a sense of existential helplessness pervades as the basic and essential reasoning. It introduces the enigma of a hypothetical alternative. According to Rácz, the exclamatory answer 'Ah' implies 'sudden illumination, [and] epiphany'.<sup>164</sup> However, 'the priest and the doctor / In their long coats / Running over the fields' make the riddle entangled even further. Whether death is accounted for scientifically in secular measures or mystically in divine measure, the *éclat* is one and the same, hence perhaps the irony of doctor and priest identically clad despite their vocational differences.

'Afternoons' takes a rather pensive glimpse into the end of youth, the approach of old age, and death all depicted in analogy with nature. While 'Days' endeavours to figure out the enigma of existence, 'Afternoons' surveys the residual summer before autumn or afternoon before sunset. It is an elegy that commemorates the fast-fading youth and thickened beauty while one is overwhelmed with the demands of a fully-fledged, typical existence. Mothers, and husbands, identified by their biological or social roles, let their youth slip away, and with it their intrinsic identities defoliate as 'The leaves fall in ones and twos' (p. 70). They stand by to watch the children grow or gather by 'The new

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<sup>164</sup> István D. Rácz, 'Agnosticism, Masks and Monologues in Philip Larkin', p. 103.



recreation ground', as the poem phrases two phenomena of existence. The parks of former romantic rendezvous of the mothers become the playing grounds of the children in assertion of continuity and inevitable replacement or exchange. The short 'dimeters or trimeters' 'rhymeless' lines simulate an 'insecure' world in which instability marks the precarious existence.<sup>165</sup> The scene depicted showcases 'the sympathetic imagination' of the poem which 'extends even beyond women' to have a unanimous consent.<sup>166</sup> The love rituals have mutated into routines, an observation that registers 'a wry comment on their former romantic ideas about love, courtship, and marriage.'<sup>167</sup> In the observation that 'beauty has thickened', the paradox between a youth breathing its last and another in manufacture or embryo deepens the human tragedy of deterioration and termination.

Ageing is not simply one generation handing the torch to another, but one generation superseding and displacing another. The coexistence of both, in the poem, deepens the consciousness of the desolation lying ahead and echoes Yeats's poignancy in 'That is no country for old men'.<sup>168</sup> This dislocation is hammered on through spatial metaphors where 'with poignant wit, their very living-rooms have become metaphors for their lack of room'.<sup>169</sup> The prime of life has receded and faded and is barely noticeable like 'Our Wedding' albums while 'the wind / Is ruining their courting-places'.<sup>170</sup> As they flip through the images of their early youth, the courting places are no longer theirs. Gradually, they are marginalised and dispensed with, making room for their children and 'Something is pushing them / To the side of their own lives' (p. 71). They belong to a different time, though the places seem to remain all the same. Hence, growing old creates a discord between the once-young lovers and the environment they used to be fully attuned to.

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<sup>165</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: the Poet's Plight*, p. 150.

<sup>166</sup> Katha Pollitt, 'Philip Larkin', *Grand Street*, 9/3 (1990), 250-60, at p. 260.

<sup>167</sup> A. Banerjee, 'Larkin Reconsidered', *The Sewanee Review*, 116/3 (2008), 428-41, at p. 437.

<sup>168</sup> Daniel Albright (ed.), *W. B. Yeats: The Poems*, p. 239.

<sup>169</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: the Poet's Plight*, p. 151.

<sup>170</sup> The ruinous wind of 'Afternoons' echoes the blowing wind of 'Wedding-Wind' with its disturbing ambience.

Choice and free will let down and abandon the nearly middle-agers who will soon be strangers, almost outcasts, in the world that was once theirs. The world always belongs to the young and every new youth culture shapes it anew to suit its temperament. This time-place web is being woven eternally. In brief, the poem builds on the awareness that the afternoon of life leads to nowhere other than the darkness falling soon.

## Chapter 5

### *High Windows: Celestial Blue*

#### I

Larkin's last collection, which seems to have kept readers and reviewers waiting too long, was met with approbation and enthusiasm, converting Larkin 'into something of an English national treasure and ...[making] him internationally known.'<sup>1</sup> Deemed as the most important and warmly welcomed of Larkin's 'three mature collections', *High Windows* 'enabled one to see *The Less Deceived* and *The Whitsun Weddings* in a fresh light.'<sup>2</sup> Its immediate rise to popularity and phenomenal success is dwelt upon most vividly by James Atlas who writes about the volume going into 'a second printing' 'within a few weeks' and its being the main discussion topic of both literary and 'non-literary people', making Larkin 'a British institution.'<sup>3</sup>

More in this vein is expressed by Walford Davies, for whom *High Windows* is an 'impressive' collection which has not failed to 'surprise' though many of its poems were already in circulation. The volume displays what is designated as Larkin's 'now familiar powers – a steady truthfulness, memorable expressiveness, and the integrity of achieved form which *earns* our attention and repays our attentiveness'; '*High Windows* shows that the slow accumulation of short meditative poems has adequately served his vision of life's evidences.'<sup>4</sup> Alternatively, Oliver Marshall finds the 'unusually slow genesis' of the book as anti-climatic, especially as many poems 'have been around for anything up to a decade'.

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Hirsch, 'Philip Larkin, 1922-1985: Sour Majesty', *The Wilson Quarterly*, 17/3 (1993), 112-21, at p. 113.

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Bergonzi, 'Davie, Larkin, and the State of England', *Contemporary Literature*, 18/3 (1977), 343-60, at p. 354.

<sup>3</sup> James Atlas, 'On Philip Larkin', *The American Poetry Review*, 6/4 (1977), 18-9, at p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> Walford Davies, 'An Ordinary Sorrow of Man's Life: *High Windows* by Philip Larkin, *Jill* by Philip Larkin, *Philip Larkin* by David Timms', *The Sewanee Review*, 84/3 (1976), 523-27, at pp. 523, 527.

Nonetheless, *High Windows* proves to be ‘a very versatile work, more various than uniform’, with a ‘range of tone’ making it ‘more impressive than *The Whitsun Weddings*.’<sup>5</sup>

Praise is liberally lavished on the poems, where ‘every poem has its own “freshly created universe” and atmosphere; the tone ranges from humour to sarcasm and the grotesque, and these always signify the relationship between the persona and the poet’s contemplated experience.’<sup>6</sup> The diverse ways in which the poems engage with and respond to versatile ontological questions justify reading many of them ‘as catalogs or as litanies of the formalities of existence, which (in the way that literary tradition is amassed to give substance to history) are amassed to give substance to memory, but which eventually cloud an awareness of man’s true relationship... of life to death’.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, the ‘individual’ poems showcase the ‘awareness that the universe is ultimately empty, like the high windows of his fine title poem.’ The ideas and themes of the poems are processed through a consciousness that is so reconciled to the inevitable ‘oblivion’ that it regards ‘everyday pursuits of people...with irony and elegiac sadness.’<sup>8</sup> There is an overall ambience of intangibility and intractability in the themes which the poems advocate. Anxiety, fear, despair, and impotence are navigated from sober, detached, even presumptuously objective perspectives. Likewise, historical, philosophical, social questions are speculated upon and deliberated with a clarity of vision and farsightedness. Larkin’s personae emerge as stoical, mature thinkers who are keen on discussing what others take for granted or think of as commonplace with such seriousness and gravity that readers are left pondering and questioning.

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<sup>5</sup> Oliver Marshall, ‘*High Windows* by Philip Larkin’, *An Irish Quarterly Review*, 63/252 (1974), 419-21, at p. 419.

<sup>6</sup> István D. Rácz, ‘Agnosticism, Masks and Monologues in Philip Larkin’, p. 111 .

<sup>7</sup> Michael Saladyga, ‘Philip Larkin And Survival Poetry’, *The American Poetry Review*, 14/3 (1985), 10-16, at p. 14.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen S. Hilliard, ‘Wit and Beauty: *High Windows* by Philip Larkin’, *Prairie Schooner*, 49/3 (1975), 270-71, at p. 270.

The ode-like poem 'To the Sea', which opens the collection, is 'a ruminative, reflective lyric of personal history.'<sup>9</sup> Like many a poem by Larkin, it charts a map or an atlas of modern existence. In so doing, it hosts a voice that praises and idolises not the sea, according to the romantic tradition, but the human rituals and practices relevant to the sea, almost in anthropological terms. Though lacking 'metaphysical yearnings' to quote Swarbrick, the poem, litany-like, borrows the tranquil and exulting ambience of a prayer for salvation of a less conventional nature.<sup>10</sup> Larkin has toyed with the notion of escapism in an erotic sense in 'Sunny Prestatyn', which promises ecstatic, Eden-like holidays. However, 'To the Sea' is not a poem about holidays as much as a treatise on culture and convention of a rather humanistic complexion. Holidays and holidayers are rationalised or idealised as appropriate. The holiday, being a social construction, is deconstructed so that it can be viewed differently. The escapist and insular atmosphere is drawn in sharp contours. The awareness of the subtle gap between the sea shore and the mainland beyond it greets the reader at the very beginning:

To step over the low wall that divides  
Road from concrete walk above the shore  
Brings sharply back something known long before –  
The miniature gaiety of seashores. (p. 75)

The 'physical action' of 'stepping over the low wall', which 'immediately engages the reader', is evaluated in 'psychological' terms as 'a conscious effort to conjure up the past'.<sup>11</sup> By association, the division is not topographical, nor even social, but psychological and mental, defining the standpoint of the observing persona as 'a detached', but 'marvelling' 'observer'.<sup>12</sup> What the seaside hosts and the mainland lacks is this 'gaiety' or the sense of happiness though, diminutive and transient. The 'miniature' bliss brings back to mind hope and expectation, which seem to perish under the pressure of modernity.

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<sup>9</sup> DeSales Harrison, *The End of the Mind*, p. 116.

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Swarbrick, *Out of Reach*, p. 147.

<sup>11</sup> Simon Petch, *The Art of Philip Larkin*, p. 87.

<sup>12</sup> Janice Rossen, *Philip Larkin: His Life's Work*, p. 59.

However, there is an inkling of doubt that the bliss the seaside oozes is a conjuring trick or the work of a fervent imagination. The postcard-like first stanza, with ‘miniature’ to orient the speculation, makes room for such an interpretation, culminating in ‘A white steamer stuck in the afternoon’ in relief against a collaged foreground of people, ‘Steep beach, blue water, towels, red bathing caps’ and ‘hushed waves’. ‘Aimed at being a Boudin’, as Larkin explained to Monica Jones, the poem has its pictorial details chiselled with care and astuteness.<sup>13</sup> The variety and abundance of details endorse its existential concerns on behalf of humankind, where ‘the miniature figures’ are towered over by the enormity of sky and ocean ‘echoing expanses of time as well, stretching backward and forward through generations and dwarfing the span of a single human life.’<sup>14</sup> All in all, the timeless symphony of the beach ritual is synchronised. The summer seaside event is a miniature life stance in which the participants ‘lie, eat, sleep in hearing of the surf’, and as early as the second stanza, the poem advocates that the sea holiday is ‘half an annual pleasure, half a rite.’ The seaside tradition which is handed down over generations helps to keep the cultural codes and instances intact. Its disintegration threatens the consecutive decadence of more defining traditions and routines, i.e., risking social and cultural identity.

By the third stanza, the persona relapses into a more personal, private voice documenting in a miniature autobiography his own version of the sea routine, oriented by his ‘meditative vision’.<sup>15</sup> The naïve happiness in ‘happy at being on my own’ recalls ‘I Remember, I Remember’ (*The Less Deceived*), which replaces the beach with ‘their farm where I could be / ‘Really myself’ (p. 42) and focalises psychological concerns. The indulgence in childish games in ‘I searched the sand for Famous Cricketers’ and of family memories and association analogous to the beach holiday evoke flashbacks and

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<sup>13</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*, p. 358.

<sup>14</sup> DeSales Harrison, *The End of the Mind*, p. 117.

<sup>15</sup> Simon Petch, *The Art of Philip Larkin*, p. 88.

introspection.<sup>16</sup> The reminiscence with its ‘self-parody’ reflects ‘a childlike faith in the wonders of the world’ and a conjuration of ‘visions’ which will ever haunt his happy moments like ‘a fanciful’ vacation postcard.<sup>17</sup> The furtive censure in ‘the cheap cigars, / The chocolate-papers, tea-leaves, and, between // The rocks, the rusting soup-tins’, unmasks a *Waste Land*-like picture of the beach on par with the Thames in Eliot’s poem. This decadent secularism typical of modernity may be interpreted as an indicator of an ensuing collapse on even a larger scale, particularly if the childhood memory of innocence and purity is pitted against a present of a commercial consumerism from its horizon ‘The white steamer has gone’. When the persona reports that ‘Like breathed-on glass / The sunlight has turned milky’, the haziness prepares for the growing awareness of the overlapping time zones, which channel the next cultural, almost anthropological, observations:

It may be that through habit these do best,  
Coming to water clumsily undressed  
Yearly; teaching their children by a sort  
Of clowning; helping the old, too, as they ought. (p. 75)

In ‘Afternoons’ (*The Whitsun Weddings*), ageing and the generational hiatus are subtly introduced. Likewise, in ‘To the Sea’, children, youth, and the old orchestrate the evolutionary preservation of the sea ritual. However, a humanitarian dimension emerges as a by-product of the beach schooling, or rather ‘clowning’, in which the young are taught to mimic the old ritual and to look after their future old selves ‘as they ought’, as the poem’s closing line mandates. Along with the clownish amusement of the beach, a philanthropic and beneficent ethos, optimal to survival, is handed over and thus preserved in what Goodby sees as ‘a moral apothegm’.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> In *Further Requirements* (p. 7), Larkin talked about collecting pictures of famous cricketers from gutters as a childhood indulgence of his generation.

<sup>17</sup> Janice Rossen, *Philip Larkin: His Life's Work*, pp. 59, 60.

<sup>18</sup> John Goodby, ‘The Importance of Being Elsewhere’, p. 135.

## II

The munificent closure of 'To the Sea', with its charitable outlook towards the old, invokes one of Larkin's most cherished concerns, old age, to which 'The Old Fools' does full justice. The poem goes in reverse to the common pattern of treating and speaking about the aged with reverence, compassion, and tolerance, hence its intellectual antithesis. Its very title, a humorous colloquial cliché by itself that does not necessarily relate literally to old age, is out of step with the conventional, almost mythical, raising of old age as a landmark of wisdom and perspicacity. As it opens, the poem hinges on an unconventional rationalisation that deepens, if not simulates, the mental deterioration imposed by old age.<sup>19</sup> Further, if the poem revolves around the tragedy of senility, and decrepitude, which old age packs up altogether, then the elderly whom the poem dramatises play their clownish namesakes as old fools and live in a despicable 'inverted childhood' as the poem ultimately intimates.

The resentful mood is a bold expression of the horror, in a rather psychological sense, which the speaker experiences as he analyses old age. Calling the poem both 'marvellous' and 'scary', Clive James assesses 'the brutalism of the opening diction' as 'a tip-off to the narrator's state of mind, which is, this time, fearful.'<sup>20</sup> Therefore, 'The Old Fools' compels the narrator who pretends to observe with disgust and evaluate from the outside to experience 'the horror of the blank mind, of having to do without a sense of one's pastness' even before he has to confront it 'head-on'.<sup>21</sup> The narrator vicariously has a taste of the horror, for 'the panic is really his own' and all his sarcasm, like 'wryness', is found to be 'tonally inadequate to the mystery and possible beauty of existence'.<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, the mind confronts a deadlock despite the lambent wit that the speaker

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<sup>19</sup> Stephen Regan, in *Philip Larkin* (p. 127), finds 'the brutal immediacy of Wilfred Owen's "Mental Cases" as relevant to the opening of "The Old Fools"'.  
<sup>20</sup> Clive James, *At the Pillars of Hercules* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 57.  
<sup>21</sup> Michael Saladyga, 'Philip Larkin And Survival Poetry', p. 14.  
<sup>22</sup> Terry Whalen, *Philip Larkin and English Poetry*, p. 23.



possesses and manipulates while he hypothesises about the old. In this stringent exploration of the possibilities, 'Larkin raises the terrifying issue of whether or not the formulation of a personal mythology based on one's own memories is of any real value'.<sup>23</sup> As one advances in age, self-consciousness relapses and the mind fails to cohere perceptions; thenceforth, 'the gap between perception and cognition is bridged only in the rare moments of epiphany.'<sup>24</sup>

The subversiveness in 'The Old Fools' is intellectually intended to shock and effect awareness. The poem gravitates towards its target in the form of an extended metaphor for dotage and infirmity that endeavours to bring to mind the injustice and grievances which existence, not only ageing, treats humankind to. In this sense, there is no opt-out, available to people of old age, except in extremis. If it seems cruel and heartless to drag old age through the mire, the satiric gesture is only superficial and meant to provoke the readers to contemplate on existence in a different light. The satire grows from a 'rational disapproval of the old fools' failure of physical control', which 'is confounded with the visceral compulsion to jeer, as a fascinated child jeers at disfigurement', subverting his sympathy, creating panic, and leading to distancing himself from their 'plight'. This is what Booth dubs as 'his raucous elation, his *Schadenfreude* that it is not yet *his* turn'. However, soon 'jeering' sways towards 'pensiveness' and then 'empathy'.<sup>25</sup> This multiple or schizophrenic model, which marks the commentator's stance, will persist up to the very end of the poem so that antithetical bearings operate simultaneously.

The poem emerges also as an extended question that embraces a series of sub-questions and queries, a strategy that entitles the first stanza to be 'a very graphic description, and an analytic thought process on the speaker's part' in which 'the movement

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<sup>23</sup> Michael Saladyga, 'Philip Larkin And Survival Poetry', p. 14.

<sup>24</sup> István D. Rác, 'Agnosticism, Masks and Monologues in Philip Larkin', p. 104.

<sup>25</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: the Poet's Plight*, pp. 190, 191.

of the thought-process is based on common sense or recognizable logic.’<sup>26</sup> Questions enlist thought processes and orient the informative inputs. Knowledge and in the long run definitiveness are sought fervently amid a world of scepticism and uncertainty. As the first line ‘What do they think has happened, the old fools, / To make them like this?’ (p. 81) spells out the polemic of the poem, four more winding questions with ‘do’ in the lead three times and ‘why’ once are amassed in the first stanza. The yes-no or short-answer questions work as default answers to the opening question in which the persona offers critical estimates of what goes on in the minds of the old fools of the title. This hypothetical thrust is further aided and reinforced by if-conditionals scattered across the stanza, such as ‘if they only chose’, ‘as if they were crippled or tight’, and ‘if they don’t’. The second stanza ends in a brief question, ‘How can they ignore it?’, while stanza three seems to offer a detailed collective answer. The last stanza closes with four brief questions which are packed together:

Can they never tell  
What is dragging them back, and how it will end? Not at night?  
Not when the strangers come? Never, throughout  
The whole hideous inverted childhood? (p. 82)

The inquisitive and interrogative, let alone the hypothetical, strata of the poem augment its intellectual and epistemological researching attitude. It is not only that the old people are mentally handicapped and consequently stupefied, but the debating persona, himself, is puzzled if not stupefied by the topic of his query as well as ‘the gaga infantilism of the old fools’.<sup>27</sup> The bafflement to which the critical voice is subordinated makes his position as foolish as the subjects of his research. While the old fools are ‘Not knowing how, not hearing who’, the polemical voice shares an equivalent status of non-knowledge, particularly as ignorance itself is involuntary, just like ageing and the feeble-mindedness it entails. This haziness of purpose and intention infects existence in its entirety and presents

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<sup>26</sup> Tijana Stojković, “Unnoticed in the Casual Light of Day”, pp. 59, 151.

<sup>27</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Writer*, p. 157.

an intellectual cul-de-sac, which is why perhaps Watson sees the poem as ‘an existential rebellion’.<sup>28</sup>

Likewise, across the ontological board, these questions are channelled into affording the critical and discontent mind opportunities to navigate through the maze of existence and land on some solutions to or at least understanding of its riddles on top of which are ageing and death. The ‘*faux naïf* technique’, which Booth attributes to the ‘blunt’ questioning led by Larkin’s persona, does not in the least reduce ‘the meditative authority’.<sup>29</sup> This is why reasoning is offered as one possible approach, manifested in the verb ‘think’ of the first line, which promises cognitive avenues and legitimates the pursuit of knowledge, deliberation, and in short the enrollment of a working mind. When the speaker reverts to ‘suppose’ in ‘Do they somehow suppose’ and then ‘fancy’ in ‘Or do they fancy there’s really been no change’, the mind-oriented reasoning deteriorates, making room for error, inaccuracy, or even falsehood and self-deception. The tight, balanced mental grip invested in ‘think’ (even when its shades of meaning sway more towards ‘believe’ than ‘rationalise’ or ‘ponder’) slackens. The mental decline of the aged is caricatured in half ridicule, half compassion, so that ‘suppose’ marks the advent of aberration and the satirist’s ‘psychology’ becomes ‘incoherent in rational terms’.<sup>30</sup> Before long, ‘fancy’ and then ‘thin continuous dreaming’ set the seal on the irreversible receding process. Likewise, the blend of ridicule and seriousness, of censure and compassion is intended to blur the distinction so that one flows so freely and smoothly into the other that it is hard to tell which is which.

Speculation as reasoning emerges with the shift in person from ‘they’ in the second stanza as a distant class to the ‘you’ that enlists a more direct approach and looks half-way towards empathy and then to an embarrassed ‘we’ as the argument heats up. Address is

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<sup>28</sup> J. R. Watson, ‘Clichés and Common Speech in Philip Larkin’s Poetry’, p. 154.

<sup>29</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*, p. 381.

