Empty Caves

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Submitted for the degree of
Master of Arts in Creative Writing
Department of English
University of Cape Town
1998

Abstract

This MA thesis is divided into three parts.

1) A **Preface**, which concerns the act of writing this work, with a reflections on the attendant difficulties regarding editing and editorial distance. A placement of the poetry in relation to "South African writing", and to late 20th century poetry. A brief elucidation of the **poems'** preoccupations and concerns.
2) Two **Essays**, entitled "*Dear Warlock-Williams : Why of Course* : The Lonely Larkin" and "William Empson : His Modern Escape". The first concerns Philip Larkin's uncanny ability to create a beauty out of irony, isolation, and desolation, his achievement of transcendence from entrapment. The second essay deals with William Empson's unique poetic position : a truly modern one. The essays puts forward the idea that Empson's poetry can be regarded as a struggle between a wish for escape and a need to engage with an horrendous "objective" reality. In other words, his struggle is between poetry and plain speaking; between art and science.
3) The **Poems**, which form a group of forty written throughout 1997/8. They have been thoroughly edited several times over, in close consultation with Assoc. Prof. Stephen Watson of the Department of English.

Preface

I have been asked to preface this collection with a short reflection upon the process of its production. This is no easy task for several reasons, the most immediate of which is that I have little objective perspective on the collection - I am still part of the process upon which I am now expected to comment. For the same reason, I have found the process of editing the poems in this collection to be considerably more difficult than writing them in the first place (and that is saying something) - for my most immediate and easiest reaction is to be as satisfied with the poems as I was when I wrote them. I have no distance from them with which to be critical with facility. I know that in years to come, these poems will most likely be the subject of a twinge of embarrassment! There is another reason behind the difficulty, too. To a certain degree, the production process has often been one which is mysterious in parts, akin to the production of a single poem. There is often no identifiable reason for one revision being "better" than its precursor, no criterion (quite obviously) for regarding the changes as necessary. Prof Watson's input has been invaluable; but there is often a difficulty between having a kind of literary empathy in realising how a poem must "look" to a reader, and therefore some difficulty in accepting changes prompted by outside reaction, even if, with explanation, I came to regard the criticism as valid (as I mostly did). In some cases, outside suggestions led me on an editorial path at the end of which the poem did not please me, or was removed so far from its initial creative impetus that I was left uncertain as to

what it was all about. In these cases, I returned to an earlier version of the poem - for what I need to feel secure about is its personal meaning. While it is good to know that an audience can be included, perhaps even essential, I found that I could not rest until I was not only author, but an included part of that audience (although, hopefully, not its only member). How, then, do these poems fit with their likely audience? What, in other words, is the place of the collection in what might be called South African literature?

A simple answer might be that they just do not occupy this place, but that would be to ignore the considerable tension this author felt in writing them. The poems revolve around the feelings of alienation and connection which characterise the dilemma of the white, English-speaking South African after a history which has done much to separate all that is white and English from membership of the classification "African". What cannot be denied, however, is that membership of any other country is not felt strongly. The possibility for true and deeply-felt patriotism is very much more problematic. The poems refer to a perceived hollowness (embodied in a "cave" motif) which is the space filled (in the case of those who unproblematically possess this patriotism) with a history, a belief in rootedness and belonging. Perched on the edge of a continent, isolated both from the centre of one's own linguistic culture (Europe) and one's own birthplace (Africa), these poems are poised in a position between leaving or remaining, each alternative confirming a kind of separateness. If the reader does not detect much of Africa in the poems, it is for this reason; yet, I am of the suspicion that British readers would not be

able truly to identify with them either. I would regard my poems as having achieved a communicative success if they communicated a sense of absence. They escape this nation-identification as much as their author's loyalties escape place. They are poems written by a member of that group of white wanderers who have populated the Cape for a long time.

If the collection is poised between a departure and remaining, it is also poised between art (which entails some form of faith, or at least a feeling for numinosity) and science, which traditionally is in apposition to art. These poles are ones with which William Empson was much preoccupied; it is the reason I have chosen to include an essay dealing with his poetry. Readers may detect a tone of irony in the poetry; this is a manifestation of an ambiguous attitude to metaphor itself, and a paradoxical poetic distrust for the poetic art. There is a scientific sense in which prose might tell truth, but good poetry never does. There is an even greater sense in which the poem is therefore fundamentally invalid; but its tone of irony remains true. Readers may feel, like Geoffrey Thurley, that the English Irony contained in the collection serves to weaken it, that it shows its author not to have a deep commitment to truth; yet, I would suggest, this irony is the only committed reaction to the paradox between art and science which has been brewing in English literature since the Enlightenment, and which has sharpened in the twentieth century to an awful position which cannot be ignored. It is not possible to remain committed to any sort of truth and write like a Romantic any longer. There is no place for a Wordsworth in an industrial estate during a

power cut. Part of my process of revision has been an attempt to reconcile my poetic stance with a view of poetry which regards taking a stance as suspicious in itself. But I have come to the conclusion that poetry is, to some degree, rhetoric - for it must answer its own questions, and suggest those answers to its audience. And the fact that my stance is ironic has to do with the world in which it comes to be taken.

Yet, as much as it can be argued for, this form of irony makes the business of poetry difficult; it undercuts the traditional devises of poetry until it is in danger of crossing the border into a disguised prose of flat tone. My anxiety about this grew until, half way through the collection, I discovered the poetry of Philip Larkin, who manages to reconcile such flatness with transcendence, even ugliness with beauty. If Larkin managed to place a line like : "Jan van Hogspeuw staggers to the door/ And pisses at the dark" in a successful sonnet, then he proves such reconciliation possible.

What, then, have I gained from this dissertation? I think an important part of its benefit is hinted at in the fact that it was not thoroughly pleasant to do - but poetry which is pleasant to write is mere varnish. In collaboration with my supervisor, tensions which were always swimming beneath the surface of my writing were exposed in all their unpleasant complexity for the first time, and partially spoiled the easy pleasure of writing. Yet it's been my more significant pleasure to consign to the past all pleasure which is in mere verse-penning. Here is a group of poems which include some miserable wet fuses; yet let it not be said that they are complacent or under-worked!

Dear Warlock-Williams : Why Of Course -

The Lonely Larkin

A preoccupation which I realise has dominated my own poetic project has much to do with the razor-thin dividing line between what sounds like poetry and what sounds like prose. A definition, or a placement, of this line has remained elusive; yet there are admirable poets (such as Larkin or Cavafy) who appear to accomplish the task of treading this line. Because of their position, their verse has a heightened tension built into its fabric; for to stray too much to poetry or to prose releases potential tension in different ways. This essay, then, is an investigation into the work of the first of these poets which attempts to trace the accomplishment of this delicate poetic feat.

Larkin's writing gains its power from what is arguably the most agonising battle which preoccupied his creative energies throughout his productive years. Hints of this ongoing skirmish can be gained from his interviews. In an interview with *The Observer*, he states that "Deprivation is to me what daffodils were to Wordsworth" - he attempts the persona of the man next door, merely reflecting the fact that, as he stated, "everyone's unhappy". Geoffrey Thurley[1] remarks that Larkin had "a central dread of satisfaction". According to Larkin himself (if he is to be believed), his ambition had always been to be a novelist, and each poem was an echo of the failure to do so.

[1] Thurley,G., The Ironic Harvest, London, 1974, p.145

Larkin hints at such a feeling in "To Failure", written "out of the very condition which threatens [it] - the etiolation of artistic power"[2]:

> You do not come dramatically, with dragons
> That rear up with my life between their paws
> And dash me butchered down beside the wagons,
> The horses panicking; nor as a clause
> Clearly set out to warn what can be lost,
> What out-of-pocket charges must be borne,
> Expenses met; nor as a draughty ghost
> That's seen, some mornings, running down a lawn.
>
> It is these sunless afternoons, I find,
> Instal you at my elbow like a bore.
> The chestnut trees are caked with silence. I'm
> Aware the days pass quicker than before,
> Smell staler too. And once they fall behind
> They look like ruin. You have been here some time.

