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**A 'long defence against the non-existent': Englishness in
the Poetry of Philip Larkin**

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of my degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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Abstract

Larkin's place in the genealogy of English poetry is significant since, unlike many of his predecessors, his work lacks the hope or possibility of redemption offered by faith. Larkin countered the void created by his agnosticism by appealing to the power both of ritual and of the English landscape, and yet ultimately these attempts – although not wholly unsuccessful poetically – appear fruitless philosophically. Larkin's awareness of English society is not explicit, and yet his preoccupation with death and nothingness is inexorably linked to the political despair and religious questioning of post-war England. Through the use of the many 'Englishes' of his time Larkin manages to construct a passable means by which to fill the lacuna left by godlessness. A thorough review of the critical opinion of Larkin is undertaken here, in order to sketch out the landscape of English letters and Larkin's place within, or in relation to, English poetry. His interrogation of the dominant societal structures is rigorous, and while his habit of constantly contradicting himself and his insistent ambiguity may seem to undermine his efforts, on closer inspection this lack of clarity complements his aims precisely. This dissertation will demonstrate how Larkin's use of cliché epitomises this struggle, and that in his poetry the often-assumed emptiness of such language is turned on its head. Larkin, it will be argued, deploys common English expressions as a modern substitute for the social links provided to earlier poets by means of reference to classical mythology.

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A 'long defence against the non-existent': Englishness in the Poetry of Philip Larkin

Preface

This paper comprises five sections. The introduction, 'Larkin's personae: a paradigm according to which his work may be read', discusses the host of personae revealed with the publication of Anthony Thwaite's edition of Philip Larkin's *Selected Letters* (1992c). The revelations which followed divided the critical community and caused many critics to condemn Larkin as distressingly prejudiced and vulgar, while others found it necessary to defend him by unsuitable critical means. The impossibility and pointlessness of attempting to attempt to work out who the 'real' Larkin was is made evident in this section, and yet it is also true that the personae can be used as a useful means by which to read Larkin's work. Larkin's different personalities were ambiguous and contradictory; characteristics which are echoed in the themes of his poetry.

Part I, 'Not ignorant, not intellectual', deals with Larkin's professed philistinism. His claims to ignorance are ridiculous to those who read his work, and yet it is not useful to subject his work to unsuitably technical theoretical readings. Larkin is appropriated by critics more intent on achieving their own aims than elucidating his work, while the true force of his work is neglected or misunderstood. In 'Influence and allusion' two of these

critical approaches are assessed.

Part II, 'A political poet?' is an exploration of the politics, or lack thereof, of the Movement, and Larkin's place in relation to it. The Movement's professed admiration for WH Auden and the poets of the 1930s had little to do with politics, and more to do with their poetic idiom. Auden's influence on the young Larkin is plain, but Larkin took more from Auden than his Movement contemporaries did in terms of his social and political outlook. In 'The personal as political' Tom Paulin's argument which sets Larkin up as an explicitly political poet is reviewed. Larkin was not overtly political, but there is an undercurrent of social awareness in his work which, when explored, demonstrates his interrogation of Englishness.

In Part III, 'The consequences of agnosticism', this idea is developed by examining Larkin's agnosticism as essential and unique in English poetry leading up to the 1950s. The irreligious aspects of Larkin's work create a sense of dread, accompanied by an overarching fear of death and nothingness, which Larkin attempted to overcome by evoking English ritual and landscape, which is explored in 'Symbolic England'. As Larkin was no doubt fully aware, these attempts fail. However, there is a final bastion: the English language.

Part IV, 'Larkin's use of language', examines Larkin's use of the many 'Englishes' of his day. 'Englishes' are taken as the dialectical, regional uses of English in England itself, as well as the class and other attitudinal distinctions these register when put to use in poetry.

Larkin's use of these 'Englishes', as well as cliché, is explored in order to highlight how his treatment of language is often misinterpreted, and to suggest further that through his use of English he was able to go some way in conquering the nothingness he feared. The final section, 'Ordinary life, ordinary speech', looks at how the language of Larkin's poetry forms a new mythology or system of ritual which overcomes, to some extent, the emptiness of religious ritual or political discourse.