<sup>30</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: the Poet’s Plight*, p. 191.

expected to change as ‘these noticeable related movements in the speaker’s thinking are accompanied by a shifting tone of voice’:<sup>31</sup>

At death, you break up: the bits that were you  
Start speeding away from each other for ever  
With no one to see. It’s only oblivion, true:  
We had it before, but then it was going to end,  
And was all the time merging with a unique endeavour  
To bring to bloom the million-petalled flower  
Of being here. Next time you can’t pretend  
There’ll be anything else. (p. 81)

This nihilistic reasoning mutates to philosophy, if not indeed mysticism or even theology proper when the deliberating voice embraces a more universal and collective approach in ‘we had it before’, in which Larkin ‘addresses the Lucretian point about preexistence’.<sup>32</sup> On the one hand, the narrator’s rationalisation leads him to conclude that humankind is ‘merely returning to the oblivion’ from which they ‘emerged at birth.’<sup>33</sup> On the other, the line of thought seems to argue, weigh, and assess an existentialistic theory of being akin to the Buddhist belief in reincarnation as evidenced in ‘Next time you can’t pretend’. Yen Mah in her *Watching the Tree to Catch a Hare* (2000) writes that the *Tao Te Ching* by Lao Zi is Larkin’s favourite book as she recalls him telling her, adding that ‘it’s a work of absolute genius!’<sup>34</sup> If so, then the lotus symbolism of the creation is echoed in ‘the million-petalled flower’. Nonetheless, the perception of existence which the poem hinges upon retains the earlier nihilistic shade. Existence, despite multiplicity, does not offer much variety or diversity, nor deviate from the chartered map in which old age and death are ineluctable.

When the poem laments ‘Not knowing how, not hearing who, the power / Of choosing gone’, the absence of choice and free will endorses the existential tenor further. In addition, the ‘philosophical composure’ gets unsettled and the speaker ‘reverts to awed

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<sup>31</sup> Tijana Stojković, “Unnoticed in the Casual Light of Day”, p. 151.

<sup>32</sup> William Kerrigan, ‘Larkin and the Difficult Subject’, *Essays in Criticism*, XLVIII/4 (1998), 291-307, at p. 296.

<sup>33</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*, p. 381.

<sup>34</sup> John Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, p. 251.

jeering, mimicking the old fools' witlessness'.<sup>35</sup> But while the commentator's critical logic escalates in 'Their looks show that they're for it: / Ash hair, toad hands, prune face dried into lines – / How can they ignore it?', the distant voice is resumed. Both the spiritual and physical dilapidation is summoned to the witness stand to prove the validity of his logic. The excruciating, humiliating agonies of old age prepare for the even more agonising torment of annihilation and death. It is not only death that sentences people to perdition; age claims their cognitive faculties, sometimes long before the physical deterioration. Hence, humankind are enmeshed in this matrix of existence whose pattern remains more or less the same. Though 'ignore' in 'How can they ignore it?' indicates a willed choice, it is the passive side of choice that 'ignore' operates on, lending a hand to a mind that prefers to play truant and not to ponder on a despicable destiny. That is also the area that fits in with non-knowledge, which stanza three arbitrates in sharp details.

Vociferous and irascible so far, the inquisitor betrays a charitable mind when he changes strategies. Instead of the sardonic tone, an objective and debating tone takes over in 'Perhaps being old is having lighted rooms / Inside your head, and people in them, acting. / People you know, yet can't quite name' (p. 81). In these lines, Booth recognises 'the pondering, meditative mode of Eliot's *Quartets*', except for 'its hints of spiritual insight reduced to a restless desultory ramble.'<sup>36</sup> The theory of 'lighted rooms' allows the old to 'achieve transcendence'.<sup>37</sup> Booth draws attention to Larkin's use of 'head', not mind, as the location of these 'unreal' and 'imaginary rooms' of an ultra existence, where 'at this extreme of physical being it is "dimensional extent" which matters.'<sup>38</sup> While the old are bodily present in their 'primitive' existence, their mental faculties, meant for superior existence, have long since departed to oblivion. The second person address is retained for

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<sup>35</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*, p. 381.

<sup>36</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Writer*, p. 158.

<sup>37</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*, p. 382.

<sup>38</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: the Poet's Plight*, p. 170.

persuasive ends where the situation looks like a face to face debate. Though barely surefooted, the debater proposes an apologia in the form of a theory, Alzheimer-like, to justify the relapse into puerility that marks ageing. Larkin maps out an entrancing, visionary metaphor of 'the lighted rooms' which treasure inside vivid memories of the distant past or the 'midsummer' of the heart of youth. The first stanza already makes a reference to light in 'Or sat through days of thin continuous dreaming / Watching light move?' where it symbolises the hurrying unconsciousness of time and wasted life or 'a ruthlessly geriatric vision of things', to quote Heaney.<sup>39</sup> That same symbolism is activated in the image of 'lighted rooms' of fantasy and dream. The lighted rooms are further furnished:

The rooms themselves, chairs and a fire burning,  
The blown bush at the window, or the sun's  
Faint friendliness on the wall some lonely  
Rain-ceased midsummer evening. That is where they live:  
Not here and now, but where all happened once. (pp. 81-2)

Far from hallucination, the rooms' interior suggests sobriety and sanity with the fire, window, and sun to accessorise the picture perfect of an undisturbed bliss and impeccable paradise or Elysium of withdrawal. Nevertheless, the old are imprisoned in two-dimensional rooms, and thus these rooms are bitterly flawed. The first dimension is hypothetical, almost cerebral, where reality and imagination are divorced. The second is temporal, where the time axis winds them back into a cataleptic past. In 'This is why they give / An air of baffled absence, trying to be there / Yet being here' (p. 82), the ubiquity of the two worlds is denied, investing the notion of absence from places of their preference, which are none other than the lighted rooms in the heads. The elderly are excused and acquitted of blame, but not of idiocy or even lunacy as to the tenacity with which they hang onto to their introvert cordon. While 'extinction' looms Alps high, their perception fails to discern 'How near it is.' Imperceptibility, which is equivalent to a mental shutdown or

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<sup>39</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'The Main of Light', p. 137.

blackout, guards them against alarm. Thus, the intellectual and cognitive degeneration is not a curse, but a blessing that eases the inevitable, imminent departure. It prepares them mentally and psychologically to be oblivious of demise and reflects a world view of oversimplification where 'The peak that stays in view wherever we go / For them is rising ground' (p. 82).

The concluding four-fold question is charged with an air of exasperation and compassion. The narrator vents his indignation, but also his pathos at the physical and mental impotence of old age. The closure is almost a rehearsal of the ideas detailed in the second stanza in which death looms tall and mighty as humanity's only way out. It also compels empathy in its collective sense with 'we' and the future tense, not to mention the exclamatory 'well', igniting doubt and surprise so that the air of bafflement persists. The promissory last line, 'We shall find out', supplies an all-in-all answer to the question/riddle template of the poem. Discovery and truth await those who live long to experience the 'hideous inverted childhood', though the imparting of such knowledge is by no means guaranteed. This secret knowledge remains inaccessible as a locked-up hoard in the notorious lighted rooms, which the poem introduces earlier, or possibly the dark rooms which the poem connives at. Apparently, the old fools take their secrets with them to the graves; knowledge is withheld from the inquirer, a reason that fuels him with rage even further.

Relevant to ageing and death, 'The Building' probes an area of existence which is just as disturbing. Akin to 'The Old Fools', this poem enacts an 'existential rebellion', which leads Larkin to write 'savagely of death'.<sup>40</sup> Osborne classes 'The Building' and 'The Old Fools' among 'Larkin's meditations upon nothingness', where 'oblivion is utter extinction'.<sup>41</sup> More than one poem ('Hospital Visits' and 'Ambulances' and even perhaps

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<sup>40</sup> J. R. Watson, 'The other Larkin', p. 359.

<sup>41</sup> John Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, p. 254.

‘Days’) harbours ‘a tendency to treat the medical profession as an index to the dreadful nature of existence’, facilitating the link with existentialist polarities.<sup>42</sup> Intellectually provocative, the poem enacts a procedure of awakening. In this vein, Timms introduces ‘The Building’ as ‘a dramatic monologue that recreates the state of mind of a certain man undergoing a particular experience, and shows his gradual realization of its significance’. Further, Timms delineates it as ‘a kind of ““Church Going” Revisited”’, an idea that the poem itself later insinuates by conjuring up cathedrals. Among the many ‘resemblances’ is that ‘both poems dramatize the movement of the speaker’s mind’.<sup>43</sup> As to structure, ‘the eight-line rhyme-scheme’ ‘willfully’ fitted into a seven-line stanzaic form bears witness to Larkin’s ‘imaginative energy.’<sup>44</sup>

Riddle-like, the poem glosses over the building of the title though it exerts a bogus effort to dissociate it from the hospital of almost every reader’s conjecture. Accordingly, ‘that the building is indeed a hospital is more an inference than a statement’, an inference interwoven ‘with an indication of somewhere else’.<sup>45</sup> Larkin does not intend to obscure the building so much as signal a concern of his, which is pertinent to the seemingly byzantine ambience associated with the place, being itself laden with abstruseness and opacity. Omitting the name of the building, the narrator offers the metaphorical and visual dimensions free leash, creating ‘suspense’. Circumventing direct appellations, the poem allows the mind to improvise, at least temporarily creating an effect that ‘resembles a jigsaw puzzle in the piece-meal construction of the whole’. Further, this puzzle-like effect is aided by ‘another strategy’, which is the ‘use of small, synecdochic and metonymic details.’<sup>46</sup> A surreal and bizarre edifice rises up in the mind as one goes through the first

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<sup>42</sup> Richard Bradford, *First Boredom, Then Fear*, pp. 218.

<sup>43</sup> David Timms, ““Church Going” Revisited”: “The Building” and the Notion of Development in Larkin’s Poetry’, *Phoenix*, 11/12 (1973/4), 13-25, at pp. 16, 22, and *Philip Larkin*, p. 130.

<sup>44</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*, p. 377.

<sup>45</sup> Richard Bradford, *First Boredom, Then Fear*, pp. 217-18.

<sup>46</sup> Tijana Stojković, “Unnoticed in the Casual Light of Day”, p. 153.



stanza, which whets curiosity and evokes eeriness ‘in the mode of Kafka or Fellini’.<sup>47</sup> The first line gives a false notion of grandeur in ‘Higher than the handsomest hotel’. But when ambulances are hinted at in ‘At the entrance are not taxis’, fear creeps in. The scruffy porters reinforce an ambience of unwholesomeness. The seventh line affirms the scary mood, stating that ‘in the hall / As well as creepers hangs a frightening smell.’ The architectural beauty and perfection are outweighed by an inspiration of fear, horror, and weirdness evoked in the wake of this ‘superstitious’ journey into ‘the metaphorical world of extinction’.<sup>48</sup> Its outlandishness, along with the prominence evidenced in ‘The lucent comb shows up for miles’, shyly invites a range of interpretations (for instance, a museum, prison, tower (block), airport, or skyscraper), standing tall in the middle of a century-old neighborhood. The second stanza reduces the alternatives to one: ‘close-ribbed streets’ and the ‘frightening smell’ betray an air of discomfort and displeasure, characteristic of malaise.

The second stanza populates and furnishes the interior of the building so that it might feel less creepy and the ghastliness of the opening might be dissipated. The atmosphere is faintly normalised with ‘paperbacks, and tea at so much a cup, / Like an airport lounge’, which slightly reduces the creepiness. The airport simile even goes so far as to confer a mood of luxury and vacationing, though the image of a departure lounge is equally present in the back of the mind. The endeavour soon proves futile, as ‘those who tamely sit / On rows of steel chairs turning the ripped mags’ hardly flatter the place. The ‘local bus’ simile is minted next and accessorised with ‘outdoor clothes and half-filled shopping bags’ before the image of ‘faces restless and resigned’ deals the optimism a parlous blow. The casual and non-dramatic slice of existence which goes unnoticed on a daily basis is weighed next to the challenging or even risky avenue. Indeed, the mind of the

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<sup>47</sup> William H. Pritchard, ‘Larkin’s Presence’, in *Philip Larkin: the Man and his Work*, ed. Dale Salwak (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), 71-89, at p. 83.

<sup>48</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*, p. 376.

narrator is crowded with images, associations, vagrant thoughts, surmises, and inferences so that these are indeed ‘corridors of imagination’, opening up at the mere touch to unfurl ‘a metaphysical hinterland that reaches back’ to ‘Dantesque, even Virgilian’ Hades, not to mention a ‘Kafkaesque terrain’.<sup>49</sup> Trespassing, the narrator wanders through the mystical labyrinth aided by awe and wonder. Thereupon, the mind engineers a procession of images which are intended to produce an ambience of uneasiness and angst, let alone chary expectation. The hushed atmosphere of the waiting room, one may assume, magnifies inanimate sounds of ripped magazines being flipped through or cups fitted ‘back to saucers’ as well as paralanguage such as ‘cough, or glance’, reflecting the perceptive alertness of the sensory apparatus.

When clients are mentioned, they are ‘Humans, caught / On ground curiously neutral’ (p. 84), which reduces individual persons to ‘humans’, stripping them of all except the core or ‘the fundamentals’ in the face of ‘biological extinction’.<sup>50</sup> Differences of ‘homes and names / Suddenly in abeyance’ topple down; the building (just like illness), the poem claims, is biased to none. The area of neutrality appears to be holistic, where even the age difference vanishes. This thought is even further buttressed when the age parameter is dispensed with in the reference to ‘that vague age that claims // The end of choice, the last of hope’ (p. 85). One, of course, can sense the age paranoia still consistent, but no longer a top priority in this context. This virtual fraternity of distress or infliction endows equality or neutrality on whose ground ‘all // Here to confess that something has gone wrong.’ The resort to religious vocabulary – ‘confess’ – establishes a link to ambulances, which are ‘closed like confessionals’ (‘Ambulances’, p. 63) and ‘Days’ in which both ‘the priest and the doctor’ (p. 60) are summoned to wrap up existence neatly. Pertinent to the religious parameter emerges the notion of ‘wrong’ which is later modified:

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<sup>49</sup> Barbara Everett, *Poets in Their Time*, pp. 246, 247.

<sup>50</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*, p. 375.

It must be error of a serious sort,  
For see how many floors it needs, how tall  
It's grown by now, and how much money goes  
In trying to correct it. (p. 85)

It brings to mind the ideas of sin and redemption, but from a rather secular perspective. Minus fire and brimstone, the building has the air of a secular purgatory and a miniature Doomsday. The world inside the building is presumably a hive of activity, but has instead about it the quiet of solemnity if not of morbidity.

Realising each other's predicaments, the clients/patients are struck speechless in a zone where words lose their edge. Like a science fiction setting, the spatial details in 'For past these doors are rooms, and rooms past those, / And more rooms yet, each one further off // And harder to return from' inspire fear and horror. They are intended to raise the awareness regarding the tacit anxiety and even panic that have to be kept under check. Ignorance or even illiteracy is also exposed, culminating in the observer's exclamatory enquiry: 'and who knows / Which he will see, and when?' The fear that entering this building could be a one-way ticket haunts those who have to entrust their lives to the building. To stay in one of the farthest rooms, the poem suggests, is like being an exile from the world of hustle and bustle or having a death sentence. The narrator is keen to solicit both the consent and awareness of the addressee by a direct approach and unmediated address first in the fourth stanza, urging the addressee to 'see how many floors it needs' and elsewhere later. This approach reflects what Whalen refers to as the 'empirical intelligence', 'imaginative logic', 'empirical discovery', and 'experiential journey' in which 'the physical world' and 'the process of thought' entwine.<sup>51</sup> Then two stanzas later, a similar invitation is voiced in 'For the moment, wait, / Look down at the yard.' In both, sight and observation are preached and the outsider as well as insider are inveigled to engage in the informative eye-opening. Larkin implements a 'stratagem' or

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<sup>51</sup> Terry Whalen, *Philip Larkin and English Poetry*, pp. 102, 103.

‘tactic to accomplish shifting perspectives: three times in that poem he directs his readers to “see,” and once to “look.” Often he directs our attention to a catalog of objects that culminates in one powerful impression.’<sup>52</sup> The target is to construct ‘an “inside,” empathetic point of view for the reader to take.’<sup>53</sup>

The crowd, the speaker takes notice of, go about their business unaware outside the red brick building. It is a world which counts the building as one of its props, yet still the latter seems to be estranged from it. The daily trivialities and invisible details ‘Where kids chalk games, and girls with hair-dos fetch // Their separates from the cleaners’ (p. 85), which exclude the inmates, take place around the inauspicious building. The outside world ‘is ordinary, even drab– but alive, and suddenly attractive when seen from inside the building.’<sup>54</sup> The awareness of this contradiction prepares for the transcendental awakening to follow:

O world,  
Your loves, your chances, are beyond the stretch  
Of any hand from here! And so, unreal,  
A touching dream to which we all are lulled  
But wake from separately. In it, conceits  
And self-protecting ignorance congeal  
To carry life, collapsing only when

Called to these corridors (for now once more  
The nurse beckons –). (p. 85)

This resourceful, vivid, diverse world proves to be a dream, a figment of the imagination, a sham, and a hoax. It hamstring awareness and hence holds people captive. The code of survival lies in arrogance and ignorance. Though neither welcomed nor acknowledged, knowledge dawns along with humility in the abandonment of ‘these corridors’ where the seriously or fatally ill, very much like the aged, revert to dependence and are no longer their own despotic masters. Unfit for the outside world, they are waiting in these claustrophobic corridors at the beck and call of their medical patrons. Those who have to

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<sup>52</sup> Patricia Ross French, ‘Living by Bridges: Philip Larkin’s Resisting Subtext’, p. 93.

<sup>53</sup> Tijana Stojković, “*Unnoticed in the Casual Light of Day*”, p. 154.

<sup>54</sup> Laurence Lerner, *Philip Larkin*, p. 33.

lose the autonomous identity and be marooned in this insular swathe of existence are next categorised:

Others, not knowing it, have come to join  
The unseen congregations whose white rows  
Lie set apart above – women, men;  
Old, young; crude facets of the only coin

This place accepts. All know they are going to die.  
Not yet, perhaps not here, but in the end,  
And somewhere like this. (pp. 85-6)

The knowing-unknowing equation surfaces once more, causing even further confusion. On the one hand, the inmates-to-be of the building are mere clueless congregations with ‘crude facets’ as their passport into this territory. On the other, they are not altogether in denial for they have the primordial knowledge that death is the final destination and abode no matter how long it is staved off. A place like the building of the poem exists as a cogent proof of this apparently poorly deployed knowledge of the impending death sentence, for ‘That is what it means, / This clean-sliced cliff’ (p. 86). This latent knowledge is not wielded well enough to forge stoicism and complaisance. The unarguable knowledge lies dormant as it does no credit to humanity’s ‘struggle to transcend / The thought of dying’. Nonetheless, such a man-made edifice lends an opportunity, even though false and illusory, to plunge into the abyss and emerge unscathed. Meanwhile, the thought of science superseding religion in the modern age is challenged and doubted if not recanted: ‘unless its powers / Outbuild cathedrals’. This is the work of ‘secular consciousness’, as Regan phrases it, which maintains a degree of probity and integrity, guarding against deception.<sup>55</sup> However, rebuttal does not hamper humankind, hence the ‘wasteful, weak, propitiatory flowers’ brought each evening as cheering gifts to the patients, apparently promising or hoping for a quick recovery. Flowers operate also as valedictory tokens of the no longer present bloom. Further, their association with funerals makes death hover around. The ‘flowers’ line, unhoused ‘of the stanzaic pattern as a way of housing them’, effects ‘an imagist epiphany,

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<sup>55</sup> Stephen Regan, *Philip Larkin*, p. 58.

the discovery of a telling clue.’<sup>56</sup> Coming almost ‘like an afterthought’, the solitary, concluding line reduces ‘theological and rational consolations... to the ineffectual emotional solace of flowers.’<sup>57</sup>

### III

The obsession with existence is most vehemently duplicated in ‘Livings’, a monologue-like trilogy that reads like pages torn from personal diaries and journals. Three historically and vocational reflective nodes are hosted in the poem, making it ‘a modern experiment in relativity and points of view.’<sup>58</sup> In this respect, the poems are barely agronomical. ‘Livings’ ‘highlights a philosophical issue by allowing an apparent lack of connection between things which ought to be connected’.<sup>59</sup> In these three scantily furnished storylines, life is epitomised and boiled down to private reflections and assessments, characteristic of baring one’s heart and soul. Being ‘three mask lyrics’ in Rácz’s words, the triad allows the minds of three diverse personae to be invaded and pried open so that the authorial voice remains secure and detached.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, the poems, as monologues, invest and retain a private, clandestine air of confessions. Though seemingly confidential, off-the-record, and *entre nous*, the threefold narrative worlds fall into a mini panorama to which almost everyone relates. The trio operate like ‘a triptych’ of three integrated panels where ‘each gives a compressed, lucid portrayal of a certain way of making a living’.<sup>61</sup> However, the lucidity claimed is highly questionable.<sup>62</sup> As ‘the felicitous title’ with its explicit punning animates, the poems explore the multi-faceted existence, whether as a burden, delight, or neither, turning the light on:

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<sup>56</sup> Terry Whalen, *Philip Larkin and English Poetry*, p. 104.

<sup>57</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: the Poet’s Plight*, p. 190.

<sup>58</sup> Tijana Stojković, “Unnoticed in the Casual Light of Day”, p. 196.

<sup>59</sup> M. W. Rowe, *Philip Larkin: Art and Self*, p. 3.

<sup>60</sup> István D. Rácz, ‘Agnosticism, Masks and Monologues in Philip Larkin’, p. 144.