Thus dissatisfaction is a motif of both the content and the context of the poems. His affected modesty about the supposed everyday and universal nature of his poetry is belied by the fact that it also provides an unusually acute view of misery, one which makes him a very unusual man next door indeed. Larkin's relationship with his readership is an uneasy one, relying much on occlusion and the maintenance of a private self while simultaneously publishing, which seems to be an impossible position to maintain. Larkin the neighbour keeps closely to himself, his life being "more ... an affair of solitude diversified by company than an affair of company diversified by solitude." His poem "Strangers" provides an insight into this:

> And to live there, among strangers,
> Calls for teashop behaviours:
> Setting down the cup,
> Leaving the right tip,

[2] Swarbrick,A., Out of Reach : The Poetry of Philip Larkin, Macmillan 1995, p.36

Keeping the soul unjostled,
The pocket unpicked,
The fancies lurid,
And the treasure buried.

Solitude is a state of preservation; the treasure is safely buried. Yet what use is buried treasure? The word "treasure" seems a fanciful term in itself, evoking the world of legend. So the kept treasure and the lurid fancies seem, in one interpretation, to lose validity and value in being protected; yet, were they exposed, they might be pillaged and destroyed. It is therefore neither good to be an alien, nor a fellow-man. In his poem "Arrival", these questions about solitude and company involve contradictions, inherent in a poet who wishes to write but not to express himself. Yet the alternative to life's expression is death, making life a "style of dying only". Relations with people, especially when of the intensity of love is difficult:

The difficult part of love
Is being selfish enough,
Is having the blind persistence
To upset an existence
Just for your own sake.
What cheek it must take.
("Love", CP, p.150)

His life is a struggle between love and selfishness; his relations with his readership, that between publicity and privacy. His poetry is taut between the despair of a country in post-war decline, and transcendent vision, between life's limits and the possibility of limitlessness.

> "It is very much easier to imagine happiness than to experience it. Which is a pity because what you imagine makes you dissatisfied with experience, and may lead you to neglect it.

> 'Life, and the world, and mine own self, are changed/ For a dream's sake', to quote Christina Rossetti ... a point does come in life when you realise that there's a limit to what you can get from other people and there's a limit to what your own personality is in itself."

The duty of the poet, as Larkin himself put it, is "to the original experience"; yet Larkin, I would propose, effects his unique transformation to such original experience, making it fit into irreconcilable choice and deadly opposites.

It is significant that Larkin quotes his formative influences as being Hardy, D.H.Lawrence and Waugh. How have these influenced his poetry? Before the late '40s, his poetry largely emulated Yeats', focusing on the visionary with Celtic intensity. The poem "Modesties" announces an aesthetic which departs from Yeats': "Words as plain as hen-birds' wings/ Do not lie,/ Do not over-broider things -/ Are too shy." His "Waiting for breakfast, while she brushed her hair" (CP, p.20), written on 15 December 1947, is an important marker for Larkin, who remarked that, by this poem, the "Celt" in him had finally begun to sleep. Compared with his previous poems, this one achieves that balance (or tension) between the mediocre and the revelatory which characterises much of Larkin's later work. The poem also shows that conflict between art and living which we shall see was an important characteristic influenced by Lawrence. The poem contains two persons to whom the "she" refers. One is a real woman, who has crossed the crucial boundary of intimacy, and who is sharing the poet's room. The other is the Muse, favoured by Vergil, and

attempting to reach out into the future with "divining-cards"; but outside, people in the present are lost, "liners/ Grope like mad worlds westward." In Livings 3, the speaker is a Don at Oxford or Cambridge,*w*rapped up in the musty past amongst old books, isolated from the potential inspiration of "Chaldean constellations/ Spark[ling] over crowded roofs." As Larkin said, "Everyone's unhappy"; everyone's isolated in his triptych. "Man," as he says in "This Be the Verse", "hands on misery to man"; perhaps the only real point of contact between people is one of misery-transfer. The reaction for Larkin seems to be anti-death by being anti-life : "get out as early as you can" seems to be, on one level, an exhortation to die. In his "High Windows" (the poem) he expresses an aged jealousy and anger at the apparent sexual freedom of youth; but it is only from his perspective that he sees it. The poet knows that he never "went down the long slide" to happiness, and neither, despite his jealous y, will the young couple that he sees. Thus the present is always a place of constriction. There is an ultimate freedom in his "sun-comprehending glass". There is a glimpse of clear blue sky, a clear-sightedness impossible elsewhere. Yet there is also a sense of inaccessibility in the height of the window, of entrapment behind the glass, and self-annihilation in that only the glass comprehends any longer. The costs of the visionary evaluated in "Waiting for Breakfast" are expanded. Human life, in the words of another poem, has a "hole in it", and that is the present. For Larkin, life itself "never worked" for him. Life is a point of stagnation with death staying "... just on the edge of vision,/ A small unfocused blur, a standing chill/ That slows each

impulse down to indecision " ("Aubade"). It is truly a hole of darkness when its own end cannot be comprehended.

It is impossible to say whether Larkin's battle between hope and despair is won by either. There is a hope in his despair and a despair in his hope. What is certain is that either hope or despair have won a Pyrrhic victory in an astoundingly insidious way. The transcendent beauty which some critics like Heaney have found in Larkin's work is of a particularly awful sort, far from an affirmative quality. If Larkin has transcendently beautiful visions, they tyrannise him, too - epiphany does not necessarily serve the ends of man; the terrible beauty of the Light on the road to Emmaus blinds like the sun. Enlightenment is annihilation, the point at which

> ... there will be nothing I know.
> My mind will fold into itself, like fields, like snow.
> ("The Winter Palace")

William Empson :
His Modern Escape

William Empson is widely regarded as a modernist poet; yet, his poetry seems to vacillate between the poles of modern incredulity and premodern belief. Unlike Eliot, who attempts a solution to the problems posed by a disbelieving world in a reaffirmation of archetype and faith, Empson refuses to allow a simple solution to these problems. Instead, the dreadful polarities of art and science, belief and knowledge, transcendence and mortality become affirmed and re-affirmed throughout his poetry. It is, perhaps, in this inescapable tension, in this agony of irreconcilables, that Empson can be said to be a true modern, avoiding the poetic evasion of modernism's questions which proved so attractive to his contemporaries.

The challenge to poetic escape which arises out of the modernist psyche can be seen in what is perhaps Empson's most widely-acclaimed poem, "Missing Dates",[i] in which there is an echo of the same sentiment behind Eliot's "fragments" in his Waste Land. The ultimate ravages of time on the individual become parallel with those which history wreaks on culture and society. There is a sense in which man remains constant, but the accumulations of time fills the "blood stream" of his creativity with a "poison". Empson "was more than aware ... of the compromises, the failures of energy, the swallowed bitterness and humiliations, that are involved merely in growing older, in growing

towards one's death ..."[ii] The poem begins on the level of an individual, perhaps Empson himself, making the point that it is not any aspect of action (or even failure, which requires prior action) which causes this poisoning, but, ambiguously, both the products of previous activity and the bitter harvest of activity not performed. (The double meaning arises from the word "waste" - both wasted time and by-products of metabolic reaction). Each stanza is relevant both to the individual and to society, to a single body and to the body politic. Once again, in the second stanza, Empson homes in further on the nature of such waste. Our despair is not so much a result of seeing horrific truth or of an over-categorisation of experience ("system"), perhaps a result of scientific investigation; instead, it is death which, while giving the very meaning to the word "life", also greatly reduces such an existence in significance - it "mills/ Down small to the consequence a life requires" [l.5]. Empson once remarked that "It is true I think that all Despair Poetry needs a good deal of "distance" (of the poet from the theme); you can only call despair a profound general truth when you are looking beyond all the practical particulars".[iii] Seen against this background, "Missing Dates" becomes an agonizing paradox, attempting to portray a tragic loss of consequence, a smallness, while being compelled to transcend all "practical particulars", all small matters.

personification of the power of art. It is under her influence that the initial judgement of the early-morning scene as "Featureless" becomes incorrect:

> Misjudgement: 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. Turning, I kissed her,
> Easily for sheer joy tipping the balance to love.