Introduction

Larkin's personae: a paradigm according to which his work may be read

In an interview for the *Paris Review* in 1982, Robert Philips asked Philip Larkin whether his use of common phrases was intended to 'bear more meaning than usual'; whether he added them for texture, or whether they were 'integral from the beginning'. (*Required Writing*, 1983: 71 [Hereafter *RW*]) Larkin replied curtly: 'They occur naturally.' (ibid.) This is just one example of his frequent attempts to deny any similarities between his poetry and what he considered to be the contrived artifice of high art. These moments of proclaimed intellectual ordinariness are echoed in Larkin's conversation and letters; however, where he professes literary ignorance a hint of his true intelligence usually follows – a hint at his level of comfort in a bookish environment. In the *Paris Review* interview, Larkin professes not to know much about American poetry. Later, he puns on the name John Ashbery, quipping 'I'd prefer strawberry'. (*RW*: 70) The same interview produced, in response to 'Is Jorge Luis Borges the only other contemporary poet of note who is also a librarian?', Larkin's famous question 'Who's Jorge Luis Borges?' (*RW*: 61) Significantly, the interview was conducted via post, which hints not only at Larkin's cautious approach to interviews, but also at the care with which he constructed his public persona. In an interview with Ian Hamilton at about the time he wrote *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964) Larkin showed 'an admiration for poets "to whom technique seems to

matter less than content””, criticised Ezra Pound and TS Eliot for their ‘concern with “culture in the abstract””, and expressed ‘distaste for foreign poetry’. (1991: 115) As AT Tolley suggests in *My Proper Ground: A Study of the Work of Philip Larkin and its Development* (1991), reactionary as these ideas sound, ‘in the years of the Movement, they seemed – and were – radical.’ (1991: 115)

It is as if Larkin took a wilful pleasure in playing up his parochial nature. In *Coasting* (1987c) Jonathan Raban writes of how he met Larkin for lunch at a pub in 1982 three years before the poet’s death. Raban suggests a Lebanese restaurant, to which Larkin asks ‘What sort of food would one get in a Lebanese restaurant? Would it be ... *mushy*?’ (1987c: 263) Raban, anxious to placate him, replies ‘No – you can get kebabs and salads and things like that.’ (ibid.) Larkin’s captious response: ‘But I *like* mushy food. It’s the only food I really enjoy now.’ (ibid.) Anecdotes such as this abound, and they are an indication of the personality Larkin presented; a personality that was constructed, in much the same way as he constructed his position in relation to the theory and practise of poetry.

BJ Leggett, in *Larkin’s Blues*, calls Larkin’s tendency to profess ignorance a ‘philistine pose’ (1999b: 22) which should not be allowed to get in the way of serious study of his work. Similarly, James Booth, in *New Larkins for Old: Critical Essays* (2000a), states, with reference to Larkin’s literary influences,

Gone are the days when critics believed Larkin’s protestations that he was an unliterary writer, who took no interest in foreign poetry and eschewed the symbolism and transcendences of Yeats and Eliot. It is now generally accepted

that Larkin's reading was omnivorous and the creative influences on his work extremely varied. (2000a: 2-3)

Despite his reputation, avant-garde tendencies can be found in Larkin's poetry; there is an intellectually meditative poet behind the philistine pose. Usually the more reactionary elements of his personality and work are given more attention, but an investigation into the social awareness and descriptions of England in his work indicates its literary and historical significance.

Larkin was a different man at different times and only allowed certain aspects of his personality to become known to certain people. As the *Selected Letters* (1992c) show, he wrote some shocking and unpleasant things. If one were to name the poets who, in recent years, have undergone severe criticism because of posthumously discovered texts or insights that indicated unlikeable or even hateful aspects of their personality, Larkin would feature prominently. He is even used as an archetype for the discussion of other good writers who could also be unpleasant people. Jeremy Treglown, in *Roald Dahl: A Biography* (1994), discusses Dahl's alleged anti-Semitism with regard to Larkin's friendship with Kingsley Amis. Like Larkin, Dahl was denounced because of comments discovered in his correspondence after his death. Treglown suggests that on both counts the questionable opinions exist within 'the realm of friendship', a realm which Martin Amis, with his father's correspondence with Larkin in mind, believes involves 'the willing suspension of accountability' (1994: 89); a place which forces no justification for private jokes.