<sup>61</sup> John Wain, ‘The Importance of Philip Larkin’, *The American Scholar*, 55/3 (1986), 349-64, at p. 357.

<sup>62</sup> Wain suggests that it is a ship steward whose voice is heard in ‘Livings II’ though admits the possibility of other interpretations in a footnote (p. 631).

a characteristically Larkinesque kind of poem which he had inaugurated as far back as 'Wedding-Wind' in 1946: a first-person evocation of the feel of being alive, capturing a character at a moment of epiphany. The poetic point in each case is to catch the existential plight of 'living', not to explicate any historical or social theme.<sup>63</sup>

The poems, in addition, place their major characters in a narrative world of very condensed nature and register the responses these personae have in reaction to not only living in the world, but also blending, melting into, or even distancing oneself from it. Behind these stances, minds that have grown analytical of and critical to the versions of living passed over to them so that they found themselves, almost trapped, obliged to indulge in and do honour to it. As such, the question that is urgently raised is whether one really chooses one's own life-time path and whether choice itself is iterative or a one-time opportunity, close to reversal or reappraisal. 'Livings I' typifies this area of disturbing thought where the mind overviews the perspective in 1929. There is hardly anything interesting in the story of a salesman whose business takes him on boring trips to places where the strictly and solely business atmosphere is hardly disguised. To do his business justice, the salesman dons the mask and performs the role perfectly well. Every third month, he has to devote three days to that shire (he does not disclose its name), and immerse himself in its ambience. He goes as far as researching the place, reading its local paper for instance, to prepare himself for the part he plays there. He even partakes in its social activities over 'whisky in the Smoke Room:', befriending 'Clough, / Margetts, the Captain, Dr. Watterson' (p. 77), and discussing 'Government tariffs, wages, price of stock.' Social events and games are conducted business-like, for the talk is barely phatic.

For the stretch of three days, his mind acclimatises or rather is reconciled to this agricultural strip of 'farmers, things like dips and feed.' When he pauses to comment on art, or rather the pictures that happen to decorate the walls, his 'philistinism', as Everett intimates, surfaces in casually labelling them as 'comic— hunting, trenches, stuff' and then

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<sup>63</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: the Poet's Plight*, p. 31.

in the sweeping generalisation that ‘Nobody minds or notices’ (p. 77).<sup>64</sup> In one sense, being attentive to what escapes the observation of others, he regards himself above the business circle he makes a living through. It is a schizophrenic life style in which the contracted life version of the three-day business trip does not seem to be amiss in any aspect. The only problem is that he has fallen in the rut and he knows it as evidenced in the same hotel and the single room he books every time he is on the road, let alone his ‘lean old leather case’. That same mind, which seemed to be reconciled earlier to this business designation, entertains doubts as to the emptiness of ‘the square’ and the ‘big sky’ that hangs over and ‘Drains down the estuary like the bed / Of a gold river’. The marginal or even apocryphal world that he briefly inhabits jerks him back into sobriety and awareness which, prove to be a rich gold mine:

I drowse  
Between ex-Army sheets, wondering why  
I think it’s worth while coming. Father’s dead:  
He used to, but the business now is mine.  
It’s time for change, in nineteen twenty-nine. (p. 77)

It is 1929, that is, eleven years since the war ended, but still war relics survive in or rather penetrate all facets of life, bedding sheets included. The irony deepens, for while the poem drops a casual hint about the war, the reader’s mind whisks in ‘pathos’ to the 1929 of the ‘impending disaster’.<sup>65</sup> The 1929 which appears as if casually hedged ‘like an afterthought or Postscript’ is the ‘ominous’ year of the Great Crash and prelude to the “low dishonest decade” of the 1930s’.<sup>66</sup> Being oblivious to the imminent economical crisis, the businessman cursorily revisits his perhaps ex-service in the war, whose impact imprints on the mind this attitude of restlessness and shiftlessness, hence the ensuing ‘wondering’ session. The ‘ex-Army sheets’ seems to be a disappointing starting point of a

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<sup>64</sup> Barbara Everett, ‘Art and Larkin’, in *Philip Larkin: the Man and his Work*, ed. Dale Salwak (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), 129-39, at p. 133.

<sup>65</sup> Simon Petch, *The Art of Philip Larkin*, p. 103.

<sup>66</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: the Poet’s Plight*, p. 132.



contemplative interval, which, though it throws a perfunctory innuendo about the war, refrains from revealing too much or diving in depth. Besides while his mind dwells on a past turmoil, it is ironically unaware of the impending depression about to take place that same year. Instead, his mind is seized by a spasm of scepticism, which spirals down to questioning the legacy passed to him through his father who founded the business and charted its maps. The deliberation of his situation tells him that he is not robbed of choice altogether. Family business is not necessarily hereditary and thus can be waived. Profound revaluations and revelations cascade from a stint of self-realisation and self-knowledge. Present to his mind and hence influencing his conclusions is the ‘implicit consciousness’ of other ‘needs’ which his current vocation fails to satisfy.<sup>67</sup> This awakening, the poem suggests, is not inspired by rubbing one’s nose in sordid reality, an act, which proves to be after all transcendental, knowledgeable, and mutating, but by an upward look at the evening sky, stretching above an empty square, ushering a priceless discovery. Fortunately, the narrator is not blind to the repletion lurking in the hollowness of a life post. No business hindsight could predict that the change he was contemplating would materialise in 1929, whether he was serious enough about change to reach for it or not.

‘Livings II’ is a one hundred and eighty degrees shift from I. It switches over to an incompatible sphere which both language and theme reflect adeptly and the ‘naturalistic context’ of its onset is followed by ‘excited leaps between ideas.’<sup>68</sup> The poem adopts a ‘sublime, impersonal mode’ and invests ‘a grim secular asceticism.’<sup>69</sup> Lerner finds the poem one ‘of pure vision’ and refers it back to ‘The North Ship: 65°N’; the affinity with ‘the extravagant symbolism of his first youthful volume, *The North Ship*’, is likewise

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<sup>67</sup> Simon Petch, *The Art of Philip Larkin*, p. 103.

<sup>68</sup> Andrew Motion, ‘Philip Larkin and Symbolism’, p. 46.

<sup>69</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: the Poet’s Plight*, p. 168.

acknowledged by Booth.<sup>70</sup> The five stanzas of the poem mimicking the tall lighthouse ‘in their short line widths and free verse structure’, the absence of a coherent rhyme, and the cryptic imagery contribute to setting ‘Livings II’ apart.<sup>71</sup> As the readers’ hindsight adjusts to the mercantile jargon of the opening poem, they are taken aback by the new lingo and vision of the second, and by the assertion of its unpredictability and ‘surprisingness’.<sup>72</sup> To begin with, the mental perspective that launches the arguments in the second ‘Livings’ is a plunge downwards where the speaker darts a look at the shore below and wonders how ‘Seventy feet down / The sea explodes upwards’. Despite his claustrophobic locus, the narrator’s vision is by no means hampered. This prospect from above documents a lofty worldview of a persona making a home of a lighthouse, very much like the legendary dwellers of ivory towers in their insularity and alienation. Further, his solitude and ‘aloofness’ awaken him ‘to the mysterious presence of the elemental world, its beauty and its energy’.<sup>73</sup> He is different in that he does not betray any ivory-tower tendencies other than his fascination with the sea world below. Nevertheless, ‘in “Livings II” staccato unrhymed trimeters serve to articulate the lighthouse-keeper’s fierce anathema on society.’<sup>74</sup> ‘Livings II’ has its solitary persona absorbed in the majestic seascape and the wrathful surfs; his mind summons ‘rejoice!’ in response to nature. With its celebration of the primitive and elemental, the *rejoice* in ‘Livings II’ takes the reader to ‘All catches alight’ which opens *The North Ship*, as well as Yeats’s ‘The Gyres’ where it first originated. One is prone to suspect that the watery outrage inspires the joy and thrill in the lighthouse keeper as it perhaps recalls to his attention the hustle and bustle of the world outside. Or, a stormy night is a reminder, renewal, and assertion of his role as a regulator,

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<sup>70</sup> Laurence Lerner, ‘Larkin’s Strategies’, *Critical Survey*, 1/2, (1989), 113-21, at p. 118; James Booth, ‘Philip Larkin: Lyricism, Englishness and Postcoloniality’, in *Philip Larkin*, ed. Stephen Regan (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1997), 187-210, at p. 191.

<sup>71</sup> Terry Whalen, *Philip Larkin and English Poetry*, p. 67.

<sup>72</sup> John Wain, ‘The Importance of Philip Larkin’, p. 359.

<sup>73</sup> Terry Whalen, *Philip Larkin and English Poetry*, p. 67.

<sup>74</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: the Poet’s Plight*, p. 12.

guide and guard, a trio on which the marine world relies. Hence, the first stanza betrays a mental attitude of ecstasy if not indeed of pride and haughtiness, which are absent from 'Livings I' whose persona deliberates on a professional makeover. It also invests an attitude of security and compatibility in relation to the job props and demands, unlike the persona in I who emerges as an unacknowledged misfit. Hence, while 'Livings I' relays the inconveniences of an inherited business and perhaps the absence of originality and personal signature, II emerges as a song of praise and an ode celebrating the vigour and dynamism of a bend of mind, reconciled to the *métier* and a mentality, fully communing with the environment. The latter sense is vividly and energetically present in the second stanza:

Rocks writhe back to sight.  
Mussels, limpets,  
Husband their tenacity  
In the freezing slither –  
Creatures, I cherish you! (p. 78)

This is the voice of 'the disguised platonist' who 'exults in his freedom.'<sup>73</sup> It sounds like a pagan prayer offered to appease a wrathful god and to praise midget creatures that survive the frothy breakers. As such, the transcendental and sublime attend to and coexist with the professional, that is, grace is synchronised with labour. And indeed duty soon calls in the face of the approaching foul weather. The world filtered through this consciousness takes on naturalistic masks and nocturnal presences. It relapses to primitiveness and originality. Hence, cricket-like, 'Radio rubs its legs, / Telling me of elsewhere', keeping the keeper posted. The same applies to the 'moth world' of the next stanza, drawing a visionary vignette of a world going dark, wild, mysterious, and ruthless. It seems up to the speaker to light it back to brilliance, order, and security. When the 'loose moth world' strays in the darkness and 'leather-black waters' are unleashed, the lighthouse keeper finds himself

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<sup>73</sup> Tom Paulin, 'Into the heart of Englishness', 173.

named as the master of the puppet-show, hence the elevated perspective of an almost Olympic deity, which he pontificates from:

Guarded by brilliance  
I set plate and spoon,  
And after, divining-cards.  
Lit shelved liners  
Grove like mad worlds westward. (p. 78)

The ‘manic spasm’ these lines betray communes with the coziness and incandescent atmosphere of his oracle-like habitat.<sup>76</sup> The lighthouse keeper is like Prometheus divining destinies and scattering blessings of light and guidance. In so doing, he achieves both ‘authority as well as...mystery.’<sup>77</sup> His task is to restore balance and sanity to world-like liners. Lunacy is reserved for the liners sailing westward, not to the raging brine though.

‘Livings III’ looks like a one night entry in a journal, or a piece, or a paragraph highlighted from a diary, which keeps record of forgettable meal routines. Wain reads the poem as ‘an engraved illustration to a rich, quirky eighteenth-century novel’, though Petch locates it tentatively a century earlier.<sup>78</sup> The speaker is a subordinate in rank for the reference to the absent ‘Master’ decides his social or professional status. Before long, the central persona in ‘Livings III’ is assumed to adopt the voice of a don from Cambridge, with ‘sizar’ and ‘Snape’ supporting the last inference.<sup>79</sup> If ‘Livings’ is intended to celebrate a trinity of selves, then III with its sophisticated intellectual persona stabilises the composite so that the poem exposes three disparate facets of human labour, viz, a profitable vocation, an eerie occupation, and an academic career. It is also a trinity of mentalities: the commercial, eccentric/innate, and intellectual, though this triple inventory is selective rather than exhaustive.

With tongues loosened by the port which ‘goes round so much the faster’ (p. 78), the conversers in III have the topic array of the dinner conversation range from the trivial to

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<sup>76</sup> Seamus Heaney, ‘The Main of Light’, p. 136.

<sup>77</sup> Simon Petch, *The Art of Philip Larkin*, p. 104.

<sup>78</sup> John Wain, ‘The Importance of Philip Larkin’, p. 357; Simon Petch, *The Art of Philip Larkin*, p. 103.

<sup>79</sup> John Wain, ‘The Importance of Philip Larkin’, p. 357.

the serious (presumably legal, anatomical, political, religious) and from prospective business gains and profits to mundane gossip. However, the drink which introduces the talk in the first stanza and boosts it later in ‘The wine heats temper and complexion’ (p. 79) is a catalytic agent of garrulousness and token of a thought flux, but also of insobriety. Overall, there is a touch of absurdity and even frivolousness in the topics which ‘are raised with no less ease’ now that the Master does not preside over the table. The farcicality or flippancy governs even when a legislative query is probed in ‘Which advowson looks the fairest’ (p. 78) with the pun on ‘looks’ and ‘fairest’. The same applies to the academic plane; the presumptuous terminological discussion of ‘*pudendum mulieris*’, one may expect, takes a scatological and crude turn. The question proper is reserved to a pseudo-political, pseudo-theological area of thought. In ‘Why is Judas like Jack Ketch?’ (p. 78). Jack Ketch, the infamous executioner of the seventeenth century whose brutality is proverbially diabolic is summoned up probably in an attempt to draw character sketches, if not proper evaluations. The liberal discussion of a tyrannical figure helps to locate the time of conversation within the safe zones of a later date. The shifting conversation is indicative of inclusiveness, but it is also noncommittal, and even indecisive, hence the abruptness of topic change. By the same token, the way the conversation fares and topics are picked is the litmus test sounding the intellectual bend of the then contemporary academia.

Topics, soon exhausted and fluctuating like ‘candleflames’ which ‘grow thin, then broaden’, prepare for the butler ‘Starveling’ whose name echoes an impoverished environment whether in literal or metaphorical senses. With his introduction rises the wintery inconvenience that necessitates the setting of ‘a jordan’ ‘behind the screen’ to save time, as the speaker claims, especially since ‘The fields around are cold and muddy’ (p. 79).<sup>80</sup> At this point, the conversation hits a deadlock and thoughts go bankrupt before wine

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<sup>80</sup> Jordan oddly and ironically enough conjures the biblical river of Jordan, not to mention its status as proper noun.

helps to wrap up the night more or less decently with ‘Oath-enforced assertions’ flying ‘On rheumy fevers, resurrection, / Regicide and rabbit pie’ (p. 79). Once more, the awkwardness of the conversational cocktail is an emblem of a tipsy subconsciousness and hence verging on bantering. A conversation over dinner is not expected to be so strung up that it would look like an academic seminar and the way topics are bartered and/or leapt over betrays impatience and awkwardness. There is an esoteric element of haste latent within the ease stated earlier. It remains vague whether it is the meal or the conversation which the diners/talkers rush themselves through.

Once the meal is over, a sense of liberation correlates with the contemplation of the outside wilderness, close urbanity, and academic props, which is reminiscent of I and II. Nonetheless, the nightscape, cold and muddy as it is, reflects psyches that are just as shiftless and troubled. Like a jumbled *mélange*, ‘A sizar shivers at his study’ is on a par with ‘The kitchen cat has made a kill’. All diverse pawns contribute to the sum total of existence. The mind, however, is struck not by the procedures of the world below as much as by the vastness above, where ‘Chaldean constellations / Sparkle over crowded roofs’ (p. 79). While the recondite atmosphere prevails indoors, ‘a world grotesque, uncouth and yet radiant with an aura of the marvellous’, as Lindop phrases it, stretches outdoors.<sup>81</sup> The heavenward perspective of as an ancient charted constellation as those Chaldea devised looks like an ideal closure to a mini epic. It offers a concise, but pithy synopsis of a cosmos whose elements fall into a perfect harmony and stability despite disparity. It also resumes an interest in the galactic and extraterrestrial, which ‘Here’ tentatively cites and ‘High Windows’ eulogises. It is this trend which sounds unearthly and peculiar that Larkin glides into unannounced with all due elegance and splendour. Osborne detects an ‘Eliotic vein’ in ‘Livings III’, whose ‘ending... splices past and present, sacred and profane, in a manner

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<sup>81</sup> Grevel Lindop, ‘Being Different from Yourself: Philip Larkin in the 1970s’, in *British Poetry Since 1970: a Critical Survey*, eds. Peter Jones and Michael Schmidt (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1980), 46-54, at p. 48.

highly reminiscent of the close of “Sweeney Among the Nightingales””.<sup>82</sup> In all, the three pieces coalesce urbanity, primitiveness, and intellectuality all together into the existential index.

#### IV

This skyward view of existence with its liberating and transcendental thrust attends to the title poem ‘High Windows’, which has no scruples about coordinating the secular and more accurately the libidinal with the spiritual or rather celestial. Even so, the argument the poem bolsters up does not appear like profanity sprinkled with sanctity or vice versa. The binary argument remains like two opposite routes, effortlessly bent in order to meet at a cross point; from that point on, they either converge or diverge without significant consequences. And like ‘Livings III’, which lets its argument simmer down to a murmur against a version of living that is highly estimated, ‘High Windows’ appends tranquil meditation to the vociferous claims and protests. Scepticism lingers in the air from the very start; the launching point is far from certain, with ‘guess’ to orient the challenging hypothesis. Nonetheless, ‘guess’ is supported by ‘know’ and ‘see’ which trigger ‘the mental pattern’ and guide ‘the poem’s perceptions’.<sup>83</sup> This is why the poem pivots around a speculative core, supported by observation, fallible knowledge, wonder, and dream, which ‘imply wishful thinking rather than definitive insight’.<sup>84</sup>

While the poem ‘meditates on the human pursuit of happiness’, it resorts to ‘colloquial brutality’.<sup>85</sup> The voyeur’s attitude is charged with a long pent-up anger at existing in an era where life was kept under restraint and then being a witness to the social paradigm shift towards liberalism too late to take part in it. However, what is perceived as freedom for one generation may be taken for granted by another so that it no longer goes

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<sup>82</sup> John Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, p. 59.

<sup>83</sup> Simon Petch, *The Art of Philip Larkin*, p. 97.

<sup>84</sup> Stephen Cooper, *Philip Larkin: Subversive Writer*, p. 171.

<sup>85</sup> Barbara Everett, *Poets in Their Time*, p. 239.

under the label of freedom, a matter that enacts ‘the recursiveness, or, more precisely, the unchangeability of human nature despite the diachronic changes of ideologies and language’.<sup>86</sup> So, the lynchpin of the argument lodges in the rationale that ‘every generation is liberated from an old inhibition that the previous generation was still bound by’.<sup>87</sup> The ‘historical context’ borrowed by the narrator helps to advance the reasoning task he shoulders up ‘by imagining the hypothetical resentment of an older generation for his own younger free-thinking self’.<sup>88</sup> In anthropological or sociological terms, both inhibitive and liberating processes are ongoing infinitely, ‘thus gradual liberation in accordance with the “development” of human society is only an illusion.’<sup>89</sup> In this instance, the complainer finds himself speaking on behalf of an entire generation whose ‘long slide / To happiness’ was blocked by ‘outdated’ dogmas long enough to make the liberation forty years later a further deprivation. In this sense, judgement acquires a cyclic ‘vision’ where the narrator passes a verdict relevant to the younger generation, ‘which replicates an imaginary predecessor’s judgment on his earlier self’.<sup>90</sup> When the mind is rolled back in time, the retrospection verges on naivety:

I know this is paradise

Everyone old has dreamed of all their lives –  
 Bonds and gestures pushed to one side  
 Like an outdated combine harvester,  
 And everyone young going down the long slide

To happiness, endlessly. (p. 80)

None seemed to have anticipated the kind of liberties which ‘the hedonism of the 1960s’ licensed, creating ‘a sexual utopia’, an evaluation the poem later revises into ‘a *dystopian* nightmare.’<sup>91</sup> As the poem converges the old/young perspectives, creating ‘a perceptive shared by’ the old and the young alike, the narrator projects himself ‘as both

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<sup>86</sup> Tijana Stojković, “Unnoticed in the Casual Light of Day”, p. 140.

<sup>87</sup> István D. Rácz, ‘Agnosticism, Masks and Monologues in Philip Larkin’, p. 115.

<sup>88</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*, p. 306

<sup>89</sup> István D. Rácz, ‘Agnosticism, Masks and Monologues in Philip Larkin’, p. 115.

<sup>90</sup> Peter Snowdon, ‘Larkin’s Conceit’, *Critical Survey*, 3/1 (1991), 61-70, at p. 67.

<sup>91</sup> Stephen Cooper, *Philip Larkin: Subversive Writer*, p. 171.



representatively old and representatively young', making possible the interaction between 'consciousness of self' and 'consciousness of others'.<sup>92</sup>

The rejection and replacement of the outdated custodial contraption has been a cherished dream of the narrator's generation whose comprehension of happiness, as he claims, is epitomised in the concept of sexual freedom. The sexual revolution has knocked down one of the pillars on which the old school was founded; in consequence, shackles and fetters collapsed. The physical liberation ushers far more intricate exemptions, latitudes, and licences where the powerful conservative institutions suffer irretrievable losses. To the mind of the speaker, the antecedent generation had to grapple with psychological agonies based on religious faith. The list of torments is surreally and hypothetically invoked in reaction to the semi-interrogative 'I wonder' and the conditional 'if / Anyone... thought, *That'll be the life*', which unleash:

*sweating in the dark*

*About hell and that, or having to hide  
What you think of the priest. He  
And his lot will all go down the long slide  
Like free bloody birds. (p. 80).*

The commentator hypothesises analeptically and 'somebody else's (imagined) thought-process' is verbalised and italicised for demarcation.<sup>93</sup> In a bygone era, the summoned image of freedom would have tasted differently and been felt more rigorously. The instances of grievances which religious dogmas instilled typify the endeavour of religion to create a self-monitoring system, which the poetical persona finds stunting, traumatising, and pretentious. Just like the priest and his lot made sure that the 'slide to happiness' is barred, the speaker gloatingly revels, in retrospect, in the downslide of priesthood but ironically to none other than bird-like freedom '*Like free bloody birds*', which entails the angry expletive. He states dubiously that his religion-free 'paradise' is far from perfect,

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<sup>92</sup> Simon Petch, *The Art of Philip Larkin*, pp. 98, 79.