It is viewed with the help of the muse that the world becomes a place of inspiration and art "painless spilled" back after a year of writer's block. But the inspiration only spills over the outside scene, not the lit interior of the couple's bedroom. There seems little inspiration here, as if the Muse refuses to cast numinosity upon her real rival. So Larkin sees that the world may present a choice between earthly attachment and visionary loneliness:

> ... 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?

Visionary sight, closeness to the divine, comes at a cost. That cost is a sickness of the soul, a lack of wholeness, and perhaps, a lack of a more everyday kind of wisdom. One can see that Hardy, in the words of Swarbrick[3] "... associated sensitivity to the suffering and awareness of the causes of pain with superior spiritual character." Yet something is certainly lost.

[3] Ibid., p.34

Thus the importance of Larkin's avowed influences can be seen. Swarbrick[4] remarks:

> In many ways, Larkin's work develops from the argument with himself about these formative romantic commitments [Yeats and Lawrence]. His work deals so much with failure because the romantic conception of himself as artist seemed later to have failed him, and his anger, particularly of his later work, can be traced back to his sense of having been betrayed by his early aspirations. Furthermore, the later Larkin who responds so intensely to elemental presences of light, water and space and who wants to overthrow the 'inorganic connections' of work [Cf. "Toads"] and money [Cf. "Money"] has his roots here, in the passionate advocacy of Lawrence.

Lawrence was preoccupied with the compatibility of life and art, of bookishness and passion. The traps in his novels have to do with the stylised constraints of Edwardian society, and the lies they upheld. His characters struggle to live against their inescapable circumstance, an opportunity from the world of natural passion presenting itself, and, in some cases, tragically missed. Larkin attempts to reassert the strength of human nature; as he put it "books are crap" - a surprising assertion from a librarian, and indicative of the fact that he, too, felt trapped by the constraints and demands of both society and sociability.

As Larkin himself put it in his essay "Books" : "Lawrence ... tended to dramatise a literature vs. life conflict", and that it was necessary for life to win. Elsewhere, in his essay "Carnival in Venice", he refers to Lawrence's "forlorn

[4] Ibid., p.24

hope" that "if only a few people, somewhere, somehow, would let go of the 'social lie' then machine civilization would perish of itself." It is this dichotomy between civilization and nature which feeds Larkin's battle between art and living. As he himself noted, "... In my character there is an antipathy between 'art' and 'life' ... I find, myself, that this letting-in of a second person spells death to perception and the desire to express, as well as the ability." For Larkin, then, the artistic ego requires isolation for true insight.

Peter Davison sees Larkin's poetry as concerned with failure and weakness - and these concerns are shared by Hardy. Novels like "Far from the Madding Crowd" are preoccupied with failed choices, relationships, opportunities; they are the tragedy of personal history. His respect for the poetry of Owen lends reinforcement to this concern about tragic waste. Hardy's poems contain a pathos which often has to do specifically with the failure of love, and the pain of loneliness; a more genteel version of Larkin's "wanking again at half past three" from his "Love Again". One must, however, disagree with Donald Davie when he comes to regard Larkin as "Hardyesque" simply because he is content to leave things as they are. Larkin's often violent grappling with the world seems to belie this, and it seems even more unlikely given Larkin's other influences.

Waugh's novels are bleak visions, containing a vicious streak of humour, of an England washed up in the flotsam of the past. Larkin shares his humour :

My wife and I have asked a crowd of craps
To come and waste their time and ours; perhaps

You'd care to join us? In a pig's arse, friend.

("Vers de Société")

Waugh's novels often bridge the gap between the two World Wars, desperate gaiety decaying to despair and desolation at the end. Vile Bodies, for instance, begins in the fashionable round of London parties, and ends on a shattered battlefield with a drunken general and a prostitute. In Waugh's world, there is a twin alienation working - human beings from each other (marriage hardly ever works, and the reality of sex is exposed as being boring/painful/ embarrassing); and England from its past. Love, sex, even company, are problematic for Larkin: he professed himself, rather disingenuously, to be "fond" of people, but remarked that "it's difficult to get people without company", which he hated. His feeling in "Going, going" is that the past of imperial glory and England's natural splendour had been lost by the event of war, propelling England into a time with which he has little sympathy, and in which no one has a true place. It is understandable that, given these influences, that Larkin, slightly undercut by French symbolist traits in his poetry, did not find himself "interested in any period but the present, or in any poetry but that written in English." His verse combines distrust of the past and of the future; for the past has been betrayed, and the future is contaminated by that betrayal. He rejects the reliance upon archetype favoured by TS Eliot, and distrusted the artistically new. He is urgently focused on England's predicament, and the predicament of what it means to be an Englishman in the second half of the twentieth century. His

focus leads to a measure of artistic selfishness, declaring himself "not very interested in other people's poetry - one reason for writing is that one's written what you want to read." He cannot, it seems, bear the burden of other people's problems - he has enough of his own.

Against this alienation, it becomes clear from Larkin's essay "The Pleasure Principle" that he asserts the importance of a community between the poet and the reader while criticising modern poetry for breaking this down in a new wave of theorising. Pleasure, not studiousness, is important for him in poetry. Simultaneously, he reasserts, in a kind of neo-Romantic move, the elevation of the poet, deeming it necessary for him to speak down to his audience, who, in his words "[haven't] had his experience or education or travel grant." He appears to desire this kind of audience to value poetry highly, while disapproving of state grants for the art, and hankering for a time when "poetry was condemned as sinful." This combination of pleasure in pain and sin seems to be an important factor to bear in mind. In his "Writing Poems", he again reasserts the pleasure principle in writing, holding that poems which should get written often don't because they're not pleasurable enough; he is consoled by the fact that the ones that do get written "please that mysterious something that has to be pleased." What is this thing in Larkin? Why would he, or his audience, get any pleasure at all from his poetry? Why should he care at all, having remarked in his essay "Carnival in Venice" that "other people are Hell"?

Larkin's oeuvre and Larkin as a literary figure are riddled with such contradictions; ones which, I hold, stem from the private war which raged through his life and writing. He can perhaps be regarded as a war poet, not historically, but because he grapples with many of the same problems as Owen. As Owen writes : "'Strange friend,' I said, 'here is no cause to mourn'/ 'None,' said the other, 'save the undone years....' Those undone years are Larkin's unused youthful vigour, and England's years of war. Regan[5] remarks that Larkin's "wry circumspection and parochial outlook ... seemed to encapsulate the authentic experience of a drab and disillusioned England."As Larkin remarked in his own essay on Owen, "The War Poet", "Owen's war is not Sassoon's war but all war; not particular suffering but all suffering; not particular waste but all waste. If his verse did not cease to be valid in 1918, it is because these things continued, and the necessity for compassion with them." What are these things in Larkin's own life? Perhaps the beginnings of an answer can be found in another essay on Ogden Nash, "Missing Chairs". The suffering which fuels Larkin's private battle is "... the missing chairs and slow burns of which civilized masculine living is compounded: waiting for women, putting up with children, social boredom and humiliation, having to work, the agenbite of inwit", and, of course, more than this.