Many readers do not subscribe to this view. Richard Bradford, in his 2005 biography of

Larkin, *First Boredom, Then Fear*, lists some of those who were not prepared to tolerate any of his undesirable characteristics: Tom Paulin wrote in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1992 that the *Selected Letters* was 'a distressing and in many ways revolting compilation which imperfectly reveals and conceals the sewer under the national monument Larkin became'. (in Booth, 2005a: 15) After the publication of the *Letters*, Andrew Motion, Larkin's first biographer, called the poems 'beautiful flowers ... growing on long stalks out of pretty dismal ground'. (in *ibid.*) Added to these voices were those of Peter Ackroyd, Bryan Appleyard, and James Wood. But while Paulin had expressed dislike of Larkin's work before the publication of the letters, these others had not. As Bradford points out 'Larkin's poetry had not changed' (2005a: 16), and it seems that the 'anti-Larkin camp ... had decided that Larkin was a bad man and as a consequence his work no longer deserved approbation.' (*ibid.*)

Perhaps because of Bradford's tendency to read Larkin's poetry in light of his life (excusable in a biography, but limited nonetheless) his attitude to the letters rejects what he calls 'formalism gone mad': the treatment, 'demonstrably invalid and impossible to maintain' (*ibid.*), of Larkin's prejudices as unrelated to and irrelevant to the poems. Instead he suggests that in his correspondence Larkin created different personae for different correspondents. In their letters to each other over the years Larkin and Amis became, as Bradford points out, 'exaggerated versions of themselves' (2005a: 17), with their own slang and code words which make it all but impossible to understand them. Colin Gunner, an old school friend who contacted Larkin in 1971 seeking his help in publishing his memoirs, is another example of this. Larkin had not spoken to him for

thirty years. It is in his letters to Gunner that Larkin is at his most bigoted, but it seems that in this he is echoing Gunner's own prejudices, which were many. In contrast with his letters to the man, he sent Gunner's manuscript to his Faber editor Charles Monteith along with a note which read, 'Have no fear: I am not going to ask you to publish it. I am not even asking you to read it: you will soon see what sort of thing it is'. (in Bradford, 2005a: 223)

Bradford points out that virtually all indications that Larkin was a misogynistic, intolerant racist occur in his letters to Amis and Gunner. Contrastingly, his letters to the gentle novelist Barbara Pym, whom he greatly admired, seemed to be written by a reserved, proper, English gentleman. In one particularly interesting instance, Larkin refers to the same man in letters to Amis, Gunner, and Pym, respectively, as 'a nigger', 'the Paki doctor', and 'the kindly gentleman next door'. (2005a: 224)

In 'At thirty-one, when some are rich' (*Collected Poems*: 69 [Hereafter *CP*]), written in 1953 but unfinished, Larkin writes about an obsession with writing letters. The poem begins 'At thirty-one, when some are rich / and others dead, / I being neither, have a job instead', and the speaker fills his evenings with letter-writing: 'I sit down, supper over, and begin / one of the letters of a kind I now / Feel most of my spare time is going in'. He admits that these are mostly letters to women, but they are not 'love-letters' because 'they owe too much elsewhere':

Too much to kindness, for a start;
I know, none better,
The eyelessness of days without a letter;

Too much to habit ('Stop? But why on earth ... ?'):
Too much to an unwillingness to part
With people wise enough to see my worth.

But the speaker suspects that these letters are also deferments of actual physical encounters with his correspondents, and asks whether they may be:

Just compromise,
Amiable residue when each denies
The other's want? Or are they not so nice,
Stand-ins in each case simply for an act?
Mushrooms of virtue? or, toadstools of vice?