<sup>93</sup> Tijana Stojković, "Unnoticed in the Casual Light of Day", p. 144.

though perhaps coveted by the older generations. This thought challenges his envy of the younger generations' sexual freedom which could be, by the same token, dystopian. The real liberation is hence essentially mental and intellectual which once guaranteed, the domino effect is activated and all residual forms of bondage crumple. This idea is phrased cogently in Bruce K. Martin's assertion that 'indeed, the entire poem suggests that the only freedom unconditionally available to the speaker, to the "couple of kids," and to us – the only freedom in which we can truly revel — is the freedom of the mind to guess, to speculate and to imagine'.<sup>94</sup>

It is this image of a bondless freedom that spawns one of Larkin's most transcendental applications of the high windows imagery, which dates from his juvenile poems. The image, which takes the speaker's mind out of the 'self-argumentative bluster to the purest poetic epiphany', is purely mental and cogently surreal, against which words lose their energy, unable to capture 'the thought of high windows'.<sup>95</sup> The imagery also suggests a nihilistic turn that enacts 'a desire to escape from language and its fictions'.<sup>96</sup>

Tijana Stojković diagnoses the situation pithily in:

The tendency of the modern mind to seek illusory refuge away from society and its content is illustrated in "High Windows" as well. The unattainable nature of such ideals is, once again, symbolized by blue. Rather than dwelling more carefully on the differences and the similarities between different epochs and trends in society and the meaning of it all, the speaker's mind leaves all words behind and dissolves in "the deep blue air..."<sup>97</sup>

The symbolism of the blue takes it back to 'L'azur', 'Mallarmé's most consistent and philosophical symbol, delineating both the necessity and absence of the ideal' and hence the blue sky echoes 'the void' and 'our longing'.<sup>98</sup> The blue itself, due to 'its unspecificity', is enigmatic when placed in analogy with 'Stevensian pure blue of the

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<sup>94</sup> Bruce K. Martin, 'Larkin's Humanity Viewed from Abroad', p. 148.

<sup>95</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*, p. 306.

<sup>96</sup> Snowdon, 'Larkin's Conceit', *Critical Survey*, 3/1 (1991), 61-70, p. 67.

<sup>97</sup> Tijana Stojković, "Unnoticed in the Casual Light of Day", p. 186.

<sup>98</sup> Barbara Everett, *Poets in Their Time*, p. 239.

imagination, or Mallarmé's "*azur*." It is Larkin's attempt to designate the abyss as 'the immeasurable, infinite 'sublime' and 'a nothingness' where the 'deep, blue air,' is 'a part of the breath or afflatus of poetry.'<sup>99</sup> But it also insinuates 'the "otherworldly blue" of the vault of heaven, lavished on the Virgin's robes, in religious painting, as expensive as gold, in the Renaissance.'<sup>100</sup> The religious symbolism of the blue works well with the image of high windows which are mostly to be found in churches. The high windows trigger the ensuing indulgence in abstractionism. A 'thought' rather than an animate subject intervenes 'to resolve the imaginative tussle of the earlier verbs' and ensures 'the poem's movement towards generalization.'<sup>101</sup>

It is not a conjectural image of absolute freedom at its start, for windows, no matter how high, remain framed breathing spaces which are in themselves deterring with 'the sun-comprehending glass' as a barrier, invisible but verifiable and tangible. The reader is 'left with the disclosure of absence. The "sun-comprehending glass" seems to promise the possibility of nature yielding up its secrets, but it is a finely judged ironic trap.'<sup>102</sup> What is intellectually rewarding is the heavenly cosmos of 'the deep blue air, that shows / Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless'. In other words, the 'final wordless perception of high windows' is the infinity of space beyond and the fathomless existence upon which these windows open, being finite portals of thought and cognition. It carries a 'visionary clairvoyance' that 'points to an eternal realm, a Pascalian emptiness beyond the confines of language. It is rapturous and terrifying and free.'<sup>103</sup>

As a coda, the final lines recall 'Here', in which the confinement of here, like that of high windows, launches the long ride to unimaginable euphoria. That 'long slide' down the path to 'happiness, endlessly' captures or is captured by 'the thought of high windows',

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<sup>99</sup> DeSales Harrison, *The End of the Mind*, p. 122.

<sup>100</sup> Danielle Pinkstein, 'The Summer of "Essential Beauty"', p 75.

<sup>101</sup> Simon Petch, *The Art of Philip Larkin*, p. 98.

<sup>102</sup> G. J. Finch, 'Larkin, Nature, and Romanticism', p. 55.

<sup>103</sup> Edward Hirsch, 'Philip Larkin, 1922-1985: Sour Majesty', p. 121.

ushering an upward ascent and, in another word, epiphany. However, the contemplation that culminates in the ‘nothingness’ and the ‘nowhere’ of the endless blue, heavenward, as the only reward looks absurd. The argument leaves the reader with ‘the implicit recognition that freedom is only ever relative’.<sup>104</sup> And by analogy, happiness is likewise relative and a precarious contingency. The analogy boils down to something and nothing, just like existence itself, a puzzle and wonder as it is, but equally riddled through. If it is an existence or identity crisis that the poem’s persona grapples with, then it is a collective, wide-ranging crisis that does not stop at sexual freedom or liberation from all sorts of oppression as cure-all antidotes. In the end, he enlists the philosophical and sublime to substitute the mundane and tangible, which prove illusory. The blue spreads endlessly and so do the speculations involving it. Larkin rehearses an intellectual bent in his poetry manifested in an ‘inclination to float free-to sublime heights, perhaps even towards the “difficulty” that he disliked in Eliot’s modernism’.<sup>105</sup>

‘Sad Steps’ explores another facet of this eternal crisis, which is existence-oriented and has to it that celestial, unearthly extension poised right after the scatological beginning. The first person revelations extend over six stanzas with an intricate rhyme scheme linking each pair (aba bba). It is a poem in which ‘the wary intelligence is tempted by a moment of lunar glamour’ of ‘the renaissance moon of Sir Philip Sidney’s sonnet’.<sup>106</sup> However, with the moon being the pivotal symbol, Edgecombe places Larkin’s ‘meditative night piece’ in a network of infinite influences and echoes, which ‘coalesced’ to shape the poem.<sup>107</sup>

The very first line, ‘Groping back to bed after a piss’, feels like a betrayal of the title with its lyricism and pathos. Nonetheless, it is an astute technique of Larkin’s which effects ‘self-mockery’ to curb and keep in proper check ‘the flight of wonder from soaring

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<sup>104</sup> Andrew Swarbrick, *Out of Reach*, p. 136.

<sup>105</sup> Joseph Bristow, ‘The Obscenity of Philip Larkin’, *Critical Inquiry*, 21/1 (1994), pp. 156-81, at p. 180.

<sup>106</sup> Seamus Heaney, ‘The Main of Light’, p. 132.

<sup>107</sup> Rodney Stenning Edgecombe, ‘Larkin’s “Sad Steps” and the Augustan Night Piece’, *Twentieth Century Literature*, 54/4 (2008), 493-513, at pp. 494, 504.

past the bounds of transient awe.’<sup>108</sup> Likewise, the incongruity in the rhyme piss/cleanliness lends a further support to the notion that both the mediocre/earthly and sublime/heavenly are juxtaposed and any illusions are debunked. At the heels of the mouldy onset, seventeen lines follow to heave the poetical ascent towards transcendentalism. As in the previous poems, the climatic turn is inspired by a gesture upwards and an oblivion of the downwards. This skyward upturn of perspective is accompanied by a liberating sense of wonder and alarm as the monologue documents the inciting moment of revelation with ‘I part thick curtains, and am startled by /The rapid clouds, the moon’s cleanliness’, let alone, ‘One shivers slightly, looking up there’ of the penultimate stanza (p. 89). It is almost like leaping over thick barriers that stand between the mind and its rise upwards. What follows is a contemplative assessment of the lunar panorama with its majestic solitude, which still has ‘something laughable about’ it, at least, as ‘all images of romance’ seem to Larkin ‘in middle age’.<sup>109</sup> As an image of power, the moon combats clouds to emerge ‘High and preposterous and separate’:

The way the moon dashes through clouds that blow  
Loosely as cannon-smoke to stand apart  
(Stone-coloured light sharpening the roofs below)  
High and preposterous and separate ... (p. 89)

Now the moon, symbolising the departing youth, is all victorious and despotic. The entire lunar landscape transforms with the sharpness and shadowiness it bestows on all that falls within its territory. The intimations, which the lunar totalitarianism stirs, are a cocktail of bathos, fulsomeness, whimsical adoration, verbiage, and even sentimentalism in ‘Lozenge of love! Medallion of art! / O wolves of memory! Immensements!’ (p. 89). It seems as if the bewitched observer hits a deadlock in search of verbal expressions that capture the idyllic, sublime sight. Therefore, his ‘mind slips into a catalogue of clichéd and overblown, Romantic-sounding apostrophes to the moon’ which are ‘more suitable to the poetry and

<sup>108</sup> Terry Whalen, *Philip Larkin and English Poetry*, p. 68.

<sup>109</sup> Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, p. 377.

time of Philip Sidney'.<sup>110</sup> If 'lozenge' is used in its colloquial/modern, rather than heraldic/knightly sense, then the mediocrity is intended to ruin the ascent and effects irony. As to 'medallion', Booth traces its symbolism to Laforgue and the negation that follows exposes a 'less deceived English poet', dismantling any romantic illusion.<sup>111</sup> In his cynical attitude, awareness lodges and 'the crucial element in the night piece is the vigilance of the poet [observer] who surveys the sleeping world and articulates the values of the darkness.'<sup>112</sup> This process is 'a gradual (self-)discovery, which involves a qualification of the dismissal of tropes and illusions.'<sup>113</sup> Nevertheless, the majestic glamour is not altogether lost as the moonstruck observer entwines negation with profound musings:

No,  
  
One shivers slightly, looking up there.  
The hardness and the brightness and the plain  
Far-reaching singleness of that wide stare  
  
Is a reminder of the strength and pain  
Of being young; that it can't come again,  
But is for others undiminished somewhere. (p. 89)

As the observer denies his previous declaration, the 'tone' changes, announcing 'the beginning of a realization: his ironic and somewhat cynical tone now becomes sober, respectful and serious. [He is] aware of his earthly place and size'.<sup>114</sup> That all the tantalising intimations and speculations boil down to a lament for lost youth feels rather awkward and unrewarding, if not indeed disappointing. In compensation, the poem has to 'lift off into a larger gesture' so as 'to celebrate man's existential limits, rather than his potential.'<sup>115</sup>

The moon rakes up 'nostalgia' for a youthful past and 'becomes the vector for an insight that valorizes the present and allows him to turn with tempered contentment from

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<sup>110</sup> Tijana Stojković, "Unnoticed in the Casual Light of Day", p. 169.

<sup>111</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*, p. 312.

<sup>112</sup> Rodney Stenning Edgecombe, 'Larkin's "Sad Steps" and the Augustan Night Piece', p. 500.

<sup>113</sup> Tijana Stojković, "Unnoticed in the Casual Light of Day", p. 168.

<sup>114</sup> Tijana Stojković, "Unnoticed in the Casual Light of Day", p. 169.

<sup>115</sup> Walford Davies, 'An Ordinary Sorrow of Man's Life', p. 524.

the past and the expectations it engendered.’<sup>116</sup> But then if the moon is saluted on the ground of its hardness and brightness, the moroseness that the thought of fast-fading and never-returning youth generates seems to be justifiable. Likewise, the undercurrents of envy and jealousy rising as the observer’s mind slides into covetousness are not altogether anti-climatic. The moon-gazer lands on a ‘moment of awareness’, which ‘gives him a tenuous stay against despair and a retrieved self-possession’.<sup>117</sup> In all, transcendentalism is attained with the awestruck moon-gazer moving beyond the diminutive and the fizzling in the instance of human youth to an ‘undiminished’ existence of an everlasting, exuberant bloom that does not exist singularly or individually, but is carried on collectively. In summary, the world, humanity included, blossoms eternally which, however, offers the gazer an inkling of consolation.

If ‘Sad Steps’ is an ode to the moon, ‘Solar’ evens the scale by singing the praises of the sun, going another rung up the celestial ladder. The pair ‘face each other on the opened page like the two halves of his poetic personality in dialogue.’ In ‘Solar’, Heaney opines, Larkin ‘is bold to stand uncovered in the main of light’ where there is hardly ‘any sleight of tone or persona’ to mask him, a matter that makes the poem ‘unexpected and daring’.<sup>118</sup> It is a poem of ‘pure vision’ in Lerner’s words, and to Booth, it is one of the pieces that typify Larkin’s ‘spiritual, even metaphysical aspirations’.<sup>119</sup> To Whalen, it ‘is Lawrentian in its valuing of the mysterious presence of the sun’ and an inspiration of wonder, though the latter is claimed to be kept under reins, by a ‘reserve’ that does not damage beauty.<sup>120</sup> Swarbrick agrees with Whalen for its ‘Lawrentian’ airs and calls it

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<sup>116</sup> Rodney Stenning Edgecombe, ‘Larkin’s “Sad Steps” and the Augustan Night Piece’, p. 510.

<sup>117</sup> Terry Whalen, *Philip Larkin and English Poetry*, p. 69.

<sup>118</sup> Seamus Heaney, ‘The Main of Light’, pp. 132-33.

<sup>119</sup> Laurence Lerner, ‘Larkin’s Strategies’, p.118; James Booth, ‘Competing Pulses: Secular and Sacred in Hughes, Larkin and Plath’, *Critical Survey*, 12/3 (2000), 3-26, p. 5.

<sup>120</sup> Terry Whalen, *Philip Larkin and English Poetry*, p. 71.

‘amongst the most symbolic of Larkin’s poems.’<sup>121</sup> It is ‘at once simple and complex, immediate and profound’ like a ‘Blakean’ song or Van Gogh painting.<sup>122</sup>

In ‘Solar’, the mind abandons earthliness altogether and finds liberty in a purely subliminal approach. Unlike the moon which is adored almost furtively and inadvertently or with a smack of sentimental dilution, the address to the sun is direct, sturdy, and vigorous, for it is the ‘Suspended lion face / Spilling at the centre / Of an unfurnished sky’ (p. 89). ‘Solar’ is a prayer, a hymn, and a paean addressed to a god-like attendance, for ‘Larkin is contemplating a landscape undomesticated by man, a landscape of pure elemental life of the kind he invokes in “High Windows”, and at the end of “Here”. The sun suggests to Larkin a totally autonomous existence’.<sup>123</sup>

Unrivalled and unthwarted, the sun presides in its singularity and separateness, deserving the double exclamatory panegyric:

How still you stand,  
And how unaided  
Single stalkless flower  
You pour unrecompensed. (p. 89)

Again, the praise gushes over the individualism and autocracy of the sun, which hangs ‘stalkless’ and ‘unaided’. The status of autonomy and self-sufficiency bestows sovereignty, indispensability and in the long run, liberty. If the sun is symbolic of inextinguishable, unremitting existence along with indissolubility and imperishableness, then it is the embodiment of the aspiration to intellectual and physical interminability that is self-born, self-cultivated, and life-giving ad infinitum like a ‘petalled head of flames / Continuously exploding’ (p. 89). The flower metaphor bears witness to the sun as a sustainer if not indeed an endower of life without denying its destructiveness. Distance tames the sun to the naked eye, reducing it to a ‘simplified’ core, but it also converts the self-destructibility

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<sup>121</sup> Andrew Swarbrick, *Out of Reach*, pp. 145, 146.

<sup>122</sup> Richard Palmer, *Such Deliberate Disguises*, p. 102.

<sup>123</sup> G. J. Finch, ‘Larkin, Nature, and Romanticism’, p. 57.



of the fiery head into an invigorating catalyst, breathing life and energy. With the awareness that 'Heat is the echo of your / Gold' (p. 90), perceptions spill over one another. The metaphorical mapping places the sun on top of the existential pyramid and at its very centre and origin as invaluable and matchless. The originality, which is gold-like, is taken for granted:

Coined there among  
Lonely horizontals  
You exist openly.  
Our needs hourly  
Climb and return like angels.  
Unclosing like a hand,  
You give for ever. (p. 90)

Whether the sun is conceived of in terms of 'a pagan celebration of ... bounty, or a Christian allegory', it is anthropomorphised.<sup>124</sup> This hymn-like coda again commends the solitary singleness of an idolised solar and its throbbing existence, since 'without recompense the sun satisfies "Our needs", the existential basics of life, on a level where society and sentiment are sublimely irrelevant.'<sup>125</sup> Nevertheless, the mystical air, shrouding worship and prayer, is faintly demoted by the fiscal connotation of 'coined' that follows at the heels of 'gold' as a natural corollary. The metaphor emphasises 'that the true "gold," the real "coin" of our existence is, indeed, the sun, and the expression of the accompanying admiration is appropriately devised as an address to the sun itself. The speaker is in an elevated state of mind'.<sup>126</sup> But then, when grappling with ethereal and intriguing phenomena of existence like the sun or endless blue, the mind has to address 'something that stands outside of words but toward which the words of the poem climb and return.'<sup>127</sup> This impotence of the linguistic apparatus perhaps leads Merle Brown to rather unfairly criticise Larkin's 'hilarious shenanigans of a verbal artist' and 'metaphorical abandon',

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<sup>124</sup> Richard Palmer, *Such Deliberate Disguises*, p. 102. Palmer discusses the Christian reference in 'Solar' to 'the lion of Judah', 'Jesus' redemptive sacrifice and the Holy Ghost' (p. 103).

<sup>125</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: the Poet's Plight*, p. 101.

<sup>126</sup> Tijana Stojković, "Unnoticed in the Casual Light of Day", p. 195.

<sup>127</sup> DeSales Harrison, *The End of the Mind*, p. 123.

where ‘the word “Solar” itself makes the sun small, shrunken by commerce and science. It is just something hung up there, suspended in a room with no furniture, a naked bulb, but magical, without wires.’<sup>128</sup> One is not sure whether the sun occupies the centre of an empty world as Brown argues or the overpowering presence of the divinity-like sun makes other elements relapse into invisibility. Like the sacrament of water, which ‘Water’ in *The Whitsun Weddings* names as a religion in speculation, ‘Solar’ revives ancient cults of the sun, but offers an agnostic reincarnation instead. God-like, it reigns majestically over stretching spaces, a magnanimous monarch, altruistically catering for life, demanding and receiving nothing in return. As a concept and in its abstract sense, ‘sunlight’ is ‘unhoused from geographical and seasonal specificity to do service as earnest of spatial and temporal illimitability’.<sup>129</sup> The mind in this prayer has gone not only celestial, but even devotional, as evidenced by the religious metaphors. The religious symbolism, however, is not literally attended to; rather it is faintly tampered with and even slightly reversed, with angel-like needs climbing upward to return fulfilled, letting triumphalism go pervasive.

‘Forget What Did’ traverses the celestials of the mind, where time, memory, and existence are explored in the hope that they will faint and vanish. The poem, whose title is borrowed ‘from Susan M. Coolidge’s schoolgirl novel *What Katy Did*’ as Osborne argues, was composed after Larkin stopped keeping a diary, putting an end to a habit he maintained for decades.<sup>130</sup> In the poem, a narrator craves oblivion in his revolt against memory, of which the physical diary is only an ersatz representation. In this respect, it seems that Larkin created personae that have to address the question of memory ‘again and again in *High Windows*... to attempt to fix the value of memory, to determine whether it

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<sup>128</sup> Merle Brown, ‘Larkin and His Audience’, *The Iowa Review*, 8/4 (1977), 117-34, p. 121. In this respect, Brown sees the poem as ‘an unconvincing translation not of a French symbolist, but of the final poem in Thom Gunn’s *Moly*, “Sunlight.” Gunn works to be precise about the sun in its nonhuman remoteness and otherness’ (p. 120).

<sup>129</sup> John Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, p. 253.

<sup>130</sup> John Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, p. 79.

hinders a clear vision of existence or if it provides a needed ballast, a context, an ordering, for the individual's sense of self.'<sup>131</sup> The poem explores a mental state in which the eclectic, totalitarian memory is no longer operative and calls not only for a drastic, selective revision of its content, but to its exclusion so as not to cloud 'personal observation.'