Larkin's reactions to these stresses often seems designed to offend the more politically correct critics. Blake Morrison, in a review of his Collected Poems comments that "the knots and blockages in Larkin's work have to do with sex,

[5] Regan,S.(ed.), New Casebooks - Philip Larkin, Contemporary Critical Essays, p.1

not always distinguishable in his mind from death." The loss of selfhood to others provokes violent reaction from Larkin, and his violence is often directed towards women: after a date with one, he wrote to Kingsley Amis:

> Don't you think it's ABSOLUTELY SHAMEFUL that men have to pay for women without BEING ALLOWED TO SHAG the women afterwards AS A MATTER OF COURSE? I do: simply DISGUSTING. It makes me ANGRY. Everything about the ree-lay-shun-ship between men and women makes me angry. It's all a fucking balls-up. It might have been planned by the army or the Ministry of Food.

His attempt to evacuate the sexual act of any frightening interior significance causes an anxiety which hides itself behind his anger. Likewise, he attempts to reject any obligation of sympathy or compassion for the underprivileged or less fortunate; this would entail the emotional (and artistic) formation of social bonds:

> I want to see them starving
> The so-called working class
> Their weekly wages halving
> Their women stewing grass.[6]

It was the revelatory publication of letters with this kind of content which added fuel to a highly critical public response: Germaine Greer, writing her review of his Collected Poems in The Guardian, sums up this view well: "His verse is deceptively simple, demotic colloquial: the attitudes it expresses are also anti-intellectual, racist, sexist, and rotten with class-consciousness." This mode of criticism does not get us very far. Greer implicitly admits that there is

[6] Thwaite,A.(ed.), Selected Letters of Philip Larkin 1940-1985, London, 1992, p.451

more to Larkin than this. How does Larkin the bigot, the "old-type *natural* fouled-up guy", weigh up against the poet that, in the words of Seamus Heaney[7], is "exemplary in the way he sifts the conditions of contemporary life, refuses alibis and pushes consciousness towards an exposed condition that is neither cynicism nor despair"? A hint towards an answer might lie, as Heaney observes, in Larkin's "Sad Steps", which begins: "Groping back to bed after a piss/ I part the thick curtains, and am startled by/ The rapid clouds, the moon's cleanliness." The almost seamless juxtaposition of animal vital function and a very human poetic epiphany lie at the heart of Larkin's aesthetics, and must force us into accepting both the dichotomy and the dilemma. Neither life nor transcendence, mutually exclusive, are sufficient. The former, while requiring no effort to validate, is a condition of blindness - one *gropes* to bed after a piss, as Larkin states. Yet what the moon poetically symbolizes carries with it its own problems: "High and preposterous and separate - / Lozenge of love! Medallion of art!/ O wolves of memory! Immensements! No,/ ..." As we shall see in "High Windows", art, and ultimate poetic realisation, is "separate" and detached, ultimately requiring of the poet the annihilation of self and the transformation into inhuman "immensements". The bestial Larkin who read pornography and rejected all attachments to the world of people is only one side of this poetry, expressed in "The Card Players"; and critics who refuse to teach him or condemn this side alone are accomplishing only the ultimate abdication of critical responsibility.

[7] Heaney,S., The Government of the Tongue, London, 1988, p.17

For Larkin, life's dilemma had progressed beyond such relatively pedestrian considerations as morality, which operates on the implicitly-humanistic conception of life as having an inherently-meaningful content. Larkin has rejected this:

> 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 to age.
> (*Dockery & Son*)

Life is stagnant for Larkin because of his view of history, which Motion[8] sees as departing significantly from Hardy's conception of time as a force of destruction. Hardy's agony comes of realising that what has been can no longer be; that what will be is not now. Larkin's present is constricted by the past in that the latter contains failures and choices; in turn, it affects the future, which is clouded by the thought of past failures. Morality is beside the point. Thus Larkin's poem "Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel" becomes a metaphor for existence as a whole. Barbara Everett[9] states that the poem "evokes the hushed cosy unnerving meaninglessness that tends to descend at late evening in a hotel, the sense of waiting for something to happen or the feeling that something just has; and it creates the sensation of inhabited void ..." What else is life for Larkin? The "full ashtrays in the Conference Room" hold the remnants of something that has been consumed and discarded; the cutlery laid for a dinner which is to come is "a larger loneliness of knives and glass". The whole place, the whole self, is in "exile" : the only thing which is

[8] Motion,A., Philip Larkin, London, 1982, p.62
[9] Everett,B., "Philip Larkin : After Symbolism", in Essays in Criticism, 30 (1980), p.231

certain is that "Night comes on. Waves fold behind villages"; in other words, that death is certain. Yet if the hotel is existence itself, there is nothing outside it; there is no "home" to write such letters to. So it is a place of silence, but for the *cogito ergo sum* of the poet. Larkin's "Reasons for Attendance" sees Art as a position of alienation:

> ...What calls me is that lifted, rough-tongued bell
> (Art, if you like) whose individual sound
> Insists I too am individual.
> It speaks; I hear; others may hear as well,
>
> But not for me, nor I for them; and so
> With happiness. 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.

But his lie does not cast doubt on the original proposition; for a lie is artful, a piece of art, an artifice, and alienated just as efficiently, if in other ways.

It is in this light that Larkin's conception of death, the "end of choice" as Motion puts it, becomes more complex than Motion conceives it. It is true that, on the one hand, Larkin regards the final tragic predicament of old age as the inability to scream at death's onset elsewhere; but in "The Building" Larkin achieves something quite different:

> ... To fetch someone away: the rest refit
> Cups back to saucers, cough, or glance below
> Seats for dropped gloves or cards. Humans, caught
> On ground curiously neutral, homes and names
> Suddenly in abeyance; some are young,
> Some old, but most at that vague age that claims
> The end of choice the last of hope ...

The sick people Larkin sees are placed in a unique position by their illness. They are not, as Motion claims, simply "pitied". It is the fact that their "homes and names" are "suddenly in abeyance"

which creates Larkin's curious, and only, optimism. The silver lining to life is that it is not eternal, that there is a release from choice and from the possibilities of success and failure. No one fails to die. The constrictions life offers can only be temporary; but to escape such constriction means annihilation - and a similar fate awaits the poet who desires a high window perspective on the world. Death is a place where it is not possible for, in Motion's words "the wasted opportunities of the past [to] coalesce and tyrannise the present". It is in 'High Windows', the collection viewed by many as Larkin's crowning achievement, and certainly his most intense expression, that Larkin shows a final outpouring of anger in his anxiety about the relation of self and community, about his own identity and the value of art. The poems in this collection are direct and powerful. His triptych "Livings" is a three-fold portrayal of different isolations - historical, geographical, intellectual. The grain merchant who speaks in "Livings 1" is alienated from the past; everything he sees, from the Customs house, to the pictures in the pub which "nobody ... notices", to his father's business he's inherited, is not his, because of its past provenance. As he remarks, "It's time for change, in nineteen twenty-nine." Thus the poem itself deals with a past which is gone and rendered useless by an intervening war. The speaker in "Livings 2" is a lighthouse-keeper, beset on all sides by the sea and the blackness of night. He is

Nor is this predicament, the third stanza appears to state, susceptible to being solved by attempting to find new sources of inner fecundity; because the source of the poisoning lies elsewhere, in circumstances beyond our control, such a measure would only be temporary. As Empson writes, "It is the Chinese tombs and the slag hills/ Usurp the soil, and not the soil retires" [l.10-11]. It is the waste of previous death, and of being compelled to be cognisant of it in a mental territory which can ill afford the space, which is the illness, and not the absence of fertile mental or societal soil. Thus man finds himself in an unresolvable position. If one does not live with passion, then one makes one's life insignificant; yet to live with passion is to consume oneself in its fire and to die. The middle position is not tenable - to succumb to hopelessness and despair, to be inactive and to miss "dates" and lose possible "poems", the opportunities of creativity, is to create the very waste of which Empson speaks. Broadly put there is

> a conflict between the habits of the sophisticated intelligence and the fears that it cannot dispel : the more confidence placed in the intellect, the more tragically moving is the discovery of its limitations felt to be, and yet, paradoxically, it is precisely these habits that can promise endurance of the discovery.[iv]

The question is whether there is a possibility of retreat from this predicament: the necessity of activity is strong, the place of leisure and

retreat soiled by the realisation of wasted time. Yet Empson, even in this his darkest poem, holds to "The idea ... [that] human life [is] an artificial struggle against a natural inertia, which is bound to conquer in the end. Yet it is the struggle, foredoomed in the individual case to ultimate failure from the start, that carries the race along, and gives human life its dignity and value."[v] This is the dilemma around which Empson writes his poetic struggles.