Bradford admits that 'abhorrence inclines us' to regard Larkin's Pym-correspondent persona as a 'concealment of the real Larkin'. (2005a: 224) However, he also points out that it is just as probable that all three personae are false, a mixed result of Larkin's desire to please, and his desire to conceal his complete self as something only he could really know. It is also possible that Larkin was testing out various selves, implying either that Larkin did not know himself, or that for him the self was a relational concept; he recognised the emptiness of a self in isolation from others but desired the relation that would restore to that self some form of identity.

As the poem above illustrates, this train of thought is fairly useless if the object is to discover Larkin's authentic self: as in the poem, the mushrooms and toadstools ultimately 'taste the same'. Larkin's wildly differing personae are a foil for those who would like to unearth his real personality, in order to understand his work. But the exercise would be unsuccessful, and ultimately boring. As a kind of paradigm useful to the interpretation of

his work, however, the personae open up a number of interesting avenues of thought.

Part I

Not ignorant, not intellectual

Larkin rarely spoke freely about his literary philosophy – unsurprisingly, as in so doing he would have been contradicting it. His frequent claim was that poetry should not be theorised about, a belief exhibited by his exclamation in the *Paris Review* interview, when asked what he learnt from studying WH Auden, Edward Thomas, WB Yeats and Thomas Hardy: ‘Oh, for Christ’s sake, one doesn’t *study* poets! You *read* them...’ (RW: 67) He did, however, expound his supposed lowbrow status once, in the ‘Introduction to *All What Jazz*’. (RW: 285-298) This piece makes it perfectly clear that Larkin was not merely an entertaining poet who happened to appeal to the man on the street. He sums up Modernism as follows:

This *development*, this *progress*, this *new language* that was more *difficult*, more *complex*, that required you to *work hard at appreciating it*, that you *couldn’t expect to understand first go*, that needed *technical and professional knowledge* to evaluate it *at all levels*, this *revolutionary explosion* that *spoke for our time* while at the same time being *traditional* in the *fullest*... (RW: 292, Larkin’s italics)

He concludes his outline with the statement: ‘There could hardly have been a conciser [sic] summary of what I don’t believe about art’. (ibid.) Thus it is plain that Larkin’s rejection of Modernism was a calculated and conscious move, and because of this it could be argued that he was not reactionary, but more avant-garde than his proclaimed nemeses, (Charlie) Parker, Picasso, and Pound. But although Larkin was a traditionalist poet, a man who abhorred the poetic innovation of the Modernist era, he could also

exhibit surprisingly avant-garde tendencies. The ambiguity of his position can perhaps be summed up by the reaction to his editorship of the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1973), disparagingly described by Robert Lowell as ‘the ultimate Larkin poem’. (in Chambers, 1986a: 33) The anthology was greeted by Donald Davie, in the *Listener*, as ‘the perverse triumph of philistinism’, a ‘celebration of the amateur, the worst kind of post-modernism, the weakest kind of Englishry’. (in Booth, 2005a: 222) As Bradford points out, although Larkin may have substituted ‘accessibility’ for ‘philistinism’, this was a fairly accurate description of his objective.¹ Thus in one way it was through adhering to historic convention that Larkin propounded his position: the reactionary as Postmodern. Although of course he never would have propounded the idea in those terms.²

In the unpublished ‘Poem about Oxford’ (*CP*: 179) Larkin scornfully mocks academic ‘arselickers’. This poem, addressed to his long-time girlfriend Monica Jones, herself an academic, shows its contempt for academia plainly:

City we shared without knowing
In blacked-out and butterless days,
Till we left, and were glad to be going
(Unlike the arselicker who stays)

But the Larkin who wrote the ‘Introduction to *All What Jazz*’ betrays an intellectual reflectiveness which, although vehemently low brow, matches the studied or learned air of any Oxford academic.

Larkin’s position is perhaps summed up in the often ignored ‘The Literary World’

¹ The book was praised by Auden in the *Guardian* and John Betjeman in the *Sunday Times*.