The poem is a contemplation of alternatives, for 'after deciding to stop his diary and do away with past words and actions, the speaker wonders how he should fill up the empty pages.'<sup>132</sup> The diary, whether physical or mental, is called off so that 'a blank starting' is made possible, which is by itself paradoxical. It raises the questions whether memory, as a mental apparatus, can be turned on and off at will, whether or not by a journal kept or cancelled. Eventually, 'discontinuity' is wittily dramatised by 'the stop-start movement of the verse' with 'stopping' to begin the opening stanza and 'starting' to end it.<sup>133</sup> But perhaps in the thousand miles journey to forget painful experiences, the discard of a diary makes the first single step. Taking the initial step, 'One no longer cicatrized / By such words, such actions / As bleakened waking' (p. 79). What the diarist dreads is that 'words' would be 'prolonging a "bleakened" state of mind' hence the urge to cease 'his diary entries'.<sup>134</sup> Words in a diary are equivalent to actions in reality, but have precedence in retrospection. They recreate the distressing incidents and keep them astir. Words sharpen the consciousness and heighten the awareness of the unwanted flotsam and jetsam, populating the mind. Memory, though mentally and psychologically triggered, is claimed to shut down, if not for the verbal reminders which stand between the unwelcome actions and their 'burial', 'Like the wars and winters / Missing behind the windows / Of an opaque childhood.' With 'wars', 'winters', and 'windows', the alliteration makes clear that unpleasant episodes are intended for demise and burial, to be rewound neither

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<sup>131</sup> Michael Saladyga, 'Philip Larkin And Survival Poetry', p. 14.

<sup>132</sup> Tijana Stojković, *"Unnoticed in the Casual Light of Day"*, p. 52.

<sup>133</sup> Simon Petch, *The Art of Philip Larkin*, p. 90.

<sup>134</sup> Richard Bradford, *First Boredom, Then Fear*, p. 229.

introspectively nor verbally. Windows are particularly wielded this time as shields and barriers that shove dreadfulness into the opacity of childhood. However, it is the distant childhood made opaque, by a thin glass barrier, that dims off the dismal prospects and adulterate dejection. The undercurrent is that childhood is inaccessible on the one hand and unaccountable on the other, unlike adulthood. An unfortunate event is simply dismissed and forgotten as if a childish slip of unwise and inexperienced judgement. It is a mere mental game which mutates into mirages any deplorable memories so that they lose their substance and impact. Windows, here, are a means of self-deception, a psychological mechanism to stupefy the mind and derail memory, which is otherwise agonising and dismaying.

But the diary, mental or physical, is not to be left blank in reply to the question of the memory erasure: 'And the empty pages?' The alternative, which looks rather Wordsworthian, is even more polemical:

Should they ever be filled  
Let it be with observed  
Celestial recurrences,  
The day the flowers come,  
And when the birds go. (p. 79)

The diarist began with a notion according to which memories are deemed to be a surplus and can be dispensed with, hence partial or perhaps local amnesia is preached. If they happen to be indispensable after all, let the diary as well as mind be highly selective, keeping record of elevated stuff, which could suggest imaginary and surreal bliss. The modified detail reflects an ambition to see the self free of the daily trivialities and 'as part of the cyclical rhythms of nature'.<sup>135</sup> The mind is urged to play the same cheerful tape over and over again, in which only spring awakes. Forgetfulness is a trick, which one needs to train the mind to command. Once mastered via repetition, it can work miracles, hence the presumptuous 'celestial' air of the selected retrospective clippings.

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<sup>135</sup> Simon, Petch, *The Art of Philip Larkin*, p. 90.

On the other side of the coin and next to the celestial cravings of the mind, the bestial and vulgar keep rising to the challenge. Yet, vulgarity is juxtaposed with, if not outweighed by, a thematic seriousness and gravity. In ‘This Be The Verse’, scatology presides over two of its three stanzas, a matter that lends support to the idea that Larkin’s use of the f-words embodies a ‘generational conflict’.<sup>136</sup> In it, one can descry an appeal to a youth-oriented ideology, rising against hegemonic notions of family and parenthood. Unlike ‘High Windows’, which builds its argument on a ‘guess’, the tone in ‘This Be the Verse’ is more personal and more certain. But like ‘High Windows’, the argument is society-oriented, where intimate social values, viz, wretched or outdated parenting styles in ‘This Be The Verse’, are questioned and deflated. The poetical persona endeavours to ‘elevate his own perceptions’ as Petch argues, ‘to the level of general truths by translating them into proverbial or epigrammatic impersonality’.<sup>137</sup> One of the techniques he enlists to attain that end is the second person address taken for granted as an accomplice and acolyte. In a sure tone, ‘the poem begins like a jingle and is sprightly in meter throughout, although it develops the grim idea that our psychological miseries increase from generation to generation.’<sup>138</sup> The critical voice rushes straightforward to the heart of the grievance, making no room for doubt and sparing nobody’s feelings in the vociferous ‘They fuck you up, your mum and dad’ (p. 88). The poem gathers momentum ‘with its manic bark of an opening line’ and a ‘title... so archly wry’.<sup>139</sup> The title relates the poem intertextually to ‘Requiem’, ‘a sentimental elegy’ by Robert Louis Stevenson, which views death in terms

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<sup>136</sup> Ryan Hibbett, ‘Philip Larkin, British Culture, and Four-letter Words’, *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 43/2 (2014), 120-38, at p. 127.

<sup>137</sup> Simon, Petch, *The Art of Philip Larkin*, p. 101.

<sup>138</sup> Stephen S. Hilliard, ‘Wit and Beauty: *High Windows* by Philip Larkin’, p. 270.

<sup>139</sup> Peter Filkins, ‘The Collected Larkin: “But Why Put It into Words?” *Collected Poems* by Philip Larkin and Anthony Thwaite’, *The Iowa Review*, 20/2 (1990), 166-81, pp. 169, 170.

of belonging, ‘*homecoming*’, and ‘a return to origins’, to God, and to ‘mother nature’.<sup>140</sup> Indulging in such an elemental and of course existential argument and aided by a title that ‘places ... [it] within quotation marks’, the poem mounts to the state of ‘a credo’, unmasking the evils of procreation. Only misery is handed down ‘to posterity, therefore both lovemaking and begetting children are immoral’ and ‘the lack of profound human consciousness’ is the disillusioning catalyst.<sup>141</sup> Thereupon, existence becomes ‘a destructive cycle, in which each person destroys the lives of all the others they might create.’<sup>142</sup> As a treatise on parenting and upbringing and thinking of what Rossen sees as a parody of ‘Freudian’ psychology, the poem opens with the notion of messed-up, dysfunctional minds.<sup>143</sup> The ruinous job is accomplished by none other than one’s own parents, a dilemma the narrator assumes to be shared unanimously, hence the second person address.

This second use of the f-word after ‘High Windows’ makes it less shocking and if one considers the obscene references other poems invest, the colloquial cliché or the ‘demotic language’, to quote Cooper, seems rather appropriate if not a proper and well-calculated strategy.<sup>144</sup> If the poems are to be seen as revolts against stereotypical conventions, then the obscenity is to be thought of as a blow to outdated etiquette and stale decorum. Hence, obscenity, provocative and vexatious as it is, is intentionally manipulated to drum the indignation up against the maintenance of a creaky ethos. The old school of parenting is dismantled, where parents contribute to their children’s faulty characters and make sure that they carry on the same burdensome package handed from one generation to another. The Victorian domestic system is hurriedly reviewed and in consequence taken to task. Its champions (‘fools in old-style hats and coats’), who raised the speaker’s parents, are themselves troubled characters, almost schizophrenic ‘soppy-stern’ (which is nothing

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<sup>140</sup> John Osborne, *Radical Larkin: Seven Types of Technical Mastery*, pp. 165, 166.

<sup>141</sup> István D. Rácz, ‘Agnosticism, Masks and Monologues in Philip Larkin’, p. 116.

<sup>142</sup> Peter Snowdon, ‘Larkin’s Conceit’, p. 67.

<sup>143</sup> Janice Rossen, ‘Difficulties with Girls’, p. 137.

<sup>144</sup> Stephen Cooper, *Philip Larkin: Subversive Writer*, p. 175.

like the proverbial tough love) and savage or uncivilized, ‘at one another’s throats.’ Outmoded dress articles, symbolic of self-imposed shackles, synchronise with stale parenting methods. It may also faintly suggest that these legislators of parenting models did not invariably practice what they preached. The outmoded moral sets were already passé, yet parents, at least the reviewer’s, cling stubbornly to them.

The third stanza marks a shift to ‘a bardic voice’.<sup>145</sup> The speaker abandons the cultural and temporal confines to advocate a cosmological address with the paradoxical twist on the legacy of ‘misery’ rather than knowledge or wisdom, which humanity is believed to pass on:

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. (p. 88)

This wretched heritage, akin to ‘a coastal shelf’, is accumulative and solid; its depths are imperceptible against which are balanced ‘the helpless and hopeless determinisms that our lives are heir to’.<sup>146</sup> However, as the ‘coastal shelf’ is prone to erosion, that legacy, firm and petrified as it appears, has no immunity, for it is apt to disintegrate and decay. The solemn, sinister tenors are snapped off under the influence of the jaunty atmosphere of the final two lines, which put a savage end to the earlier ‘quasi-philosophical attitudinizing’.<sup>147</sup> Whether ‘get out’ hints at death or leaving one’s family (which concurs with the ensuing line), the attitude sounds most like ‘Dockery and Son’. The voice also seems to have neither a death phobia nor is it paranoid by the notion of departing the world, which is a far cry from the typical Larkinesque persona. The ‘No kids’ mentality, maintains its original integrity. The last line, which evokes Hardy’s ‘Epitaph on a Pessimist’, equates ‘the desire for self-

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<sup>145</sup> Stephen Cooper, *Philip Larkin: Subversive Writer*, p. 175.

<sup>146</sup> Adam Phillips, ‘What Larkin Knew’, *The Threepenny Review*, 112 (2008), 6-7, at p. 6.

<sup>147</sup> Richard Palmer, *Such Deliberate Disguises*, 117.

extinction with an eschewal of reproduction'.<sup>148</sup> It rings in refusal to admit 'loss, displacement, and mortality' in the face of 'the old truism of the moment of siring being a moment of transference'.<sup>149</sup> The last two lines operate as 'a flourish' that spawns hypotheses and insinuates possibilities of 'freedom' and 'choices', 'as though existentialism is stronger than geology; as though leaving home and not having children were virtually redemptive'. The ambitious, futuristic trajectory targets 'the relentless transmission of misery' and 'the breaking of the cycle.'<sup>150</sup> This is how 'a study in masculine nihilism becomes a devastating assault upon family pieties' after being processed by a mentality that has set no ceiling to its potentiality.<sup>151</sup> The critical mind soars high and keeps its atypicality well stoked.

The elevated, devotional airs of the celestial poems have to take another tumble and the mind which has attained or contemplated attaining spiritual heights is tugged abruptly back to earth. From the mystical solitude of the sublime and vast, the mind descends to dwell on the hustle and bustle of a contemporary living room hosting a social gathering in 'Vers de Société'. Thus 'the meditative life' is poised against social life.<sup>152</sup> Still navigating within the social waters and along with 'High Windows' and 'This Be The Verse', 'Vers de Société' completes the sociological triangle. The opening is stamped with the now usual scatological mark and the colloquial obscenity jacked up for satirical ends. Therefore, the italicised '*a crowd of craps*' or the guest list in metaphorical terms, the facetious invitation '*perhaps / You'd care to join us?*', and the offensive ridicule in 'In a pig's arse, friend' assure the plummet of courteous gentility and set a relentless challenge. The host's name itself with 'war', 'lock', and 'Williams' projects affectation, traditionalism, and fossilisation. The same deliberate affront applies to the chauvinistic 'some bitch / Who's

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<sup>148</sup> John Osborne, *Radical Larkin: Seven Types of Technical Mastery*, p. 165.

<sup>149</sup> Steve Clark, 'Larkin's Sexual Politics', p.100.

<sup>150</sup> Adam Phillips, 'What Larkin Knew', p. 6.

<sup>151</sup> John Osborne, *Radical Larkin: Seven Types of Technical Mastery*, p. 168.

<sup>152</sup> John Osborne, *Radical Larkin: Seven Types of Technical Mastery*, p. 187.



read nothing but *Which*’ in the second stanza and the satiric, anti-academic parenthesis ‘(Asking that ass about his fool research)’ in the fifth. Before long, the cynical façade crumples and there lurks an anxiety, if not a fully-fledged phobia, behind ‘Funny how hard it is to be alone’ (p. 91). However, lonesomeness is not the only issue that is mentally taxing to the gruff guest-to-be as his mind endeavours to project a hypothetical alternative, which ends the second stanza and spills over the third:

Just think of all the spare time that has flown  
  
Straight into nothingness by being filled  
With forks and faces, rather than repaid  
Under a lamp, hearing the noise of the wind,  
And looking out to see the moon thinned  
To an air-sharpened blade. (p. 91)

Next to loneliness, the satirist bothers about an issue of an ontological calibre. The nothingness, futility, and waste plague the social machine so that it pales next to a romantic, hermitic night of reclusive contemplation, if not for the aphoristic ‘*All solitude is selfish*’ and ‘*Virtue is social*’, both italicised. While company is deemed a waste of time, ‘solitariness is associated with lyrical attentiveness’.<sup>153</sup> To borrow from Rossen, one may argue that it is probably the narrator’s mind that casts a spell on loneliness and shrouds it with romantic mysticism.<sup>154</sup> In the long run, the bogey of loneliness, which is itself a failure on the psychological level, is ward off by sacrificing intellectual and spiritual standards. In this stance, Osborne detects a ‘sense of calling, an apostolic mission’ that entails ‘a throwing over of the “they-self” and an answering to a more existentially authentic state of being’ which is later identified as the ‘I-self’.<sup>155</sup> This egoistic conflict feeds ‘a romantic fantasy of becoming a modern-day atheist hermit’, a fleeting dream which the later ‘self-examination’ refutes.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Andrew Swarbrick, *Out of Reach*, p. 139

<sup>154</sup> Janice Rossen, *Philip Larkin: His Life’s Work*, pp. 36-7.

<sup>155</sup> John Osborne, *Radical Larkin: Seven Types of Technical Mastery*, p. 187.

<sup>156</sup> Janice Rossen, *Philip Larkin: His Life’s Work*, p. 37.

The exploration of this societal predicament rolls on to touch on faith, which seems to be collectively lost. Existentially speaking, anchoritic personae lose their appeal as religion wanes and is eclipsed in the wake of secularism, which frowns at solitude. Hence rather than the eremitical, austere worship of God, '*Virtue is social*' is aphoristically offered. Secularism is religious in this respect and its reward 'Is to have people nice to you, which means / Doing it back somehow.' It seems like a fair bargain and this change of attitude is on par with 'Freudian *disavowal*' where denial operates as an affirmation in psychoanalytical terms.<sup>157</sup> Secular rituals even verge on being charitable though the recluse's scepticism overrides vehemence if anything: 'Are, then, these routines // Playing at goodness, like going to church? / Something that bores us, something we don't do well' (p. 91). Aided by such reasoning, the cynical potential guest 'moves into a speculative state of mind where he considers and analyses related ideas'. When he ponders on 'beliefs such as *All solitude is selfish* or *Virtue is social*, he wonders (with an admirable mixture of abstract thinking and parenthetical real-life illustration)'.<sup>158</sup> In place of religious faith, a social conscience dictates a certain set of tenets which make people, in spite of their boredom or disinterestedness, 'try to feel, because, however crudely, / It shows us what should be? / Too subtle, that. Too decent, too.' Again, scepticism lies in wait to pepper the ethical analyses of the societal obligations, tingeing them with mystical uncertainty. The self-caricature in 'Too subtle, that. Too decent, too' reveals self-awareness, as the speaker catches himself, red-handed, acting insincerely. His philosophical rationalisations, profound as they sound, lack genuine faith to prop them up. Scepticism marks, as well, the separation between what one really believes in and what one should reveal and act according to. There is a gap between private thought and social behaviour, which do not

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<sup>157</sup> John Osborne, *Radical Larkin: Seven Types of Technical Mastery*, p. 189.

<sup>158</sup> Tijana Stojković, "*Unnoticed in the Casual Light of Day*", p. 123.

necessarily or consistently coincide on the pragmatic level; rather idealism and reality are often at discord.

Likewise, a huge gap stretches between one's own wishes and desires and other's expectations and demands. When the recluse is pressurised by the thought of private freedom or a free conscience, the corollary is the expletive 'Oh, hell, // Only the young can be alone freely' which runs on to the final stanza:

The time is shorter now for company,  
And sitting by a lamp more often brings  
Not peace, but other things.  
Beyond the light stand failure and remorse  
Whispering *Dear Warlock-Williams: Why, of course* – (p. 91)

These lines mark 'the narrator's crushing awareness that the solitary life no longer yields the hoped-for spiritual or creative rewards'.<sup>159</sup> Thereupon, social gatherings perform a double favour. On one level, the potential guest fills any surplus free time, mulling over the loathsomeness of social obligations. On another, social events occupy time otherwise invaded by 'other things', an unidentified streak of thoughts and revelations which one rather does without for one's own peace of mind. In both, escapism is attained, for the earlier 'assertion' is found flawed and 'time spent' on social routines 'is not the only kind of time that flies straight into nothingness'; by the end of the reasoning, the reflector is relieved by realising that 'nothingness', in fact, is kept 'at bay' by socialising.<sup>160</sup>

Instead of agonising about 'failure and remorse', the mind is engrossed in the trivia of the next or past soirées. The intimate voice, rushing to decline, confides '*Dear Warlock-Williams: I'm afraid* –', unleashing the earlier contemplations, which ironically enough put a break on and check his rashness. That same voice is resumed in the closing alliterative aside, after the thoughtful spasm. 'Whispering *Dear Warlock-Williams: Why, of course* –' is just as sarcastic, open-ended, and provocative.

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<sup>159</sup> John Osborne, *Radical Larkin: Seven Types of Technical Mastery*, p. 189.

<sup>160</sup> DeSales Harrison, *The End of the Mind*, p. 111.

## Chapter 6

### *The Later and Posthumous Larkin*

#### I

After *High Windows*, Larkin published only seven poems over a span of ten years.<sup>1</sup> He did not write much during the interval, therefore the dryness or barrenness that he often complained about is not an exaggeration. He published only those poems which he thought of well enough not to disconcert him later. Likewise, ‘given the meticulously high standards by which he judged later poems worthy or not of public appearance’, the little that he wrote rarely seemed to meet his ambition or satisfy his poetic vision.<sup>2</sup> However, Gardner speculates with regret:

The greatest intrinsic interest to be newly found in *Collected Poems* resides in those poems written between 1950 and 1974 which Larkin never published in his lifetime or only (like ‘Breadfruit’ and ‘Continuing to Live’) published in magazines, and in the handful of poems written after ‘Show Saturday’ (1973), chronologically the last of Larkin’s poems to find a place in *High Windows*. The best of these poems of Larkin’s final poetic decade, together with many he had not chosen to print during the previous 25 years, would have made a last, non-posthumous volume as sizeable as any of the four which actually appeared.<sup>3</sup>

Such a last collection could have been potentially a step further in Larkin’s poetic career, proving that ‘it is typical of Larkin’s greatness as a poet that he was capable of introducing innovations even after *High Windows*.’<sup>4</sup> The speculative collection would have included some poems that he wrote in between his four collections, but declined publishing, though he kept coming back to some of them, such as ‘A Letter to a Friend about Girls’, as he himself wrote to Monica Jones and also to Anthony Thwaite.<sup>5</sup> Some of these poems such as,

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Faggen, ‘*Collected Poems* by Philip Larkin and Anthony Thwaite’, *Harvard Book Review*, 15/16 (1990), p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Roger Day, ‘*Collected Poems* by Anthony Thwaite and Philip Larkin’, p. 223.

<sup>3</sup> Philip Gardner, “‘One Does One’s Best’: Larkin Posthumous”, *Critical Survey*, 1/2 (1989), 194-99, at p. 198.

<sup>4</sup> István D. Rácz, ‘Agnosticism, Masks and Monologues in Philip Larkin’, p. 116.

<sup>5</sup> Archie Burnett (ed.), *The Complete Poems of Philip Larkin*, p. 626.

‘The View’ and ‘Love Again’, even though unpublished and hence unacknowledged by Larkin, have received their share of criticism and analysis.

Published in *The Times Literary Supplement* in 1977, ‘Aubade’ looms large to embody the Larkinesque wondrous and ponderous, if not innovative, spirit, though Faggen sees its ‘saturnine vision’ as an echo of ‘Dawn’ from *The North Ship*.<sup>6</sup> John Osborne places the poem within a web of various intertextualities including Shakespeare, Laforgue, Orwell, Sassoon, Edward Thomas, and Eliot to name some.<sup>7</sup> The intellectual framework hinges on the exposure of the narrator’s mind ‘in an elaborate contemplation of one subject—death.’<sup>8</sup> Provided that Larkin was sound and healthy in 1977, Palmer argues, ‘the poem is much more a measured philosophical statement than an agonized emotional one.’<sup>9</sup> Speculating about the arrangement of the poems in the last collection and considering Larkin’s strategic stringing together of poems according to such criteria as ‘music-hall bill’, ‘contrast, difference in length, the comic, the Irish tenor, bring on the girls’, Gardner concludes that ‘Aubade’ fits in as ‘the long philosophical poem - the “big middle”, one might call it - which gave each of his three main collections its central upholding pillar.’<sup>10</sup> In ‘Aubade’, the central persona dons ‘a mask lyric’ and waxes personal in ‘a dramatic monologue’ where ‘the mystery of death’ is confronted ‘more openly than ever before’.<sup>11</sup> The unmistakable confessional tone takes a critical and evaluative turn to echo a mentality that has grown disillusioned, and its scepticism seems to taper off into a bleak conviction of an impregnable and ineluctable end. When the speaker casually announces, ‘I work all day, and get half-drunk at night’ (p. 115), the entire living routine is epitomised. Work is the diurnal sedative that makes sure the mind does not stray off limits. Drink is the nocturnal equivalent while it

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Faggen, ‘*Collected Poems* by Philip Larkin and Anthony Thwaite’, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> John Osborne, *Radical Larkin: Seven Types of Technical Mastery*, pp. 214-20.