A good example of this is "The Ants" (which I shall discuss more fully below). The initial metaphor compares the ants to workers, carrying on a subterranean lifestyle. The fact that they "tap your aphids for your dew" [l.5] suggests that they derive pleasure (in the form of the sugary substance aphids produce) from the parasites, surely intended to represent the upper classes, who are privileged to be in a position to view the garden. This is strongly suggestive of the mindset that Empson, in Some Versions, attributes to the writers of ballads: the conventions of the aristocracy are used as a source of pleasure and amusement by the peasant listeners. In return for this pleasure, the ants offer the aphids protection from the winter: the working classes are therefore content that the system continues as is. This picks up on an earlier suggestion that the workers are living in a state of Marxist "false-consciousness" - their walls are "nostrum-plastered" [l.3], suggesting

that the adverts which are an omnipresent symbol of capitalism offer some medicinal solace to any potential class dissatisfaction. Even the air they breathe is "prepared", suggesting that the very atmosphere is conducive to making an unnatural state of affairs seem natural.

Such exposing of the mechanisms of class control may seem to suggest that the implied author is critical of the suggested class oppression, even if the narrated voice of the workers is not. This is reinforced by the statement that "You [the Garden, or perhaps even a god-figure] may not wish their sucking or our care" [l.6]. What is more, the ants are "all-but free" [l.7], as they, unlike the aphids, know and traverse both upper and lower world; this is given ominous overtones by their admission that "by too much this station the air nears" [l.9]. The pun on "station" ensures that the line has definite implications that the ants are straining the social hierarchy, as well as fitting in to the train metaphor. However the ants, and thus the proletariat, retreat from this position, rejecting a place in the garden with its ephemeral pleasures. A threat of revolution is therefore averted by a recognition, by those who actually wield the practical power, of the value of the status quo. The harmonious relation between the classes is preserved. Although it may still seem that the political facet of the poem contains uneasy Marxist sentiments, the restoration of escape-possibilities is more completely effected by the

expansion of meaning which the poem has undergone by its conclusion. The "we" of the poem appears initially to refer only to a tube-travelling working class, but by the last stanza it is clear that the poem also deals with the broader metaphysics of the human condition. As discussed later, the ants, with their fear of the exposure to open air and thus to knowledge, portray an impulse of insular self-preservation common to all humanity.

Empson's most incontrovertible poem of retreat is his "Description of a View"[vi], a work which also shows an uncharacteristic acceptance of the Modern milieu. As the title suggests, this poem is the closest Empson comes to a purely descriptive sketch. The building that is personified in the first stanza is given the typical innocence of a character from pastoral. It has a naive lack of self awareness characteristic of an Edenic preconscious state (it "was not sure what size it was" [l.3]), an honest straightforwardness ("plain, and firm, and cleanly" [l.7]), and a lack of arrogance or ambition (it could scrape the vulnerable sky, but "would not think of doing such a thing" [l.8], and it is "like stretched string" [l.7] used in its own construction: it therefore does not exceed its prescribed bounds). This last characteristic forms an implicit contrast with the biblical Tower of Babel, that first product of human civilisation, which did indeed have the hubris to attempt to violate the heavens, but

could not.

The second stanza strengthens the pastoral connotations which are imposed on the cityscape by portraying the building as threatened with destruction, just as the Garden was threatened by Satan. The crane which could dismantle it in an "impious" deluge [l.17] is compared to the bridge by which Satan reached Paradise. The destructive agent is also, however, compared to a "Zeppelin" [l.16], which hints that the source of the threat is the hubris of badly-handled technology - paradoxically placing the building, itself a product of modern science, in implicit opposition to a scientific world about to destroy it. This picks up an idea from the opening two lines, in which the passivity of an object of scientific enquiry is attributed to the "specimen of building" [l.2] - its pastoral ignorance is endangered by researchers who lay out, examine and label it. The crane is likewise compared to a pencil, the instrument of such labelling. Empson's wish for retreat is threatened by outside forces, but the fact that even this most idyllic of Empson's poems is never far from a hint of the sinister, is indicative of the difficulty of maintaining any sort of bucolic mindset with sincerity in the modern age. Nevertheless, the landscape of "Description of a View" remains in a prelapsarian state. In the final stanza, the unity of the entire physical world is suggested by his equation of the building to the larger

firmament. Although the observer's limited understanding cannot grasp this (as one cannot see the stars in daylight), the building and the sky, and by implication the whole of "concrete" nature, is one.

However, as Empson himself confesses in his poem "Success"[vii], his poetry as a whole can be considered as being impelled by "torment and fear" [l.1], tormented by the apparent impossibility of reconciliation, of the possibility of poetic escape, and fearful of the consequences of failure. He deals further with the nature of fear, as endemic to human life, in "Reflections from Rochester"[viii]: the "horror" attributed to the modern condition is not a new phenomenon; it is merely more apparent to us now due to a breakdown of our ability to rationalise our primal fear. We have, in the past, calmed our irrational terror by "making risks to give a cause for fear" [l.2], but this process has spiralled out of control. Our risks grow more and more daring, with an ever smaller "margin" of safety, and we thus begin to question our motives: "the mind... less easily decides/ On a good root-confusion to amass/ Much safety from irrelevant despair" [l.17-20]. The modern mind is therefore characterised by the fact that we have been unwillingly forced into a greater comprehension of our state - rather than allowing our actions to be determined by our nature, like a train "running on sleepers" [l.11], we are for the first time examining consciously what we are doing, even if the

eyes we turn are "blank" [l.22] with despair or the incapacity for complete comprehension. This change in awareness is neatly reflected in the central ambiguity at the turning point of the poem: our driving need to create causes for fear is described as "not/ The law of nature it has been believed" [l.11-12]. This could mean that it "has been believed that it is not the law of nature", suggesting that in our previous state of lack of self-awareness we only believed ourselves to be free, whereas in fact we were controlled by our subconscious compulsions. It could also be read: "not the law of nature that it has been believed to be", reflecting the dawning awareness in the second half of the poem of the true nature of our subconscious impulses. This freeing from determinism, due to a passing out of infancy of the human race is also reflected in the rhyme scheme. At its end, the poem breaks out of its terza rima scheme, in which the rhyme of each stanza is partially determined by the rhyme of the last, and partially determines the rhyme of the next stanza. Empson's very recognition of the bleak meaninglessness of the human condition, and of these consequent emotions, destabilises the possibilities of poetic escape in his poetry. His poems therefore constantly grapple with a tension between the urge of a self-searching Modernism to destroy all societal illusions (the presence of a God, the Donnian unity in a relationship, and of course the possibility of retreat), and a need to find sense, order and an instinctive home in the world.

There is a tendency which Empson shows to abandon his struggle with these tensions, to justify a metaphysical retreat from logical opposition.

"Success" is a retrospective look at a period in which it was more possible to write poetry because of such fear. Thus poetry is simultaneously made easier and more difficult by the circumstances of his time. Ambiguously, he both praises and blames the woman whose love has numbed him like a "drug" to these irreconcilables - who has led to the dwindling of his poetic impetus and simultaneously saved him from the "dear" cost of the discomfort. He has been rescued from death, but the poetic fascination arose from it, and its focus has been fortuitously frustrated. The love which he and the woman (probably his fiancee at the time, Henrietta Crouse) share, by dispelling the pressing nature of the ambiguities, allows for the revealing of a new feeling of unification (though not a poetic one), clearly alluded to in "When this leaves the green afterlight of day." [l.17]. Daylight is the condition conducive to greatest insight; but perhaps such insight ceases to matter. Empson has lost the concern and found a profound place of leisure.