² The idea of the avant-garde and its possible application to Larkin is explored in more detail in Part IV.

(CP: 38), written in 1950 and not collected in his lifetime.³ The piece is divided into two sections. Part I begins with a quotation from a letter written by Kafka, where he bemoans the writer's block that has afflicted him for 'five months'. The poem begins 'My dear Kafka', and the speaker challenges him to suffer such an affliction for five years:

Five years of an irresistible force meeting an
immoveable object right in your belly,
Then you'll know about depression.

The description of opposing forces meeting in that most primal of spaces, the belly, conveys a very powerful image of how incapacitated a poet who cannot write becomes. Part II, however, is a description of the household chores undertaken by Mrs Alfred Tennyson; answering all forms of letters addressed to her husband, from 'begging letters' to 'business letters'; looking after his clothes and food; and entertaining visitors when he did not feel up to it; as well as performing the task, not usually assigned to her gender, of 'protecting him from gossip and criticism', in short 'running the household'; as well as bringing up and educating the children. The poem ends:

While all this was going on
Mister Alfred Tennyson sat like a baby
Doing his poetic business.

The poem may be a lament against the world's lack of vision or understanding of the poetic process, in which case the feminised description of Tennyson as a baby supports the public's perspective, and poetry is paradoxically prioritised even as it is negatively represented. But it is also possible to see the poem as a nod of respect towards the real,

³ The poem, of course, appears in the posthumous *Collected Poems*. As the analysis makes clear, Larkin's unpublished and uncollected poems are useful in revealing attitudes not always made plain in his three famous volumes.

everyday world, where art cannot provide basic human necessities. This was indeed Larkin's situation: unable to stop writing, although not for lack of trying,⁴ and yet with a burning belief in poetry as an art form; fully aware of the relative unimportance of his work to the average Briton, and yet unable to shed his faith in the arts.

After the publication of his letters and unpublished work, as well as Andrew Motion's biography of Larkin (*Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, 1993), critical reaction seemed to split into those who condemned Larkin and rejected his work, those who were disturbed by his previously unseen disturbing personality traits but who still held that the poetry was acceptable, and those few who argued for the separation of the man from his, still very good, work. And whereas before he was seen as a mild-mannered boring man who wrote parochial poems, he was now seen as a deeply disturbed, but ultimately boring, man who wrote parochial poems. Bradford, in the introduction to his biography of Larkin, sums up the common reaction to his work: 'Terms such as "philistine", "parochial", "suburban" or more sympathetically "wistful", "sad", and "circumspect" would follow him to the grave, with Englishness as their accompanying subtext.' (2005a: 13) But, unfortunately, this subtext is seldom elevated to the point of primacy.

Whether or not he intended to create a body of work able to withstand such treatment, Larkin has become a poet at the mercy of critics who 'discover' evidence of theoretical intellectualness in his work; slaves to critical fashion who manipulate his poetry to achieve pre-ordained critical aims. Although often interesting, and occasionally plausible,

⁴ On many occasions Larkin 'gave up the whole business' of writing poetry. Tolley mentions that it was 'quite usual' for him to cease writing for a period after the completion of a volume. (1991: 46)

these revelations do not maintain lasting value. The habit of linking Larkin to one or other group or movement began with the Movement, to which he was involuntarily and erroneously hitched from its inception. However, in recent times such critical practises have become more severely theoretical. John Osborne's essay 'Postmodernism and Postcolonialism in Larkin' (in Booth, 2000a) and Tolley's *Larkin at Work* (1997c) show how Larkin's work is susceptible to, capable of, and even engaged with the kinds of theoretical reading he eschews elsewhere. Before exploring Larkin's place within the Movement, it may be salutary to explore these approaches (and insufficiencies) in order to adumbrate the argument that Larkin's work actively interrogates his own identity and the identity of others, the nature of society and class structures, and the relationship between the self and society; ultimately that it actively interrogates England and Englishness. His is a body of work set at an unlikely, critical, even unseemly angle to the dour complacencies of a hegemonic Britain and its poetry, and does not deserve to be forced into compliance with an arbitrary theoretical idea.