<sup>8</sup> Tijana Stojković, ‘*Unnoticed in the Casual Light of Day*’, p. 128.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Palmer, *Such Deliberate Disguises*, p. 111.

<sup>10</sup> John Haffenden, *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation with John Haffenden* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 122; Philip Gardner, ‘“One Does One’s Best”: Larkin Posthumous’, pp. 198, 199.

<sup>11</sup> István D. Rác, ‘Agnosticism, Masks and Monologues in Philip Larkin’, p. 117.

lasts; once it is slept off, the mind trespasses into forbidden grounds of thought: 'Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare' (p. 115). His daily existence is divided between workaholism and alcoholism, with the latter doing a mediocre job. Though the voice is basically individualistic and subjective in its confessional and first person address, what is depicted is a broad outline and potential scenario of a human tragedy when loneliness, despair, and faithlessness close in at the approach of death. The pivotal axes are 'experience and contemplation', which 'form an organic unity'.<sup>12</sup>

As with many other poems in which Larkin depicts a persona that is challenged by awareness and squares up to disturbing consciousness, 'Aubade' has its hero thrust into the trauma and anguish of realisation, not only that death is drawing close and is final, but also that death harbours 'unrest' according to his own calculations. Its cathartic power stems from the dramatised consciousness of a lonely hero or antihero who goes through the nightmare of confronting not death, but the horrifying thought of death. In all, the drama is virtual and proleptic for the narrator drops no hint as to him being, for instance, breathing his last or on the brink of death. The death rattle heard is masterly faked, though the fear it inspires is genuine. When the drink wears off and wakefulness impacts, the persona, quite vulnerable and disarmed, has to combat and give in to the demons of darkness until, 'In time the curtain-edges will grow light / Till then I see what's really always there: / Unresting death, a whole day nearer now' (p. 115). Death is seen as the other side of the coin in existential terms and a sequel of suffering. For the agonised persona, the dawn, which the title 'Aubade' parodies, rehearses a dreary, valedictory requiem.<sup>13</sup> In this respect, Lerner talks about 'Aubade' being 'suffused with awareness that it is a poem: not only because of its immaculate metre and careful rhyme scheme, but also because of the title.'<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> István D. Rácz, 'Agnosticism, Masks and Monologues in Philip Larkin', p. 117.

<sup>13</sup> In *Philip Larkin: Art and Self*, M. W. Rowe discusses the genres to which 'Aubade' relates in detail, including the aubade and alba, p. 170.

<sup>14</sup> Laurence Lerner, *Philip Larkin*, p. 37.

Larkin's version flouts or, as Osborne intimates, is intentionally elliptical towards some of the characteristics common to traditional aubades, known for their reluctantly parting lovers or serenade-like address.<sup>15</sup> It pivots around a persona who 'is woken early not by the lark, not by the need to be up and going, but by depression; his dawn song is for himself only.'<sup>16</sup> It is his farewell song to 'that most beloved of all, life itself.'<sup>17</sup> The small hours before daybreak, along with vigilance, conspire to install and force into effect the gruelling, 'arid interrogation' in regard to 'where and when I shall myself die', where 'death individuates like the law.'<sup>18</sup> Richard Rorty points to the sense of singleness to which the narrator falls prey, confiding 'that unless one finds something common to all men at all times, not just to one man once, one cannot die satisfied.'<sup>19</sup> It is doubtful, however, whether the narrating consciousness of the poem is heedful of the hypothetical collective experience of death as a human dilemma. Rather, death emerges as personal and lonely; the pluralism of death as a comforting thought is dismissed, just as with all of the other consolatory options which the poem surveys and debunks one by one.

Death haunts the mind during the waking hours with dreadful images 'Of dying, and being dead', flashing 'afresh to hold and horrify' (p. 115). Marsh draws the attention to death being treated as an action in 'unresting' and 'dying'. Likewise 'being dead' introduces an unresolved paradox, in that 'death is not "being" but its opposite' in regard to which thoughts run dry.<sup>20</sup> Death, presumably, paralyses the mind, 'Making all thought impossible' (p. 115). It is an advanced version of the horror that permeates *High Windows*. It is a mind bogey, which is partially an hallucination, clad in a realistic armour and coinciding with hours of alertness and wakefulness. It is also typical 'of Larkin's

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<sup>15</sup> John Osborne, *Radical Larkin*, pp. 211-12.

<sup>16</sup> Laurence Lerner, 'Larkin's Strategies', p. 119.

<sup>17</sup> John Osborne, *Radical Larkin: Seven Types of Technical Mastery*, p. 213.

<sup>18</sup> Adam Gearey, 'The Poetics of Practical Reason: Joseph Raz and Philip Larkin', *Law and Literature*, 19/3 (2007), 377-400, at p. 394.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1989), p. 25.

<sup>20</sup> Nicholas Marsh, *Philip Larkin: the Poems*, pp.126, 127.

imagination' to muster 'an obsessively vivid apprehension of death as *event* and as *condition*'.<sup>21</sup> When the horror-stricken persona claims 'The mind blanks at the glare', what follows next by no means portrays a mind shutting down. Alternatively, the mind which has been dormant due to drink and/or sleep is reactivated by the 'glare' as evidenced in the ensuing contemplation, which serves to 'foreground negatives': 'Not in remorse /— The good not done, the love not given, time / Torn off unused' (p.115).<sup>22</sup> In these lines and the rest of the second stanza, Larkin's protagonist begins his lofty climb, striking a philosophical note of his own. It is Larkin's way of turning the tables on 'a succession of false belief systems, not just religion but Epicureanism, Stoicism and existentialism'.

The logic with which the insomniac clings to life does not spring from the pure or abstract love of life, but from his horror of 'the total emptiness for ever / The sure extinction that we travel to / And shall be lost in always'(p. 115), which 'this post-Nietzschean death' typifies.<sup>23</sup> It is his fear of losing the 'precious self', to quote Booth, and 'his individuality', according to Rowe, where the personality erasure has the 'advantage' of making the narrator 'a kind of Everyman.'<sup>24</sup> Life itself, by his description, teams with unused opportunities and non-fulfilments and hence holds no or little attraction in the light of the stumbling beginnings which one's own lifetime may not be long enough to rise above. Life earns its value only because of the terror and irreversible truthfulness, perhaps finality of 'Not to be here, / Not to be anywhere'(p. 115), which is a further endeavour to put death into words, and define it in terms of its very opposite: being.<sup>25</sup> Life is precious only due to its here-ness, in contrast to the nowhere-ness of death. Thus, the physical and spatial visibility is pitted against non-existence. Drawing on the title, Booth finds in 'Aubade' a poet who 'imagines the extinction of his imagination. Figurative language fails

<sup>21</sup> Peter Hollindale, 'Philip Larkin's "The Explosion"', *Critical Survey*, 1/2 (1989), 139-46, at p. 139.

<sup>22</sup> John Osborne, *Radical Larkin: Seven Types of Technical Mastery*, p. 229.

<sup>23</sup> John Osborne, *Radical Larkin: Seven Types of Technical Mastery*, p. 229.

<sup>24</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: The Poet's Plight*, p. 198; M. W. Rowe, *Philip Larkin: Art and Self*, p. 177.

<sup>25</sup> Nicholas Marsh, *Philip Larkin: the Poems*, p. 127.



him, and a dispirited prosiness prevails'. It shows Larkin struggling as evidenced by the extensive drafting, and falling 'back on familiar, richly romantic vocabulary recycled from his earlier work', like 'unrest' from 'unresting castles' of 'The Trees'.<sup>26</sup> By this measure, behind 'Aubade', a poet is saying his reluctant farewells to his Muse, but still clings on to the last shred of his talent. It also exposes how witty and intellectually fracturing the choice of the title is.

This dread of invisibility and unavailability at the corporal level defines the death phobia of whose psychological dimension the narrator is by no means unsuspecting. The third stanza dives into the psychological background of the death fear syndrome:

This is a special way of being afraid  
No trick dispels. Religion used to try,  
That vast moth-eaten musical brocade  
Created to pretend we never die,  
And specious stuff that says *No rational being*  
*Can fear a thing it will not feel*, not seeing  
That this is what we fear – no sight, no sound,  
No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,  
Nothing to love or link with,  
The anaesthetic from which none come round. (pp. 115-6)

Despite the sardonic tone, the narrator, in truth, barely expresses his disappointment that the tricks which religion offers do not work for him. Religion as an antidote against the fear of death does not belong with the modern age; its consolation is obsolete and outdated. Neither does rational logic, which seems to suffer demotion and devaluation, with 'it' designating the rational being. Found lacking and absurd, this philosophy, for which Epicurus is renowned, is dismantled here. The narrating voice is not willing to evade 'anxiety and pain', which are almost welcomed on their own.<sup>27</sup> He is through with self-deception and dismissive of philosophical claims, finding them highly questionable. He draws no comfort or consolation from the notion that in death, the existence of the human being ceases, striking an unmistakable masochistic note. The horrified persona 'remains

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<sup>26</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*, pp. 392, 393.

<sup>27</sup> John Osborne, *Radical Larkin: Seven Types of Technical Mastery*, p. 230.

resolute in justifying his fear of death against any palliative argument to be found in religion, philosophy, or human relations. He suffers and refuses all solutions'.<sup>28</sup> To accomplish that, the narrator 'presents an argument (or arguments) in the first half of the stanza, which he then refutes with his own counter-arguments in the second half, clarifying his point of view through contrast.'<sup>29</sup>

Nonetheless, the fear which the notion of death inspires is the end result of a mind too much engaged in the question of nonbeing. The narrator panics at the idea of 'disappearance' and 'the stark finality' in wait for him to the point that 'the "special" fear of death resists the comforts of reason; it is merely "specious" advice'.<sup>30</sup> The horror is stirred by too much awareness and speculation, which are, in their turn, among the identifying hallmarks of that 'rational being' of the already mocked philosophy. Another contradiction is located in the ensuing exegesis that seems to go against the earlier argument which strips life of attraction. All of a sudden, the narrator is in raptures over the minute details of life and the irresistible sensuality of the sensory apparatus, cognition, love, and relations. This is how the mind checks any gaps in the proposition and modifies it according to the newly arising insights. When the spiritual tone climbs up to ethereal heights, the use of a medical term 'anaesthetic' slows the ascent, if not brings it toppling down, unless 'anaesthetic' is employed literally rather than figuratively, as Booth suggests, tracing the word to its Greek origin '*an-aesthesia*, the negation of senses.'<sup>31</sup> The medical term is found to link the poem to Eliot's 'Prufrock' as Russell intimates, in which the narrator's 'perception of the paralyzing effects of the urban is heightened when it is expressed through medical images'.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Robert Faggen, 'Collected Poems by Philip Larkin and Anthony Thwaite', p. 10.

<sup>29</sup> Stojković, "Unnoticed in the Casual Light of Day", p. 130.

<sup>30</sup> Adam Gearey, "The Poetics of Practical Reason", p. 394.

<sup>31</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*, p. 417.

<sup>32</sup> Richard Rankin Russell, 'Echoes of Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" in Larkin's "Aubade"', p. 235.

What started as a lampoon on religious myths is concluded in a realistic and scientific fashion. Meanwhile, the dreamy aura continues intact to invade the next verse with its chilly opacity. It may be consciousness that ‘stays just on the edge of vision, / A small unfocused blur, a standing chill / That slows each impulse down to indecision’ (p. 116). The regressive ‘indecision’ is equivalent to non-existence, the phase in which decisions are no longer made or no longer needed and being ceases. Or, it is that ‘rational being’ that sways and hesitates albeit the surety that *it* is one step closer to demise, which must happen even though ‘most things may never happen’ (p. 116). This tormenting ‘realisation’ of the imminence of death ‘rages out’, capturing a Dylan Thomas ambience, when the mind is neither numbed by ‘drink’ nor diverted by ‘people’.

More illusions are pulled down, such as courage which is dismissed as ‘no good: / It means not scaring others. Being brave / Lets no one off the grave./ Death is no different whined at than withstood’ (p. 116). Thereby, Larkin’s person takes aim at Stoicism and disarms it unequivocally. The realisation, induced by rationality along with sagacity, flows in a direction that liberates the ‘rational being’ not only from the illusions of religion and logic, but also from a cliché-ridden heritage that more or less paints the fear of death in disgrace. Death is the only reality and every other thing, including life, is illusory. Shakespeare’s ‘Cowards die many times before their deaths. The valiant never taste death but once’, from *Julius Caesar*, is bitterly debunked.<sup>33</sup> Cowardice, then, applies fairly well to the narrator who confronts death every dawn when he lies awake in his bed waiting for the light to dissipate the murky death-haunted awakening. Death is not only the ultimate truism, but also the only certain knowledge which ‘stands’, stark naked in physical terms, ‘plain as a wardrobe, what we know, / Have always known, know that we can’t escape, / Yet can’t accept’ (p. 116). The ‘wardrobe’ simile is ‘scarcely even figurative. As an

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<sup>33</sup> William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* (Walton-on-Thames: Thomas Nelson, 1998), p. 221.

upended wooden box it is almost a coffin already.’<sup>34</sup> The repetition of ‘know’ and the juxtaposition of ‘escape’ and ‘accept’ hoist up desperation and cement certitude and irrefutability along with indecision and bafflement.

With ‘one side will have to go’, the closure of the poem takes the mind back to the opening lines, with work as the locus of being, putting an abrupt end to the morbid realisation. Light does not really chase out the murky visitation. Light only summons up worldly concerns and obligations which have to be taken care of, as ‘work has to be done’, as usual, ‘In locked-up offices’, an observation that reinforces the sense of inescapability. Work is conducted while the mind strays, summoning up ‘Postmen’ (not the priest of ‘Days’) who ‘like doctors go from house to house’ (p. 116). The poem runs a full circle and ‘thought’, which had been deemed ‘impossible’, is consummated. In holistic terms, ‘Aubade’ accomplishes its mission and ‘is a very successful combination of an analytical thought-process and an intelligible expression’.<sup>35</sup>

## II

The seriousness and morbidity of ‘Aubade’ are traded for indifference and cynicism in ‘The Winter Palace’ (1978), a poem which Lerner praises as ‘one of the previously unknown gems of the *Collected Poems*’.<sup>36</sup> The glacial attitude together with nonchalance suit well a temperament of the narrator devised to rehearse cursorily and facetiously the major concerns which ‘Aubade’ addresses in depth. The chilliness and wryness are all-pervasive in the way the narrator pits his beliefs against those of the majority when he proclaims ‘Most people know more as they get older: / I give all that the cold shoulder’ (p. 211).<sup>37</sup> Knowledge, people, and old age are all dismissed so that the rest of the poem makes sense. Of course, the knowledge that ‘The Winter Palace’ deprecates is a different species

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<sup>34</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*, p. 418.

<sup>35</sup> Tijana Stojkovic, ‘Unnoticed in the Casual Light of Day’, p. 133.

<sup>36</sup> Laurence Lerner, ‘Larkin’s strategies’, p. 117.

<sup>37</sup> Anthony Thwaite (ed.), *Philip Larkin: Collected Poems* (London: the Marvell Press and Faber and Faber, 1988).

from that which ‘Aubade’ laments. Knowledge, in the latter, is prenatal, caustic, and distressing as it is ineluctable and compelling. It is worthwhile and highly esteemed, though by no means rejoiced in. It is a shared knowledge that the narrator attributes to himself along with the others, as the collective ‘we’ navigates through its intricacies and convolutions. By contrast, in ‘The Winter Palace’, Larkin’s persona sloughs himself off ‘most people’ and assigns himself with an unidentified minority. The narrator imparts the information in the first person, affirming a private and individualistic intellectual stance. The poem is able to ‘articulate the desire to escape from the toils of selfhood’, and that ‘pivot, however, on a paradoxical language game: the ability of the “I” to propose a world in which that “I” would not exist.’<sup>38</sup> By the same token, the ‘growing absent-mindedness’ which the poem extols emerges as the antidote ‘to approaching death – playing extinction at its own game as it were’.<sup>39</sup>

The hypothesis of the poem is stated in the first couplet, where the narrator claims that quite in opposition to the prevalent belief, people know less as they get older. In so doing, an epistemological blankness is advocated to deflate any claims of knowledge. The remaining five couplets develop an argument to validate the hypothesis and prove that people grow less informed and even go senile as they advance in age. The thought has a familiar ring to it, echoing ‘The Old Fools’, for instance. Examples of mental dementia are surveyed in a tone of simultaneous denial and concession. Forgetfulness, the dwindling of knowledge, and blankness are most acutely related in a cogent, indifferent attitude. Such a stand is strategically adopted as a self-defence mechanism, worth trying, against any lingering thought of wretchedness which realisation may forge. Indeed, the poem ‘is entirely about forgetting: it moves from a vague grumbling at how the passing years cause

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<sup>38</sup> DeSales Harrison, *The End of the Mind*, p. 107.

<sup>39</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Writer*, p. 161.

him to forget more and more to a conclusion that celebrates oblivion'.<sup>40</sup> It also proposes a stasis of inertia, 'envisioning a world cleansed not only of self-awareness but of any awareness at all':<sup>41</sup>

It will be worth it, if in the end I manage  
To blank out whatever it is that is doing the damage.

Then there will be nothing I know.  
My mind will fold into itself, like fields, like snow. (p. 211).

Denial and self-deception are wiles deployed to ward off agony, qualms, and regrets which the diminished mentality experiences, as it 'will inhabit a world of pure signifiers.'<sup>42</sup> The situation in its entirety presents a persona which embraces the foibles and flaws of old age. Instead of striving to keep himself updated and to preserve knowledge, he devises a stratagem of dismissal or acquittal in which he celebrates ignorance, if not indeed dementia and senility. The metaphor of a mind folding applies in fact not to fields as much as to flowers withering and shrivelling. Knowledge, if any truly exists, remains in detainment inside the snow-covered shrivelled mind. This state of no-knowledge calls to his mind the prenatal frostiness, void, and emptiness on the one hand and post-mortem hollowness and torpor on the other. It is loaded with a prophetic power anticipating the withdrawal of 'creative power itself...both from world and function.... The reference is perhaps as much to a culture as to a self.'<sup>43</sup> The icy attitude prepares the ground for the ensuing embalming of not the body, but rather the mind that lies buried under the snow.

The title itself paints this glacial period of the mind in colours antithetical to convention, for the 'palace' of the title 'is, with the flattest of ironies, a wide landscape inside his head, an image of blanking out the damage of age'.<sup>44</sup> It is not a barren view of intellectual poverty or emotional inertia and downfall. It is rather an ascending heaving,

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<sup>40</sup> Laurence Lerner, 'Larkin's Strategies', p. 117.

<sup>41</sup> DeSales Harrison, *The End of the Mind*, p. 107.

<sup>42</sup> Laurence Lerner, 'Larkin's Strategies', p. 117.

<sup>43</sup> Barbara Everett, 'Larkin's Money', in *New Larkins for Old: Critical Essays*, ed. James Booth (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), 11-28, at p. 24.

<sup>44</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: the Poet's Plight*, p. 170.

cast in the form of an icy palace (in analogy with the mythical ivory tower) where the notions of majesty, grandeur, splendour, and wealth are all invested. On the flip side, height could be a symptom of an 'error of a serious sort, / For see how many floors it needs, how tall / It's grown by now' ('The Building', p. 85). The same strand of sombre thought emerges in the opening line of 'How', with its narrator registering his awed surprise at the altitude of morbidity in 'How high they build hospitals!' (p. 112). Height and light (as in the lighted rooms in the old fools' heads) are suggestive of a precarious human existence that is prone at any minute to collapse and expire. Likewise, the final metaphor with its sweeping view of dormant and moribund fields buried under the snow announces an age of ice and torpor where life has expired after running its full circle. It is an image of dissolution and going back to the mysterious, probably, mystical origin.

The indifferent and depreciative attitude of the opening lines that begets the final sympathetic view on ageing and death in 'The Winter Palace' persists in 'The View', a poem written in 1972 and collected by Thwaite (1988). Albeit devaluation, 'The View' does not follow a descending pattern. Like 'The Winter Palace', 'The View' exposes 'the amnesia that accompanies the aging process and which obliterates one's past' and 'the sense of life as a match-spurt between two oblivions' is found to be 'reminiscent of both Heidegger's philosophy' and Venerable Bede's contemplation of the shortness of life and the state of no-knowledge humans come from and finally retire to.<sup>45</sup> The poem relies on 'the casual self-deprecating wit' and the 'incongruous' 'mountaineering' imagery to advance a rational and clear-headed argument.<sup>46</sup> It is a view from the top, though the climber keeps shooting rueful glances at the steep route he left behind and stands in awe of the rest of the climb. The poem professes a reappraisal of life which leads to a position in which 'the value of one's life is an assessment of what goals one had in one's life; a

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<sup>45</sup> John Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, p. 249.

<sup>46</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Writer*, p. 155.

variation of this thesis would hold that life's value is its future directedness as a span of time in which experiences can give life a content.'<sup>47</sup> The climb metaphor is manipulated and stripped of its estimable qualities where, to quote 'Dockery and Son', increase is indeed dilution. Likewise, and aided by the notion of ageing, it recalls 'Extinction's alps' of 'The Old Fools', below which old people are pictured crouching (p. 82):

The view is fine from fifty,  
Experienced climbers say;  
So, overweight and shifty,  
I turn to face the way  
That led me to this day. (p. 321)

It shares with 'The Winter Palace' the sceptical disdain of common belief, which is here cited, then wryly and inadvertently assessed in the first person to be found lacking and unconvincing. What 'experienced climbers' advocate is shrugged off and scorned in 'The Winter Palace' when Larkin's speaker hails a state of epistemological void. The same applies to 'The View', which also pinpoints a state of disbelief and non-existence. Looking down at his meandering trail, the narrator is not greeted by the view of the hearsay. The 'fields and snowcaps / And flowered lanes that twist' of an Eden-like sanctuary are nowhere to be seen, as 'The track breaks at my toe-caps / And drops away in mist. / The view does not exist' (p. 321). The paradise-like imagery looks like a rehearsal of the popular views of the Alps as promoted by children's books such as Johanna Spyri's *Heidi* (1880), which Larkin had probably read as a schoolboy. The fairyland of dreams which the expectant wishful thinking paints in vivid colour proves to be a mirage and a phantasmagoria that wanes, recedes, or fades upon approach.