His poem "This Last Pain"[ix] opens with a cynical view of Christianity, standing for religious belief in general. The punishment of Hell is seen as a cruel invention, made worse by ascribing to the damned the

knowledge of the heaven they are denied. Yet Empson subverts his quote: for any being on earth, belief creates a false knowledge of what is not there - the faithful do, in a sense, "[know] the bliss" [l.2] with which they never will be "crowned". The first stanza thus constitutes an atheistic statement. In the second stanza, the poem moves to focus on the position of the believer, likening him to a "prying housemaid" looking on the supposed secrets of the soul. Yet his vision through the keyhole is useless: the door, the heavens, will never open to expose the vision which, if truth, would be too horrible to contemplate. As Eberhart remarks,

> This is all rather funny. At any rate, man is safe; he knows the door of the soul will not open, therefore he can go on looking through it; the keyhole will not close, so that he can go on contemplating. There is a smirk to the passage, which is both a criticism of and a satire upon bliss, a criticism and a satire upon man contemplating his own soul.[x]

Belief is a refuge from truth, a placing of oneself in a cowardly, prying position. While such a metaphorical door is closed, the vision can be a poetically pleasant one; if it were to become fact, the motions towards heaven or hell (the full tyranny of God, the final judgement of worthiness, and, in either place, the prospect of selfless eternity) would cease being made gentle by being fantastical.

> In this world of paradox, he finds that religion presents us with a double paradox. Man has conceptions of divine states that he cannot attain; these conceptions are supported by fictions, yet these very conceptions support the values that seem truest and most meaningful.[xi]

Wittgenstein's statement of conception and possibility - "What is conceivable can happen too" - was not meant to encompass the metaphysical: he "had not dreamt" [l.10] of it. Thus, its extension to the area of religious belief is an overworking, leading us to a satisfaction with scientifically incorrect conclusions.

The bliss with which the saved are crowned is echoed in the fourth stanza in the crown of Christ, the ultimate of the saved: the reality of his suffering and death should not be overlooked in a foolish concentration on a mythical future bliss - there is no valid interpretation, no "star[ing] them into song" [l.16] which would force joy out of the fact of painful death. Having stated a position of disbelief in eternal salvation, Empson moves in the fifth stanza to examine the need, and perhaps the necessity, of these symbols.

Man's position, echoed in other poems we have dealt with, is seen between two unendurable extremes (here conventionally symbolized by fire and frying-pan) of unendurable existence and the unendurable

concept of annihilation. Even the atheistic, Empson seems to state, leaping "from pan to fire" [l.19], from life to annihilation, should afford to admire in some ways the opposite position of belief, but for complex reasons. It is not the vision belief creates which is important, but what is real: the "slide" which allows his visions to be projected - in other words, the act of believing. For Marvell, the act of believing enabled his vision of living well in his pastoral creations: in the seventh stanza, Empson points out that Marvell's "dappled shade", far from "annihilating all that's made", was made itself, "hand-painted" by an "inventive" mind. Thus Empson's debate is a debate about the possibility of pastoral in the science-dominated twentieth century; and by pastoral we may include the escaping devi es of metaphor and poetry. Marvell's pastoral would have us forget the artifice: but even if we don't, we still "feast" on it like Empson - it is still vital in some way.

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[i]. p.60

[ii]. Fraser, p.260

[iii]. Empson, [F42], p.230

[iv]. Hamilton, I, "A girl can't go on laughing all the time", H7, p.42

[v]. Fraser, Ibid.

[vi].p.34

[vii]. p.61

[viii].p.54

[ix]. p.32

[x]. Eberhart, R., "Empson's Poetry" in [I25], p.584

[xi]. [I23],p.200

Bushman's Kloof

From the river we saw the empty caves.
There was an elephant which reared:
Facing, a leaping ochre San. The animal
Bristled with his arrows. The cave
Was very cool and still.

Later in the afternoon, crossing the valley
Between the mountains, an inflated
Eland carcass drowned in flood,
Pain on its broken mouth.
Warmed by the sun, maggots on the lips
Worked to forget this dark red agony. So
The ochre on the walls was clear.
It is what feeds the maggots,
The colour of the stories and the kind of death
They once knew in the empty caves.

Death and the Angel

Gaugin's "Nativity" - Pinakotek, Munich

That woman is my island wife
Dressed in bright flowers.
Even in the gloom you can see
Bright flowers open against the green.
After Paris, everything seemed green -
The surrounding sea, the palms on the strand
Her dress every day. I loved her first
When naked, she stood in my rowing boat
Holding her robe unfurled. It filled
With air and she became a mast
Whose power landed me here time after time.
Her body swelled like a loving eye..
I did not paint. But when it subsided I painted
My island wife closing her eyes in green darkness
And handing my son to the angel
Whom only I could see standing in the shadow.
After they took him away from us
Green with death, she rested sadly
And told me he was in the sea round Tahiti
Swaddled in seaweed. Now I paint outside
Near the beach my gentle angel
Crowned with his faint green halo.

The Threshold of Etemity

I thought I saw the ebony flow
Of the ocean tides, a safe shadow
Behind a keyhole too close for
Hard gazing.

The mind fears etemity at every step,
Whenever the head is in the hands
And the darkness is so still it cannot feel
The imprint of the light.

In this, life is too long to think over,
Its moments too short to dwell on -
They flicker past like black gulls
Through the rain offshore.

All talk is whispering at the margin
Of the strong black tides. You cannot
Stop them carrying me away.
I cannot hear above the roar.

The Figure

The top of wet cliffs in the wind
Never sleep at night.

The lashings of the black wind
Never cease fraying bent thatch
Or pushing back the trees.

The centre of the darkness
Is the wind. Without it, there is
Daybreak and gulls above.

Without it, there is a fading memory
Of all dark clouds
On the glaring, sunlit cliffs.

But storm makes memory.
Folk memories of these broken aspirations
Lie in wet feathers and broken bones
Far beneath the tortured thatch.

The Fools

The branch is always curved too high:
Its tempting fruit too far to reach;
The fools all cup their hands and see
That water pours out consistently.

The pull between this world and myth
Shows up the foolish qualities:
The failure of our science's lie,
The feared-for mediocrity.

They read the stories once again -
The good all die, the timid live -
But both did much to entertain.
(We know such striving is in vain.)

One slipping step is still a joke:
To skid and die, and ancient laugh.
The fools slip often, heroically.
Remember them observantly.

The branches of a willow tree
Will touch their graves eventually.

Tierra del Fuego

The nights were on fire.
Rounding the Horn, we saw fires
On the shore, a shining
Plenitude of beacons.

We took refuge in the night
Against unfamiliar rituals, coloured
Feathers and masks - expressions
Of the strangeness of white wings
On the waves offshore.

I returned. What can I say?
I am certain of the fires, for
We did not quite know their purpose.
But the darkness behind the campfire blaze -
That is more difficult. We burnt closed
Disbelieving eyes and sung
All the psalms too loud. So to speak
Of voyaging is difficult
For it is a blinding eternity
Between the coupled sea and sky.

The Garden

The canopy of knitted leaves
Keeps back the god whose wings are sun,
Whose staring eyes the world bereaves,
And filters all to dappled softness,
The safety of the forest's darkness.

For darkness is the lack of light
And light can kill if turned to blaze
And all dreams end - the canopy decays.

Extremes of zero and of one,
Fearful presence and dreaded lack,
No atmosphere, no sky, no birds,
The blazing noon and empty night,
The nights on fire and the days of ice,
The deafness of a void of light.
The blistered knees and blinded face,
The fall from dream, that lie of grace.