Influence and allusion

The main thrust of Osborne's essay aligns Larkin's love of jazz with his literary tendencies, basically stating, in contradiction to Larkin's own writing, that it was not the Parker generation that made jazz Modernistic, but that 'the real distinction of jazz is that here was a rare example of popular Modernism, rising from the bottom up, not percolating down from a cultural elite.' (2000a: 146) Thus Larkin's critique of later jazz is in fact a critique of progressively less accessible jazz. Osborne suggests that

because his love of jazz directly contradicts his anti-Modernist stance, shifting one of his already decideds towards undecidability; by pretending that jazz only became Modernist in the 1940s he is able, at a cosmetic level, to square his love of the former with his supposed loathing of the latter. Larkin loved many aspects of Modernist music, but lied about it. And when we move to Modernist poetry we find that once again he was attracted to the liberating heresy of that which he publicly excoriated. (2000a: 147)

Larkin traced his stylistic development as moving from being influenced by Yeats to being influenced by Hardy. Many critics have endorsed this notion, and in works from Blake Morrison's *The Movement* (1980), to Ian Gregson's *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism* (1996) Larkin is described as 'anti-Modernist'. (2000a: 147) However, Osborne stresses the growing number of dissenting critics, Seamus Heaney, Andrew Motion and Barbara Everett, among others, who take issue with 'this simplified teleology' (2000a: 147), and claim to find evidence in Larkin's work not only of Yeats's influence, but of many Modernist or proto-Modernist writers, such as 'Baudelaire,

Gautier, Mallarmé and Laforgue.’ (2000a: 147) He also states that ‘the Himalayan range of Larkin’s knowledge of and indebtedness to Modernism has yet to be mapped’ (2000a: 147), and begins to do so himself with a reading of ‘The Whitsun Weddings’ (CP: 114) which traces that poem’s similarity to TS Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922).

Osborne suggests that Eliot’s influence is ‘so pervasive that it is possible to detect echoes from his work... in nearly forty Larkin poems.’ (2000a: 148) He states, specifically, that both ‘The Whitsun Weddings’ and *The Waste Land* begin with a journey south, ‘travel through heat and drought, with much play on the way shadows lengthen or contract in accord with the angle of the sun, to hints of regenerative rain.’ (2000a: 148) Both poems allude to major rivers, and ‘complicate these wholesome riverine images with descriptions of industrial waterways’. Finally, both poems ‘move towards a close with reference to towers, London and polluted walls’ and ‘end with the prospect of sexual regeneration – the restoration to potency of the Fisher King in *The Waste Land*, the consummation of the marriages in ‘The Whitsun Weddings’ – alike symbolized by the yoking of the word ‘rain’ to a present participle (Eliot’s ‘bringing rain’, and Larkin’s ‘becoming rain’).’ (2000a: 149) What makes the analogies ‘too close to be accidental’ are the final parallels of ‘word and phrase’: ‘Larkin’s “girls” marked off “unreally from the rest” invoking the previously mentioned “unreal” of *The Waste Land*; or Eliot’s “She ... nearly died of young George” becoming “*I nearly died*” in “The Whitsun Weddings”’. (2000a: 149) Finally, Osborne stresses the technical similarities of the two works: ‘both incorporate a mass of literary allusions along the way before climaxing in a kaleidoscopic tessellation of echoes and citations.’ (2000a: 149) He traces the literary citations evoked

by the shower of arrows at the end of 'The Whitsun Weddings', claiming it as a miniature version of the end of *The Waste Land*:

The difference is that Larkin's echoes and accretions are subtextual, unobtrusively enriching the poem's prosody and purport, like an underground river that shapes the surface vegetation whilst itself remaining hidden. And, of course, the beauty lies in the fact that 'The Whitsun Weddings' still makes perfect sense to a reader who has never heard of *Henry V*, Milton, Longfellow, Betjeman, or TS Eliot. (2000a: 150-1)