'From fifty', 'the view' is by no means 'fine', unless its total absence or at best fogginess compensates, masking dreariness and emptiness. The rub, nonetheless, is in a situation where the persona at fifty is incapable of looking forward to the route ahead. The physical imagery where the life/climb compact is balanced helps to dissipate the mistiness

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<sup>47</sup> Adam Gearey, 'The Poetics of Practical Reason', p. 393.



only partially, but keeps the narrator grounded and his mind clear. The physical imagery is relinquished in the last stanza when the narrating persona dispenses with metaphor in favour of an undisguised, cynical, inquisitive confrontation:

Where has it gone, the lifetime?  
Search me. What's left is drear.  
Unchilded and unwifed, I'm  
Able to view that clear:  
So final. And so near. (p. 321)

The mind is no longer at ease and gives in to resentment, indignation, and anger, overflowing from the spatial question headed by 'where', which fits in well with the metaphor of the opening line. The colloquial imperative 'Search me' deepens the bitterness of loss. The narrator is aware of the paradox in the claim that what has gone of his life is not after all his, hence the sarcasm and audacity of his bidding. In terms of possession or have and have-nots, the narrator announces bankruptcy, and the linguistic unfamiliarity of 'unchilded and unwifed' exposes mock regret, but also incredulity or even shock, because after all being 'unchilded and unwifed' involves volitional choices. The expression looks like disbelief hand in hand with exasperation, which is supposed to be self-directed, and it shows the narrator 'thinking again in negatives'.<sup>48</sup> The misty view of the hollow or null past of the 'unspent' life is jaundiced compared to the 'clear', 'final', and 'near' vision of future bleakness. In between, a weary and distressed mind is sandwiched as the climb up continues. In conclusion, 'the elliptical virtuosity characteristic of Larkin's style' helps the poem to modulate 'at the last minute into pensive self-elegy.'<sup>49</sup> The persona in 'The View' strikes a rare tone of regret in 'unchilded and unwifed', a state which helps to clarify his vision of the end. It legitimates the question whether having children and wife would have clouded his vision or even entirely blinded him. In all, it exposes a dimension to a mentality that sees in marriage and parenthood a sort of fake salvation. However, this is a rare moment of

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<sup>48</sup> Janice Rossen, *Philip Larkin: His Life's Work*, p. 83.

<sup>49</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*, p. 379.

epiphany when dismissed choices, namely marriage and parenthood, are momentarily invited in and briefly reconsidered to gauge despondency.

### III

‘The Life with a Hole in it’, published in 1974, dramatises ‘an unwelcome state of mind.’<sup>50</sup> It explores rigorously a paradoxical area of thinking on behalf of a Larkinesque persona who discusses a life span prior to the one focalised in ‘The View’. It gives a glimpse of the time which ‘The View’ pronounces invisible and equates with void and nothingness. A wry and foul temper lodges in Larkin’s choice of the title, which is ‘an offhand reference to the advertisement for Polo mint: “The mint with the hole”’, and ‘the unusually elaborate, interwoven rhyme scheme abcbaddc is wantonly abused.’<sup>51</sup> The poem, which opens with a private and personal register, turns out to be a treatise on how life goes to waste while the individual clings to unrealised dreams and wallows in resentment. The poem also spells out the hiatus between what others think and perceive of an individual and what one conceives of one’s life and how one lives that life. This thought disparity is embodied in the speech reported in italics:

When I throw back my head and howl  
People (women mostly) say  
*But you’ve always done what you want,  
You always get your own way...* (p. 114)

The persona in this poem is aware of the dialectic involved in the way his life is assessed by others. Choice or choice withholding is subject to multiple views and outlooks which may very often run contrary to his. Others, or at least his female circle, in brief, judge him as selfish, inconsiderate, and stubborn, while he finds the accusation as ‘A perfectly vile and foul / Inversion of all that’s been. / What the old ratbags mean / Is I’ve never done what I don’t’ (p. 114). The attack and counterattack formula commences verbally, but proceeds intellectually and persuasively, proving to himself the injustice of the claim and

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<sup>50</sup> Richard Bradford, *First Boredom, Then Fear*, p. 231.

<sup>51</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Writer*, p. 100.

acquitting him of blame. The expletive language portrays a latent indignation, which may have brewed long and for reasons possibly irrelevant to the ones he claims. Self-deception and self-pity may be spotted at the bottom of the angry tirade. The poem enacts 'the illusions and disillusionments of choice' and how 'an attitude of self-pitying belligerence opts for the comforts of resignation and fatalism.'<sup>52</sup> The specification of women in this context runs parallel with their being, at least as far as Larkin is concerned, 'symptomatic of the life he would never lead, the incarnation of unfulfilled, unfulfillable desires.'<sup>53</sup> Psychologically speaking, there is a masochist streak tinged with arrogant self-pity in the inclination to emphasise suffering rather than happiness, which exposes a personality viciously exasperated at not getting sympathy. However, these are his inarticulate thoughts which the rest of the poem unravels freely and heatedly. The verbal inexpressiveness, encoded in 'When I throw back my head and howl', is intellectually designed to expose the ripple effect of what his mind analyses and labels as unfair and unjust. The hopelessness of the situation and the agony, minted by what he perceived of as a false accusation, are vented under his breath. The triple permeation of 'w' and the alliteration of 'h', which Booth dubs as 'crude and melodramatic', redound to the inarticulate and pent-up thoughts and deepen bitterness.<sup>54</sup> What follows the reported speech is the hushed grumblings of a person, due either to their being too shocking or too unreasonable, or most likely both. To address his dilemma which is attitudinal in principle, the narrator resorts to such syllogism that verges on absurdity, as 'I've never done what I don't' (p. 114), typifying the antithetical reasoning. He is aware that he has always done what he wanted, but in the same breath, he deliberates and agonises about the plenty that he missed or the 'unspent' phases of his existence. More accurately, he deplores the reality which falls short of duplicating his fantasy and dreams.

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<sup>52</sup> Andrew Swarbrick, *Out of Reach*, p. 144.

<sup>53</sup> Edward Hirsch, 'Larkin, 1922-1985: Sour Majesty', p. 119.

<sup>54</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Writer*, p. 100.

And indeed, it seems that he has a point when he lists in the second stanza his have-nots on all levels, including a creative career, pleasure, leisure, and romance, which bolster up his claim and argument. The syllogism is validated, for his have-nots are no less weighty than his haves, which are anyway connived at. In his mental view, a conflict exists among three versions of the self as depicted in the poem: the superior, the inferior, and the real. These are the 'stereotypes' of 'male destiny' which he fantasises and dreads consecutively.<sup>55</sup> The superior and desired alternative of 'the shit in the shuttered château/who does his five hundred words', incarnates his favourite surreal self, a glamorous role model that he finds beyond his reach. The speculative current persona looks up at the superior and shoots a disgusting glance at the inferior or most unfavourable alternative of 'that spectacled schoolteaching sod / (Six kids, and the wife in pod, / And her parents coming to stay)' (p. 114). His real self is then sandwiched in between the two; in his mind the three fractures of selfhood are potentially present. The attitude of covetousness, envy, and jealousy of 'the five hundred words' per day writer pales next to the family guy version of life, which reminds the readers of Arnold in 'Self's the Man'; the protagonist is expected to sigh in relief that his lot is not Arnold-like. From a purely autobiographical perspective, Larkin wanted to be that novelist, as he tells James Sutton in a letter dated 20 May 1950, so desperately pursuing a novelistic career which he later gave up on.<sup>56</sup> Ultimately, the dialectic is resolved rationally and cogently. He could not be the person of his dreams, i.e., the epicurean hedonist who lives in the lap of luxury, but he is also appreciative, though rather inadvertently, of having escaped an opposite fate so abject and wretched in his view. The narrator's awareness is responsible for steering him clear of any further jealousy of the reveller of the writing career and secures a less deprecatory response to his status quo. Measuring his life and achievement against the high brow and the low brow secures his middle brow position.

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<sup>55</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Writer*, p. 101.

<sup>56</sup> Anthony Thwaite (ed.), *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin: 1940-1985*, p. 164.

Thus, it seems like a deadlock between the wrathful discontentment of the first stanza and the envy of the second. Ultimately the narrator recoils and relapses into bewilderment and confusion. Hitting the deadlock releases the philosophical reflections of the third stanza, in which his articulations are no longer personal or individualistic as they gain a generic thrust. He no longer attempts characteristic sketches, but devotes his reasoning to divining a definition of life:

Life is an immobile, locked,  
Three-handed struggle between  
Your wants, the world's for you, and (worse)  
The unbeatable slow machine  
That brings what you'll get. (p. 114)

It is the three-fold configuration of existence which parallels the three selfhoods in conflict with each other and all against 'the unbeatable slow machine' of time. But the conflicting parameters also overlap; in him, the three dimensions exist in wakefulness, dream, and nightmare. In this three-handed struggle, what one wants or 'one's id', what the world wants on one's behalf or the 'superego', and what one is really capable of pull at each other.<sup>57</sup> The conflicting nodes drag the narrator into nothingness, as 'They strain round a hollow stasis / Of havings-to, fear, faces. / Days sift down it constantly. Years' (p. 114). The poem ends in 'a larger awareness' carried out by the 'impersonal register' of the final line, echoing 'the faith in lyricism' that marks 'Larkin's earlier work'.<sup>58</sup> Being pressurised by human-created obligations, anxieties, and acquaintances, the narrator sinks into what he describes as 'a hollow stasis' in his endeavour to rationalise life. It is a state of immobility and monotony, swaying between boredom and fear. It harbours a routine of existence that does no credit whatsoever to those undergoing it. By this measure, life, in the abstract, is incorrigibly flawed and riddled with holes. It is a state of being in which the temporal framework in one of its small divisions, i.e., days, subjects it to a continuous sifting as long as the hole remains unmended. The sifting metaphor, however, does not only designate an

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<sup>57</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Writer*, p. 101.

<sup>58</sup> Andrew Swarbrick, *Out of Reach*, p. 145.

all-losing state of being, but also relates to a testing that proves worth, mettle, and genuineness in the face of ordeals and predicaments. To the mind, the two dialectical polarities of loss and worth go hand in hand, though the narrator emphasises the latter. Days, the sifting holes, turn into years, so that the ‘hollow stasis’, which commences tentatively, becomes a lifetime mode of existence. Ultimately, there is no gain, and replenishment never overthrows hollowness, so discontentment endures. ‘The Life with a Hole in it’ delves into the existentialistic questions already explored in more than one poem. Thus, it is another existentialistic journey despite its romance-like tenor. The major concern proves over and over again that existence is not progressive, it is static or immobile and one is simply stuck in it until one ceases to exist.

‘The Life with a Hole in it’ discusses life in terms of constant sifting or continuous losing. ‘Continuing to Live’ (1954), which Larkin dubs as ‘a completely unpublished mediocre poem’, explores the notion of continuity in detail and hence its orientation is largely existentialistic.<sup>59</sup> Like a typical Larkinesque poem, ‘Continuing to Live’ builds its argument by first stating a pivotal hypothesis which is ‘Continuing to live – that is, repeat / A habit formed to get necessities– / Is nearly always losing, or going without. / It varies’ (p. 113). Two behaviouristic notions are advertised in the onset. The first is that life is a monotonous catalogue of habits, a notion that has already appeared in many a poem, including ‘The Life with a Hole in it’, with ‘stasis’ summing up the stagnancy of living. The other idea is that life is a losing game and the longer one lives, the graver the loss. Again, this notion presides over ‘Dockery and Son’, ‘Aubade’, and ‘The Life with a Hole in it’, among many others. Within the loss/gain framework lies life, thought of as a game, which serves the initial proposition of life being a list of memorised moves analogous to a ship’s lading list and a series of depletions on the physical and intellectual levels. Now that

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<sup>59</sup> Archie Burnett (ed.), *The Complete Poems of Philip Larkin*, p. 493.

the major hypothesis is pronounced, the rest of the poem goes about the business of rationally and logically validating it. In consequence, 'Continuing to Live' rehearses philosophical arguments in support of its debater's reductionist approach to existence, epitomised in the 'loss of interest, hair, and enterprise' (p. 113). The zeugmatic inventory of losses seems to be comprehensive, covering the personal, the physical, and even the professional/financial. The proof is valid enough and axiomatic, for living entails ageing which, in its turn, eats away at and sabotages the physical and materialistic assets of living or introduces the losing cards of the game. However, controversy arises when the equation of life/game is poised and the game is identified not as a gambling one. It is not the poker of expectations where 'You might discard them, draw a full house!'/ 'But it's chess' (p. 113) in which a checkmate, like a bolt out of the blue, could put an abrupt end to it once and for all. Living is a game of minds where the intellect excels. It involves math-like scheming, accurate calculations, and premeditated moves. Larkin's persona obviously does not think highly of his intellectual capability. The existential game is a sophisticated practice of foresight and forestalling; it has no room for luck and coincidences. Being a mind's game also entails that it roots itself in the ethereal and virtual coordinates of thought and cognition, hence the outcome is insubstantial. Albeit its intangibility, the intellectual exercise is not a mystery:

And once you have walked the length of your mind, what  
 You command is clear as a lading-list.  
 Anything else must not, for you, be thought  
 To exist. (p. 113)

The second stanza quoted above introduces the 'you' in place of the general and impersonal address of the first stanza. The shift is strategic and intended to thrust the reader or addresser directly into the argumentative equation, but it also relieves the narrator from personal confinement. From the very start, the issue is not purely individualistic or egoistic, as the generic, non-specific address of the onset and the absence of 'I' jointly

indicate. Then, in the seventh line, the argument progresses towards an address shift to the semi-specificity, but also pretentious detachment, which the 'you' entails. Now, with 'you' in the lead, the arguing voice seems to be excluded, at least partially from the dilemma it delineates. The question is relevant to the addressee in a fashion akin to a dramatic monologue. The analysing voice moves from philosophical, impersonal aphorism in the first stanza to a detached and patronising stance, nailing a situation pertinent to the observation and perception of the present other or the *you*. In the third stanza, nevertheless, he expands the address with the collective 'we' appearing on the heels of a question, so that the address metamorphosis is accomplished and his involvement is no longer connived at:

And what's the profit? Only that, in time,  
We half-identify the blind impress  
All our behaviors bear, may trace it home. (pp. 113-14)

Candour, claimed earlier, is vanquished by the half-identifications and blind impressions to which all our 'behaviors' (which recalls the habit of the first stanza) are liable. The argument reaches a polemical area of assessment, hence the obscurity of the thought and the parentheses. The strenuous task, laid before the reflector, is 'to find continuities, the something rather than the nothing to be said. Finding continuities becomes a way of defining the self not in terms of separateness, but of its sensitiveness to otherness.'<sup>60</sup>

The final stanza marks a double change in person and thought. It starts with a collective address in 'our death', but soon resumes the generic and impersonal attitude of the opening stanza. Further, opacity is abandoned and philosophy gives way to rationality and reality:

But to confess,  
  
On that green evening when our death begins,  
Just what it was, is hardly satisfying,  
Since it applied only to one man once,  
And that one dying. (p. 114)

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<sup>60</sup> Andrew Swarbrick, *Out of Reach*, p. 174.



Through enjambment, the closure is linked to the philosophical brooding of the penultimate stanza. It rehearses the philosophy of loss and defeat already operative in the poem by emphasising notions of dissatisfaction, perdition, and loneliness. ‘On that green evening’ is a reference to Keats’ *Endymion*, as Burnett notes.<sup>61</sup> The image of ‘the green evening quiet in the sun’ hails life and energy in Keats’ poem, but introduces death and extinction in Larkin’s, hence the life/death compact is simultaneously activated.<sup>62</sup> By the same token, death remains an entirely lonely and individualistic experience, that matters and relates only to its experiencers. The change from ‘our death’ to ‘that one dying’ reflects a paradigm-like shift: in the former, death is only a speculation haunting minds, while in the latter it is a realised truth. Existence, in short, is a routine that people go into and exercise until death wraps up the game altogether.

#### IV

In the posthumous Larkin, the poems examined above lend voice to the sage and furnish the Larkinesque life philosophy. The libidinal streak is carried out by such poems as ‘Breadfruit’ (1961), ‘Femmes Damnées’ (1943/ 1978), ‘A Letter to a Friend about Girls’ (1959), ‘Love Again’ (1979), and ‘The Dance’ ( 1963-1964). Apart from ‘Breadfruit’ and ‘Femmes Damnées’, the rest explore jealousy and covetousness in their negative and derogatory sense. ‘Love Again’ and ‘The Dance’ rehearse the same tensions to which a lover is prone when forced to be a part of a love triangle or ménage à trois and explore Larkin’s richest source of inspiration: deprivation.<sup>63</sup> The lover’s agitated mind weaves scenarios of erotic nature to whet his jealousy further and deepen the sense of loss and exclusion. Being ‘a meticulous, calculated exercise in masochism’, ‘Love Again’ copies a bereft mind hypothesising.<sup>64</sup> Thus, the reflective persona is not only erotic, but also

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<sup>61</sup> Archie Burnett (ed.), *The Complete Poems of Philip Larkin*, p. 493.

<sup>62</sup> Elizabeth Cook (ed.), *John Keats: the Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 87.

<sup>63</sup> Philip Larkin, *Required Writing*, p. 47.

<sup>64</sup> Richard Bradford, *First Boredom, Then Fear*, p. 249.

neurotic. The hypothetical tenor prevails in ‘Love Again’, which ‘tellingly recalls the Frederick Hollander-Sammy Lerner song “Falling in Love Again”, an ode to helpless promiscuity’.<sup>65</sup> The narrator speculates in the affirmative ‘(Surely he’s taken her home by now?)’, an intimation inflicting ‘the usual pain, like dysentery’, which rhymes archly with the ‘bakery’ of the hot bedroom (p. 320). Jealousy, caused by rivalry, and ultimately love are on par with dysentery, a painful, humiliating, and embarrassing illness. The imagination is given free rein to furnish the missing pieces in a way that paints in vivid colours the masochistic bend of the hypothesising awareness. That is, the persona’s mentality no longer insists on putting ‘it into words’, which marks ‘the point where this moment of reflection collapses in an ellipsis’, and in the reluctance ‘to be ignorant / Or find it funny, or not to care’ (p. 320).<sup>66</sup> Defeat is aggravated and the pain multiplies when speculative thoughts are paired with words; the verbal expression confers credibility on agonised contemplations. However, before pain robs him of sobriety, and before he stoops to more unwholesome speculations, he turns the mirror inwardly, psychoanalyses his situation, and probes for the reasons of his failure:

Isolate rather this element  
 That spreads through other lives like a tree  
 And sways them on in a sort of sense  
 And say why it never worked for me.  
 Something to do with violence  
 A long way back, and wrong rewards,  
 And arrogant eternity. (p. 320)

Whether the analytical insight is meant literally or cynically and whether it is genuine or pretentious, it marks an intellectual shift from blaming the partner to self-blame, even though the latter comprises other-blame, parents for instance (recalling ‘This Be The Verse’), as the ‘violence’ in the narrator’s past intimates. On a biographical plane, the answer to the question ‘why the life strategies of other people (non-neurotic people)

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<sup>65</sup> John Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, p. 79.

<sup>66</sup> Joseph Bristow, ‘The Obscenity of Philip Larkin’, p. 178.

never worked for him' has to do with 'traumatic experiences which pushed him [the poet] towards "arrogant eternity," that is, poetry.'<sup>67</sup> The personification of eternity and its controversial slurring by attributing arrogance to it exposes a mind too reluctant to have faith in the existence of 'eternity', albeit the attraction of the idea and the satisfaction it may yield. Hence, the pretension in regard to 'eternity' is deflated as bumptious and vain. However, art, if it is, indeed, what Larkin means by 'eternity', is, after all, meant to last for eternity and has at least the authority or even despotism, if not the arrogance, the poem claims. Likewise, cryptic and suggestive, 'violence' belongs to an entire package of an 'unexplained history that informs this sense of betrayal, and yet it cannot be articulated. All he can do is repeat his fantasy, the same old act ("love again"), and feel thwarted in the pleasures he desires'.<sup>68</sup> As a result, he is not intransigent, stubborn, or opinionated, rather he is open to negotiation and compromise, a position proved by the acknowledgement of his share of the blame. That tree-like element, love, which the narrator's imperative foregrounds and isolates sways the mind away from self-deception and self-victimisation towards self-negation and transcendental awareness of one's flaws and shortcomings. Once self-recognition is accomplished, the narrator is no longer misled by prejudice or egoism.

Within the cordons of psychology, 'Neurotics' (1949) is a sonnet about a category of people who are mentally disturbed, falling prey to depression and ennui. Its narrator, psychiatrist-like, descants on the sinister consequences of neurotic obsessions in such a penetrating way that Theodore Dalrymple, 'a writer and retired doctor', admits that 'what Larkin had to say about neurotics seems all too familiar to me, functional MRI and PET scans notwithstanding. Nothing much has changed really'.<sup>69</sup> 'Neurotics' is not a treatise on

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<sup>67</sup> István D. Rácz, 'The Experience of Reading and Writing Poetry: Auden and Philip Larkin', *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)*, 14/1 (2008), 95-103, at p. 101.