The Maze

There is terror in a well-cut hedge
That blocks the view. Where it curls
In on itself like a thick green snake
There is no bell to call the keeper.
Upwards, past its coils, you notice
There are clouds across the sun.

And now you are the animal
That's close confined. You pluck
At your plumage in anxiety and suffer
Mange in the shadows of the cell.
And you will not eat. One has
No wit in such a place.

You are trapped. The serpent has the greater guile.
The coils constrict and lock their leaves.
Choose madness or see the maze's style.

The Death of Oedipus

In the space between the trees
Panthers activate the air -
Pieces of empowered dark, they float
Exhaled by evening and heavy on the ground.

Liminal inhabitants, these
Are mythic dreams, encouraged
By the dusk. Their territory
Is the end of all heroic travels.

Deep within the sacred copse
Nightingales swoop between shadows
As dead leaves made alive
In limitless descent and death.

This is the repose after journeying.
The dark beasts catch yourscent
And they grow eager. Songs of nightingales
Slowly drug the tiring brain.

Now is the myth incarnate - the tender
Feral breath near the throat,
The repertoire of dense birdsong.
Then all is in darkness known and strange.

Trappings

Words are trapped in hidden lines
Lying close beneath the forest leaves.
Lines sense the touch and shut.

Snared screamings in the night
Words wait for footsteps

Wait for the chance that in the small apocalypse,
The breath expired, dark poems crouch like seeds,
Bloom as tunnels to other waiting nights.

Subterrain

By our creation
Darkness becomes a world
With a thickness like old blood
Consuming like shadow
The light in the wake of the rocks.
In the safe dark places, we say
We can find shelter. Much better
Face the darkness and
The still dark water underground.

If you come to this place with us,
Know that this still silence
Implies all that is, close at hand:
When a blade sinks, it ends
In subcutaneous darkness.

Perhaps you think there is no rest.
Fleeing, seeking shelter forever
And hiding from the dawns,
Those bloody sunrises
Promises of chaos - haphazard
Heat waves and scattered rocks.

Retreat here - fear consumes the light
Like shadow in the wake of desert rocks.
In the shadow there is no chaos,
Only wariness at a promise of rain.

From Wolfgang to Marie[1]

I remember your chandeliers,
The gilded room with many mirrors.
In the corners of the ceiling,
Little angels laughed. You wore
A necklace that sparkled.

My proposal was immodest, for
I had not yet learnt that life then
As always makes its own distinctions.

In history, we are one now.
We have been coiled together,
Time having decreed equality.

[1] Marie Antoinette and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart met when Mozart was a very young boy and when Marie one of the daughters of the Hapsburg dynasty, marrying the King of France later. It is reputed that Mozart, having taken a shine to Marie, after his performance, sprung into her lap and asked her to marry him. The harmless kind of peasant's impudence was thought most amusing. The room in which it occured is preserved at Schloss Schonbrun, Vienna.

La Stagione

We had been assured that
The passing seasons were best viewed
From this point where the garden spread
Downwards on a slope. There was
A stream of frogs, and on the bank
The insects ate the orchids ragged.

The golden trees had been a sight.
Avoiding the grass we walked back
Along the cobbled path. Over drinks
Behind bay windows, a compliment
To our host for a view of his trees
In season. We shall be reinvited
And walk down again soon
To the river and the insects in the leaves.

Dinner

He stopped the dinner dead
With his religious argument. I
Only noticed the flowers outside
In the compost, yet there was talk,
Mahler and the smell of cooked meat.

Behind my napkin, I longed for a fly.
After the sherries and wine,
I wanted one like an airborne ox
To come and die against a window pane.

Then our host would have drunk God
And salvation like poor beer.

The Concert

24 April 1997

High above the thrashing palms
Undimmed by the lights
And enhanced by Brahms
The moon was out in full.

You said, that night,
The haunting song, the dire chords
Placed new vigour into empty words:
But they were only sorrowful.

The contents of that night are yours:
The tempest does not cross the gulf
But blows amongst the hills of self.

For me, the Brahms was always Brahms
Still beautiful because itself.
Alone, the moon in cycle is inevitably
High above the palms that thrash
Late some windy April night.

Dismember Me

My skull is a nest for kingfishers:
Halved and hollowed. Learning to fly,
Their young splash water
With clumsy coloured wings.

Stripped and suspended, my limbs
Turn to chimes. Wind directs their note,
Delights you with a gentle
Random sound.

My body is scooped out:
A boat for you to glide
Past banks of trees suspending
Chimes and loud
With birdsong.

I prepare my skin for curing.
My windy nights are dark and silent.
The birds sleep to me. But by the light
My lampshade gives, sleep silently
Deep in the dream of song
And coloured wings.

A Last Communication

You suddenly launch and I stand in the wake
That tousles my hair. Meagre comfort
Flows across the space like radio from Mars.
I receive spare whispered sounds, a radio wake.

You know nothing of being at ground control:
Your message is faint and you're on your own.
You outstrip light and fly too fast
To reach and keep control.

Perhaps the farthest darkened worlds
Will see your passing flash in purple skies.
No gravity has the strength to pin you down:
Spectators do not sprint between far worlds.

To slow you down is not my aim.
You slingshot past the stars, my desire.
You have enough to do. You have your aim.
Your impact sets the seas on fire.

Dendrites

Science sees the roots of trees divide,
Branching to the asymptotic infinite.
The system seems without end when
Too closely observed, too small
To see the surrounding earth.
Close enough, and the bark itself
Becomes a lattice, then a hive
Of lignin segments. It is here
That unity seems imaginary.

In climbing these microscopic
Mountains of large topography,
You have to see the rocks, the pines
In terms of many metres. The thickness
Of the stink of resin erupts from sources
Far too slight to consider. When the branches
Makes a canopy far over your head
Anchored deep by growing roots
We know we consider the whole forest
Of being together in this way.

The Silent Afternoon

Under cover from the season,
Even in the hardest storm,
The air is still around the table.
I know precisely what we'll talk about at lunch.
When I start, I'll hear your napkin fall.

Promising horizons come to single line:
You make me feel this is my fault.
The talk struggles over you and I
Amidst the glasses and the golden wine.
Our voices gently die across the room.
Your bowls are full of flowers in the gloom.

Cold Vigil

We know now that on Mars
The earth is red with grey stones:
A cold Kalahari frozen for
Two billion years. Above its orange sky
Our communication net is scattered
Through two billion galactic storms.
A distress call fades to sibilance
Filtered through thick lightning clouds.

High above the earth
The clouds become white fractal whorls
And oceanic expanse reduced to pools.
I am a satellite to your startling blue,
Silent in my circular patience
For that moment when the galaxy
Stands still, the weather clear on Mars.

To Art

I cannot catch you out. Your talk
Turns insubstantial when I mix
Drinks and smokes. I can't
Remember what I said
To start out with. Best be going
Now that I've swallowed
The barmaid's apron and made
Myself quite ill.

It's in my stomach. You can't
Expect me to do much now.
I've devolved from early raconteur
To good listener to this. I won't
Remember you. I never saw
You before in my life, honest.

Trace

You might have been there, swimming under
Green waves, but you never came up for air.
I had to be content to see
Only a line of breaking bubbles
Tracing out your movement.

And yet I sang to you every day.
So do not say I did not try:
My vantage had a sweeping view
Of all the waves, but now I see still waters.

I wonder if you grow colder under water,
Even a still body, dead in the depths.
I find it impossible to concentrate
On your hidden problem.

I tire of examining an empty pool's fading ripples.
I am distracted in the wind moving dead leaves
Tracing out another tentative movement.

If you Want to Talk of Music

If you want to talk of music
Bartok's too rough for a
Slowed-up summer.

I have to talk of Debussy
Moving like the shadows
Of pine needles on a still day.

I wish you could see this too:
This insuperable musical smell
The soot of pine nuts all around.