It is easy to criticise Osborne's comparison of these two poems simply because *The Waste Land* is so vastly allusive that similarities between it and almost any other poem can be imposed. Nonetheless, the similarities are arresting, and Osborne's conclusion echoes a currently popular critical outlook. He asserts that if Postmodernism is taken to mean *after* Modernism, then chronologically Larkin is Postmodern, but that he is also Postmodern with respect to his assimilation of Modernism, as 'he collages the works of Joyce, Pound, Eliot, Yeats and Auden into his *oeuvre* as freely as they did the works of Homer, Dante and Shakespeare.' (2000a: 151-2)

This may be so, but the analysis asks more questions than it answers. It smacks of Randall Jarrell's comment on TS Eliot: 'Won't the future say to us in helpless astonishment: "But did you actually believe that all those things about objective correlatives, classicism, the tradition applied to *his* poetry?"' (1999a: 242) Larkin may deny different issues to Eliot, but it is difficult to imagine that any literate reader of his poetry could believe that he took no interest in foreign poetry, or any of his other impertinent comments about how ignorant he was were really true. Osborne should

perhaps be lauded for attempting to praise where he believes praise is due, and Larkin's groundbreaking use of allusion is admirable. But the usefulness of his allegation that there are alarmingly similar aspects in Larkin and Eliot is questionable. Osborne states at the outset that he wishes to show how Larkin's 'part in the evolution of British Postmodernism is greater than is generally accepted' (2000a: 144), but his sole reason for this seems to be so that he can 'demonstrate that Larkin is constantly attracted to that which he rejects'. (ibid.)

Tolley's focus is different. He examines the modes of composition evident in Larkin's notebooks. By studying his drafts and drafting process, Tolley seeks to illuminate the poems themselves, and also (an imposing task) 'to further the general understanding of how poetry is composed.' (1997c: 1) His investigation of the notebook version of 'Maiden Name' (*CP*: 101) is one of the most revealing in the book. The drafts of the poem, according to Tolley, take up seventeen pages, a fact which hints at the careful thought which was disguised by the lightness of tone and wit of the poem. Tolley's interesting interpretation begins by pointing out that although the nature of identity, as one of Larkin's chief poetic concerns, is present in the poem, 'a submerged rhetoric of love, faith in love, unrequited love, and innocence and defilement can be observed' (1997c: 69) as well, which is apparent in lines such as 'wholly / Untruthful'; 'you're past and gone'; 'How beautiful you were'; 'unfingermarked'; 'our faithfulness'. Thus although the poem deals with the nature of identity, it seems that to focus so intently on the seemingly superficial fact of the alteration of a name disguises a deeper romantic or emotional involvement. The first stanza is most revealing:

Marrying left your maiden name disused.
Its five light sounds no longer mean your face,
Your voice, and all your variants of grace;
For since you were so thankfully confused
By law with someone else, you cannot be
Semantically the same as that young beauty:
It was of her that these two words were used. (*CP*: 101)

Tolley declares that the reference to semantics may have been a little ‘over the heads’ (1997c: 70) of the reading public Larkin paid tribute to in the contemporary essay ‘The Pleasure Principle’; the ‘pleasure-seeking audience’ (*RW*: 82) rather than those ‘whose aim [in reading poetry] is not pleasure but self-improvement’. (*RW*: 81) It is, however, ‘in tune with intellectual preoccupations current in his culture group in the middle-fifties’. (1997c: 70) In one draft of the poem, Larkin refers to the maiden name as ‘A term rejected by its own extension!’ (in *ibid.*) According to Tolley, ‘intention’ and ‘extension’ are logical terms ‘referring respectively to the perceived meaning of a term, and to the entities referred by it’. Thus ‘the “term”, the maiden name, is rejected by the woman, its “extension”.’ (*ibid.*) This echoes the line ‘a real girl in a real place, // In every sense empirically true!’ from ‘Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album’ (*CP*: 71), and demonstrates how ‘Larkin’s poetry is permeated by a sophisticated intellectual awareness at odds with his championing of poetry that is readily understood.’ (1997c: 70) Tolley goes as far as to suggest that ‘Maiden Name’ refers to problems dealt with by Bertrand Russell in ‘Theory of Descriptions’ (in *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, 1919), which looks at the logical status of sentences containing phrases such as ‘the present