<sup>68</sup> Joseph Bristow, 'The Obscenity of Philip Larkin', p. 178.

<sup>69</sup> Theodore Dalrymple, 'Between the Lines: Comfort for Failures', *BMJ: British Medical Journal*, 334/7594 (2007), p. 641.

neurosis; nevertheless, Larkin's choice to explore such a turbulent area in 1949 is hardly fortuitous; it exposes an insightful awareness, marching ahead of its time.

In the opening line, a neurotic persona complains against having, unprepared and without prior warning, to grapple with depression: 'No one gives you a thought, as day by day / You drag your feet, clay-thick with misery' (p. 266). However, he chooses to address his contemplation to the 'you' that prevails upon the entire argument, effecting both involvement and objectivity. The rest of poem goes about the business of explaining the causes of depression:

None think how stalemate in you grinds away,  
Holding your spinning wheels an inch too high  
To bite on earth. (p. 266).

Being too aspirant justifies the condition of 'stalemate', the dead ends which waylay vaulting ambition, though it is only 'an inch' higher than the customs dictate. However, 'spinning wheels' stand for destiny and fate and imply an attempt, on the part of the neurotics, to tamper with fortune and force their own choices. But it is not only ambition that shapes one's own fate and decides wellbeing. The picture is far more complicated with the introduction of 'minds' that deviate from the norm and 'rusted, stiff, admit / Only what will accuse or horrify, / Like slot-machines only bent pennies fit' (p. 266). The root of the problem is the possession of twisted minds that have a taste for the shocking and abnormal. 'Minds' in the plural could stand for multiple, disunited personalities or fractured psyches and dissident mentalities. The 'slot-machines' simile fathoms out the despondency of the situation, while 'rusted stiff' minds allow only for distortions. These freakish mentalities with the pluralism emphasised have within them the intrinsic inclination to insulation: 'So year by year your tense unfinished faces / Sink further from the light' (p. 266). When the narrator mentions 'unfinished faces' which 'Sink further from the light', he takes the mental disorder to a critical level of an endless or constantly renewing neurosis. He seems to drop hints at some psychiatric disorders, such as

schizophrenia or Dissociative Identity Disorder, which have gone too far or lasted too long to remedy and hence: 'No one pretends / To want to help you now.' Hitting the 'stalemate', the neurotics who have neither youth on their side, nor insistence, retire to 'locked rooms where a hired darkness ends / Your long defence against the non-existent' (p. 266).

More within the psychological domain, jealousy works in coordination with self-victimisation in 'A Letter to a Friend about Girls' (1959), which has self-affirmation rather than abnegation dominate. The poem comprises a slippery set of thoughts with which Larkin struggled, confessing in a letter to Judy Egerton dated 28 November 1959 that 'the whole idea is too complicated a trap to spring'.<sup>70</sup> He expressed similar sentiments to Anthony Thwaite, diagnosing in detail its many difficulties if not weaknesses, which have to do with being not 'funny' enough or indeed at all, 'too obvious or too subtle', its need for further 'polishing up', not to mention the potentiality of its hurting 'too many feelings'.<sup>71</sup>

Unlike 'Love Again' and 'The Dance', love triangles are dispensed with. A different category of rivalry is forged in the narrator's covetousness of his friend's better lot with girls in his complaint, 'I've met a different gauge of girl from yours' (p. 299). The Byronic hero-like friend is destined to meet girls of a different calibre and hence in the game of love and romance, the writer of the letter could 'see how I've been losing' and that 'Everything proves we play in separate leagues' (p. 299). The game metaphor is taken a notch higher in 'You bag real birds, though they're from alien covers', where the game is identified as hunting. The misogyny, which commences with the 'girls' of the title opposed to women, is carried further by 'birds'. The birds-girls metaphor recalls 'The Life with a Hole in it', in which the narrator looks up enviously at an imaginary superior version of himself: 'the shit in the shuttered château / Who does his five hundred words / Then parts

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<sup>70</sup> Anthony Thwaite (ed.), *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin: 1940-1985*, p. 311.

<sup>71</sup> Anthony Thwaite (ed.), *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin: 1940-1985*, pp. 576-77.

out the rest of the day / Between bathing and booze and birds' (p. 114). Identified by Richard Bradford as Kingsley Amis without 'a château', the five hundred words novelist in 'The Life with a Hole in it' fits well in with the description of the letter's recipient.<sup>72</sup> Still within the biographical plane, Booth sees the poem as 'a relaxed attempt to ironise the pattern of his [Larkin's] own personal sexual history in terms of the comic categories of Amis's fiction.'<sup>73</sup> The friend is a better player, with his 'pushovers' and 'intrigues'. He is even a more competent warrior, adventurer, or knight, as 'skirmishes' in the second stanza insinuates, while the letter writer is impeded by timidity and naivety, thinking 'all girls the same', and by his 'fecklessness'. In all, the game-life compact involves intrinsic winners and losers. Relevant to that are the disparate attitudinal and mental frames of the two friends. This is summarised in the difference between the 'mortification' of one and 'mystification' of the other. They differ characteristically and psychologically, which is why they attract different sorts of women.

The letter writer broadens the analysis of his friend's guilt-free romantic conquests. The Casanova lives according to different standards, which are summed up in 'where to want / Is straightway to be wanted, seek to find' (p. 299). Thus, as a playboy, the coveted friend crosses all lines and has no scruples whatsoever. His ethical and moral system, if anything, is entirely disabled. The second stanza goes about the business of surveying succinctly 'his friend's sex-life in a brilliant vignette of tacky sexual larks, such as those with which the Sunday newspapers excite the salacious envy of their readers', creating 'this male myth of life'.<sup>74</sup> In other words, 'machismo', which 'is evoked as an entertainment', is set against rather a modern version of chivalry.<sup>75</sup> In contrast, the romantic endeavours of the letter writer are merely farcical; he 'is content to play his role

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<sup>72</sup> Richard Bradford, *First Boredom, Then Fear*, p. 232.

<sup>73</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Writer*, p. 115.

<sup>74</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Writer*, p. 115.

<sup>75</sup> Terry Whalen, 'Larkin and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*: Exploring an Influence', in *New Larkins for Old: Critical Essays*, ed. James Booth (Basingstoke, Palgrave: 2000), 107-20, at p.119.

of dismal failure in this rich and varied pageant of male philandering.’<sup>76</sup> Thus, it is not only an epistolary narrative or a thesis on ‘girls’ and jealousy, but a comparative study of two male paragons. The ‘Don Juanish’ friend is the one who ‘magically caused fantasy and fact to become compatible.’<sup>77</sup> Possessed of a hedonistic personality, he prowls around and picks up girls that are easy going, pretty, and dummy-like:

And no one gets upset or seems to mind  
At what you say to them, or what you don’t:  
A world where all the nonsense is annulled... (p. 299)

The friend’s erotic ‘exploits’ are surveyed against the backdrop of ‘a Platonically perfect world’ of flawless felicity.<sup>78</sup> This paradise of noncommittal and pure pleasure is denied the feckless friend whose male-chauvinistic mind categorises in detail his types of ‘girls’, with a question in the lead: ‘But equally, haven’t you noticed mine?’. In analogy with the ‘bosomy English rose / And her friend in specs I could talk to’ (p. 68) of ‘Wild Oats, (*The Whitsun Weddings*), the characteristic ‘caricature’, to use Booth’s expression, of his type sketches self-opinionated, sophisticated, career women (like Monica Jones) who ‘put off men’:

By being unattractive, or too shy,  
Or having morals – anyhow, none give in:  
Some of them go quite rigid with disgust  
At anything but marriage... (p. 299).

Thus, the core of the trouble is the fact that he tends to pick the brainy, conscientious type whom he has to manoeuvre and outsmart, but probably to no avail. In the end, the failure is reciprocal and the suffering is shared: ‘you mine away / For months, both of you, till the collapse comes / Into remorse, tears, and wondering why / You ever start such boring barren games’ (p. 299). As he ‘seems almost to be identifying himself with his particular “gauge” of women’, his analysis verges on sympathy as well as empathy.<sup>79</sup> The

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<sup>76</sup> Richard Bradford, *First Boredom, Then Fear*, p. 176.

<sup>77</sup> Richard Bradford, *First Boredom, Then Fear*, pp. 177, 175.

<sup>78</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*, p. 244.

<sup>79</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Writer*, p. 116.

consolation he draws from this ‘mock-heroic resignation’ is ‘one of those things which, in Hamlet’s words, lie beyond philosophy.’<sup>80</sup> The logical route of his romantic affairs gradually meanders into turbulent areas before it ends in loss in the ‘boring barren games’, condemnation, and personal contrition. The scheme seems exhausting and taxing on the mental level for both partners in a way that alleviates, if not suspends, the misogynist strand of the onset. The empathetic ‘you’ marks a shift in point of view from the ‘I’ and ‘She’ to the dual ‘you’ of the couple. This attempt to enlist the Byronic lover’s empathy is doomed, hence the ensuing apology. He is acutely aware that the friend could never understand the plight the letter writer dilates upon, though he calls upon him to ‘notice’ and perhaps appreciate. After regret and acceptance, surrender follows but, above all, realisation and awareness which reconcile the losing lover with himself, claiming ‘I’m happier now I’ve got things clear’ (p. 299). Nonetheless, his mind still puzzles over the reasons why he never bumps into his friend’s type of women, though ‘There should be equal chances’. His bewilderment is antithetical, perhaps even anticlimactic, as it goes against the almost feminist figure he cuts earlier. Accordingly, the clarity that he previously claimed proves deficient, if not indeed, pretentious, which is why it is slightly edited in ‘One day perhaps I’ll know / What makes you be so lucky in your ratio’ (p. 300). The last solitary line ‘– One of those “more things”, could it be? *Horatio*’ comprises an assertion in the first half and uncertainty in the tag question that follows, hence the inquisitive, unsure ambience is resumed. Its polemic does not stem from the interrogative tenor only, but also from ‘Horatio’, whether intended to be the name of the writer or the recipient of the letter. With *Hamlet* in mind, it is Hamlet who experiences heartbreak rather than Horatio, his university friend who survives to tell the story, and he is the one who sends a letter to Horatio, as well, though by no means about girls. Hamlet’s letter is about

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<sup>80</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*, p. 244.



surviving friends' betrayal and having the Judases hoisted with their own petard. Again, Larkin offers a whole heap of speculation and a trick fodder for the mind to engage in.

'Breadfruit' (1961) takes the libidinal tenor to a rather variant dimension, adopting an approach reminiscent of 'Sunny Prestatyn'. The poem, however, is found by Osborne to expose 'a proleptic relation to particular contributions to postcolonial theory', anticipating Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) which criticises the West's stereotypical views of the East. The oriental female 'as concupiscent, alluring and predatory' is eroticised and animalised in contrast to 'chaste Victorian womanhood.'<sup>81</sup> Hence, the poem wades into an area of thought marked by controversy and dissonance.

To do the subject justice, Larkin weaves dreaminess into the texture of the poem. This 'dream-framework and the exotic/primitive setting of the dream' populate 'the boys fantasies' or 'uncorrect visions', and 'it is they who conjure up the native girls and fantasize about sex.'<sup>82</sup> Its very title, the two stanza format where each stanza has two short lines of the same rhyme, and the rhyme scheme of abacdcdb and ebefafab all contribute to an exotic and magical atmosphere. Dreaminess is paired with immaturity and naivety, not to mention stale stereotyping, as evidenced in the opening lines which introduce boys and girls, then brides, to animate the island of erotic imagination. The 'native girls' of the first line, who relate to the wild tropics, are mismatched with 'the tennis clubs', dancing, deodorants, pubs, 'private cars', and of course 'ex-school girls' of European reality. The medley is exotic by the nature of its aphrodisiac ingredients. And the paradise of the libidinal imagination is ruined when untamed wilderness and naturalness yield to urbanity, modernity, and artificiality. No matter how fertile the imagination gets, reality forces itself so that 'Such uncorrected visions end in church / Or registrar' (p. 111). The idea proves a figment of the imagination, an hallucination, and an incompatible likelihood. Harsh reality

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<sup>81</sup> John Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, p. 233.

<sup>82</sup> Tijana Stojković, "Unnoticed in the Casual Light of Day", p. 172.

shakes the dreamers off their torpor and so they are no longer boys, but men who have to face the demands of real life in the example of marriage and its retinue, which recalls 'Self's the Man':

A mortgaged semi- with a silver birch;  
Nippers; the widowed mum; having to scheme  
With money; illness; age. So absolute  
Maturity falls, when old men sit and dream  
Of naked native girls who bring breadfruit,  
Whatever they are. (pp. 111-12)

Maturity, attained at a high price, is only skin-deep, since deep down, the old men are those same boys with the same exact dreams, but with 'false Platonism' debunked and the 'fraudulence' assaulted.<sup>83</sup> The tropical girls by whom 'all men, at heart, have been duped' haunt 'dreams in old age'.<sup>84</sup> Fantasy is dealt a blow and 'desire' has to be reshaped or 'revisioned' to fit in 'the context of lived sociological fact.'<sup>85</sup> Ultimately, the falsity of the 'Orientalist fantasy' is twice dismantled with 'whatever they are' at the onset also sealing the closure and re-grouping both girls and the breadfruit they offer. The breadfruit has 'become a reverse Edenic apple: not so much the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, leading to the Fall into sexuality, as the fruit of the Tree of Ignorance, leading to frustration.'<sup>86</sup>

In the poems, examined above, Larkin returned to themes and issues that he handled differently, less subjectively, or more craftily in poems he chose to publish. The unpublished or uncollected poems expose a mind in its ongoing search for answers and explanations. They show a mentality that endeavours to support an attitude of disillusionment and awareness towards life and existence. Nonetheless, the poet's subtle consciousness, tentative and sceptical, which these poems comprise, measures and weighs each poem against certain standards of worthiness and quality. If the mind opts against the

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<sup>83</sup> Terry Whalen, *Philip Larkin and English Poetry*, p. 43.

<sup>84</sup> Rory Waterman, *Belonging and Estrangement*, p. 93.

<sup>85</sup> Terry Whalen, 'Larkin and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*: Exploring an Influence', p. 116.

<sup>86</sup> John Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, pp. 233, 234.

publication of a poem, it is because that poem fails these meticulous standards albeit the meritorious themes and profound reasoning.

## Coda

### *Larkin's Minds*

According to Watt's *Concordance*, the word *mind* occurs twenty-six times in Philip Larkin's poetical *oeuvre* and *minds* makes a half dozen appearances.<sup>1</sup> While the frequency of occurrence barely stands out, the employment of the plural form is indexical of the multiplicity of the mental altitudes of the poet, not to mention the intellectual pluralism of his poetry. Thereby, each poem harbours a mind, a fracture, or a slice of the mind, in tribute to its trespassing on the esoteric frontiers of knowledge and thought. Studying Larkin's poetry in the light of its mental and introspective engagements is a journey to find the many Larkin minds that process and reformulate the world and its diversities, controversies, and contradictions. Indeed, the motif of visionary wandering in search of knowledge and discovery debuts with surreal and absurdist trappings in the juvenilia and *The North Ship*, as the title poem of the latter proves. Journeying and restlessness adopt a more definite, even geographical, perspective in *The Less Deceived* with its interest in space and/or place change (e.g. 'Church Going', 'I Remember, I Remember', 'Poetry of Departures', and 'Places Loved Ones'). The same motif takes on a lofty, speculative turn in *The Whitsun Weddings*, whether in the panoramic 'Here', the philosophical 'Dockery and Son', or the epiphanic 'The Whitsun Weddings'. And finally it emerges as an astronomical and enigmatic mystification in *High Windows* and this is clear in the title poem, as well as in 'Sad Steps' and 'Solar'.

The poet's mind, as it appears in the poems, gravitates towards existential, social, and philosophical bearings which are by no means immobile or fixed. Far from being marooned in stasis, the mind adapts and adjusts to be able to assimilate and accommodate

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<sup>1</sup> R. J. C. Watt (ed), *Philip Larkin: A Concordance to the Poetry of Philip Larkin* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1995), pp. 296-97.

the different and constantly emerging phases of being with self-discovery and self-knowledge as the major hallmarks. Likewise, the poems are crafted as flexible and extendable entities that rarely offer a view or a set of views without simultaneously proposing their opposites. Panel-like, such poems act as venues designed to debate divergent views which are subject to drastic and severe revisions as the argument develops and synchronises with insights. The antithetical and dialectical voices bear witness to the presence of an eclectic mentality and collective awareness that can account for the heterogeneity of experience. In each poem, Larkin exposes a mind that finds the world polemical and endeavours to construct a logical rationale regarding how to survive in it, if understanding it is a forlorn pursuit. A powerful reliance on sobriety, cynicism, persuasion, and ratiocination makes Larkin's poetry appeal to the reader's commonsense, intelligence, perception, and discernment to respond to the experience related and evaluated. Larkin's is always a conscious choice of content and form intended to create a platform for debates which are almost always multifarious and manifold with Larkinesque personae adopting confessional and cognitive approaches. With neither shame nor reluctance, the central consciousness bares heart and mind to expose not only the masked personae, but Larkin himself, to censure and opprobrium. However, the poems mutate and their meanings magnify once reappraised through a detached and rational perspective. As such, Larkin takes his readers on a journey of exploration and learning; ideas, traditions, and beliefs are revised and edited, if not indeed altogether debunked. Awareness evolves and the simplicity, directness, straightforwardness, and even vulgarity and obscenity are soon transformed into sophistication, profundity, solemnity, and peculiarity. The profane and the sacred operate hand in hand, and hence the mind is trained to be double-edged and forced to be multitasking; thinking has to be bilateral, even multilateral.

The effort to locate the mind in the interstices of the poems is rewarded generously. However, instead of the moot attempt to capture one single mind, a multitude of minds are arrested and identified. Poems like 'The Whitsun Weddings' focus on the dynamism and mutability of the individual's mind and the process of its conversion. Hence, the mind grows out of its old version(s) and rises above its shackles. That individual mind is sometimes presented as awareness-riddled in the middle of the intellectual bankruptcy of Dockery, Arnold, Bleaney, and their likes. The minds of these personae hold on to static, innate, and outdated misconceptions while the minds of their opposites, prophet-like, break the mould and blaze new trails whether the others choose to follow or decline. Or else, despite the imperfections, the mind preaches reconciliation with the world and draws a thick line between body and soul. In 'Wedding-Wind', yesterday's bride sends her mind soaring high while her body combats the wanting, flawed reality. The drawer of knives-like mind in 'Deception' does not go flying, targeting the world that brought or contributed to its ruin, but lays low and recoils from light as the only adaptation it could afford to the hostile milieu. It is also a mind that possesses awareness enough to admit the plausibility of misjudgement and self-deception in 'Reasons for Attendance'. The toad-like bent of mind that frowns at unconventionality but votes for comfort and security is not spared, and its schizophrenic stance is brought to light not as a fortuitous idiosyncrasy, but as almost an inevitable atavism. It is a mind that stops the diary in 'Forget What did', yet reminisces with pathos and nostalgia in 'MCMXIV'. The mind that finds life attractive and engaging in 'The Large Cool Store', 'For Sidney Bechet', and 'To the Sea' is simultaneously haunted with death in 'Ambulances' and 'Aubade', loneliness and old age in 'The Old Fools', failure in 'The Life with a Hole in it', and misanthropy in 'Vers de Société'. The minds prove rich, various, and profound, and the process of pinning them down is

intriguing and ecstatic. The mind in 'The Winter Palace' is folding and lying dormant, yet it is field-like in vastness and immeasurable.

Almost every poem defines a certain rational or intellectual stance, achieved through a studious intricate process of deliberation, analogy, and evaluation. The consciousness that manages and sometimes presides over the contemplative flow organises the argument subtly and intricately. It resorts to mental manipulation by affecting simplicity and candour, even frivolity before the argument heats up and shoots past the primary simple layout towards uncharted coordinates, as in 'Sunny Prestatyn' or 'This Be the Verse'. In a similar fashion titles are crafted. 'Dockery and Son' moves from a simple statement on the classic story of professional, lineal success to question the utility of existence and continuity. The movement is performed adroitly and intelligently and the arguing voice worms itself smoothly into the readers' convictions. In 'An Arundel Tomb' the embalmed atmosphere of the title paves the way for the memorable final line that barracks for the survival of love amid this death-doomed existence. In 'At Grass', the pastoral ambience of the title gives way to contemplations of a far higher calibre. The reader is taken inside the mind of a detached but compassionate observer who conjures up the glorious, idyllic past on par with speculating about what memories the horses could have preserved of that past. Again, the transition in both poems from one orbit to another, peculiar as it must seem, is achieved so inadvertently and brilliantly that it feels, against all odds, natural and axiomatic. More interesting are the puerile, yet elemental questions of 'Days', whose answers require a priest and a doctor in their long coats. Likewise, the key to knowledge seems to lodge in 'Ignorance' and the more one realises her/his ignorance, the more knowledgeable s/he is!

In all, Larkin left a poetical *oeuvre* that will not cease to warrant intellectual and epistemological approaches to uncover the mental and philosophical drives operative in it.

Larkin's poems read like poeticised scholarly treatises showing the mind's effort to rationalise existence, culture, love, and identity. Tracing the shaping and reshaping of the poet's mind, which Tennyson warns against vexing, is proved plausible by reading the poems as philosophical, visionary, and ideological statements carrying a private intellectual signature.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Gregory Tate, *The Poet's Mind*, p. 1.



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