Do you have this there? Does
This note make sense at all
Outside of wilting arum lilies,
These hot forests, and the sense
Of nocturne at midday,
A longing for you made strong
And *piano* on the forest floor?

Persephone

I wonder where you are today -
Here or hell. I do not know.
Your path has made my thoughts
Go gray.

I always knew you'd want your way -
And I will try to follow and be near.
Your path has made my thoughts
Go gray.

I wander down the beach by day -
And tread the margin of the land.
Your path has made my thoughts
Go gray.

I dream about how far you are -
But, waking, know I have to stay.
Your path has made my thoughts go gray
Because of where you are this day.

Remembering Morning

When I walk in the garden and admire
The rising moon, igniting stars,
I stop wondering about such things.

Like listening to your slow deep breath
While the light extinguishes the stars -
Then it is difficult to trace
The dim outline of your face.

The sun erases moon and memory together.
When the dreaming stops the light floods in
To bathe the empty garden and my footprints
Left there, somewhere in the dew.

On the Sand

I notice when you walk along the sand
Your footprints mark the track you walk
While spreading ripples wipe mine clean
To make a wettening mirror of the sand.

This deserted sand is only ours to walk
Only ours to mark the changing of the tide.
By noon, the place is hot and glaring white;
The morning's washed-up debris dogs our walk.

You do not see the difference in the sand.
I know erasure of the waves. I see
The crystal of the shallow standing pools.
The tidal grinding on the sterile sand.

A Waiting Strategy

Wit only means a smiling corpse,
The flutter of the dry leaves at the wind.
The anger of the seasons stirs the ashes
Of the impotent, cold and buried deep.
And sadness cannot stop the hard green grass
From cracking through the marble and the glass.

Laughter makes unearthly noise.
Growing angry is to rattle a bag of pomegranate stones.
With sadness I cannot see by day.
You are right to say there is nothing to do.

Suicide

Perhaps you talked before.
When we meet now, your smoke
Curls into the room and is dispersed.
You tell me how it was:

No one seemed to care.
Your love was a quiet affair:
The angel not coming, your offering
Not taken, blood to dust
In the red cracks of your bones.

How quiet you sit in front of me -
Your smoking is without pattern.
Dry bones lie scattered
Under the icy stars and blank moon.

You seem to be too tired to care.
And there's the end to the affair.

You Say

You say that Joyce was always bad
(That pompous patriarchal sod);
And question all his politics,
His failings of the womyn God.

Poor Eliot - now you analyse
How badly-treated was his Viv,
How scared he was of female power
Of women strong enough to live.

And Ted was not the cuddly sort:
(He did not tend to Sylvia)
He's evil biographical.
His failings are your trivia.

You say that only beastly men
Are capable of nastiness:
Your women float above the ground
The paragons of righteousness.

Your cannons fire into the sea:
Genius grows in many soils;
And wit exists eternally!

Social Congress

"Will you tell me?" she seems to ask,
- Her hands slipping a napkin under her glass -
But that is not what she's asking at all.

"What do you want to tell me?" I seem to say
- My hands worry at my lighter's wheel -
And of course that isn't the point to me.

Tiny things are true, or gesture towards truth:
The movement of the hands are frantic,
Tearing back the peel. Red juice and sweetness.

All of You

My friends, I know I missed
All of you .

And you know how I missed.
It was my fault, struck silent
At the crucial times. They
Seemed then neither right
Nor crucial.

What can I say? I do not
Have the right to call to
Any of you now. I was coward
And talked too much with wine.

Perhaps another time
Far from the gardens where
We used to drink the dark red wine -
A far-flung place - I'll meet
You all again. But then,
Walking down a passageway,
I'll notice my thin dull hair
And blasted skin. And how the wine
Makes me too tired to talk
To all of you again.

An Arrival

Snow falls on cathedrals.
It has clogged the gargoyles' nostrils
And cracked their grinning faces.
The caustic rain softens St Stephen's
Jagged spires - all elements unite.
There is a reasoned faith in that.
Inside is the darkness.
The organ shakes the high stone carvings.

Approaching pilgrims bring the place down -
Their passing feet have planed the floor.
Their candles coat the walls in soot.
And outside is deep white snow.

To A Church Artisan

Suspended high and making angels' golden hairs
You defy the fear and sway above the void of prayers.
Above the nave your harshest death prepares.

Dead, and high above the altar stairs
Unseen, you have a thousand years of praise
To sing while gold from scrollwork slowly tears.

Your name lies deep inside the golden rays
Around the dust in Gabriel's greying hair:
You are as still as greying winter days.

Above the nave a harsher death prepare -
The dome is cracked, the altar stone is bare -
You atomize in unbound vacant air.

Munich

At night in the cathedral
The pillars disappear into darkness:
A cavern receding upwards where somewhere
In a place uncertain, an organ roars,
Makes the marble shake and sing.
Around pietas, rows of candles ripple.

In the tunnels of the Underground
Old Nazis grip the heads of canes
And disapprove: the music is too loud.
Children with bodypiercing enjoy themselves
Despite the stares and make jokes in German.
And the city crawls with them
Who don't understand a word you think.
Yes, I've visited your caverns,
Breathed your lilac air.

Our air is dry - perfumed with sweaty
Darker smells. Our caves are cool and dark.
In summer the deep sources and the rivers dry.
Our cattle shamble, unreal
In rarified mirage. In winter, their carcasses
Wash up downstream, bloated, thick as buoys. Here
We are all addicted to these things:
This fear, a place hollow with
All our unfound empty caves.

You Want to Know the Reason Why

Above this place is too much sky:
Our heights are filled with empty hopes.
Here's no place to dream or die.

Our tethered minds know hopes fly:
They soar above our mountain slopes.
You want to know the reason why.

Those misted mountains are too high,
Too steep to climb with mental ropes.
Here's no place to dream or die.

The bonds of soul must soon untie.
A barrel's wood without its copes.
You want to know the reason why.

It's not that we don't want to try
The ignorance awareness dopes,
But here's no place to dream or die.

Above this place is too much sky:
It's cluttered full with empty hopes.
You want to know the reason why -
Here's no place to dream or die.

On Gentle Days

The ocean wind has slowed
From off the coast : the rub against the waves
Whipped to white horses but always there,
The endless smoothings
Through the stubborn grass,
The high hills and thick pine
Stunt the wind to gentle breeze
As it comes inland. It moves the sand
In parking lots and slides around
Tall buildings.

This is the wind
Of Sunday afternoon depression.
Here is where we stand blinded
By our windshields, feeling
An exposed peninsula sliding
Seaward with the wind.

The Pines

The pines against this place
Lean towards the sea below.
From the breakers, they seem
Pushed like wheat in the wind.
The pines all lean; they
Have grown with seasons
Of south-easter shoving. A hand
Against the trunk retracted
Yields black dust and dark sap.

The wind blows needles fathoms deep;
Processes of deposit and decay
Indeterminate, too gradual
For analysis. There is no choice:
Turn and go from here,
Yield to the wind and go down
To the sea.

From deep within this dark muck,
Amongst the strew of pine-nut shells,
There are the groves of Arum lilies,
White trumpets blocked
With thick black dust.

Our Dead

We've said that snow is theoretical here:
A symbol cut in polystyrene only. Your universe
Lies at the white tops of mountains
And in the distance, here. Who dies
Like that? The ones that die on mountains
They lie wedged deep, curled into our crevices.
Most die beneath the flat sand.

We do not die in cold, but in the warm wind.
Perhaps you'd understand at Cape Point
When the wind is blowing at the full. Then the surf
Converges, falls, roaring and eroding
Over all our land around the coast,
The margins of our lives.

And so we are the sand that moves
Downward to the dark water.
There everything is cold and clear.

Home

I suffer from familiar trees.
Sick to death of idleness,
When I see them, now
I am determined to be swayed somehow
Despite the close familiarity.

I must do justice to departure,
Not allow all pangs to cluster
Like sour pips around the end.