King of France' (in Tolley, 1997c: 70), which make sense without an 'existent referent.'
(*ibid.*)

Larkin's 'Statement' (*RW*: 79), originally published in Enright's *Poets of the 1950s* (1956), is a brief outline of his 'views on poetry'. (*ibid.*)⁵ He writes that he has 'no belief in "tradition" or a common myth-kitty or casual allusions in poems to other poems or poets, which last I find unpleasantly like the talk of literary understrappers letting you see they know the right people.' (*ibid.*) Tolley's analysis of 'Maiden Name' comes dangerously close to claiming that Larkin is doing precisely this. He cannot prove that Larkin read Bertrand Russell, and does not make explicit how such a revelation would create a decent reading of Larkin's work. It seems his agenda is to make Larkin appear more intellectual, in order to counter claims of ignorance, and ultimately both arguments are critically stylish rather than poetically worthy. It is clear from the analyses that it is possible to read Larkin more theoretically than is widely acknowledged, and through his work to tackle the boundary between text and author, text and ideology, or text and reader. But his intellectual reflectiveness when it comes to theory is not all pervasive; it is obvious in some poems, and can be found in others if looked for hard enough, but no one would argue that all of Larkin's poetry is theoretical or shows the influence of high Modernism.

What could be argued, however, is that all of Larkin's poetry shows evidence of Englishness – whether it be the language or the people. And Larkin's Englishness is not

⁵ In a footnote to 'Statement' Larkin explains that Enright 'wrote to his contributors asking for a brief statement of their views on poetry I was rather dashed to find them printed *verbatim*.' (*RW*: 79)

retrogressive or simple; it comes in many forms, and often goes unrecognised. His work is a complex commentary on modern English life. Larkin's importance to English letters can better be exposed by examining his place within the Movement, or rather his place outside it; by examining how his admiration of Auden differs from his contemporaries, in that he took from the poets of the 1930s not only a 'modern' poetic language but keen social concern; and by noting his agnosticism as a 'first' in the genealogy of English poetry. The inconsistency of his presentation of the concepts of Englishness is indicative of the contradictory and complex nature of Englishness itself. Larkin thus undermines or destabilises the mythic pretensions of the nation and the national culture, he exposes class and gender as fundamentals and explores their articulation.

Part II

A political poet?

The Movement is either praised with faint damns or damned with faint praise. Alvarez's introduction to *The New Poetry* (1962) sketches a potted history of poetry since the 1930s. He cites Thomas Hardy's remark to Robert Graves: '*vers libre* could come to nothing in England. All we can do is to write on the old themes in the old styles, but try to do a little better than those who went before us.' (in Alvarez, 1962: 17) Alvarez's literary history names the three occurrences of 'negative feed-back' to occur in poetry since the Modernists, which seem 'designed to produce precisely the effect Hardy wanted' (1962: 17); and to correct the imbalance created in English poetry by Eliot's experimental techniques. The first 'negative feed-back' occurred at the end of the 1930s, to counteract the unskilled attempts to imitate Auden's combination of traditional form and technical skill with 'the most contemporary of contemporary idiom.' (1962: 18) It ushered in 'traditional forms, in a chic contemporary guise'. (ibid.) The anti-intellectualism that followed in the forties brought with it a taste for 'high, if obscure, rhetoric' (1962: 19) best exemplified by Dylan Thomas. Imitators of his verse ended up using it 'as an excuse to kiss *all* meaning good-bye.' (ibid.) The second negative feed-back was thus a 'blockage against intelligence.' (ibid.) The third negative feed-back counteracted 'wild loose emotion' and is Alvarez's definition of The Movement. He cites 'Church-going' (sic):

...Hatless, I take off
My cycle-clips in awkward reverence ... (CP: 97)

This single image, according to Alvarez, is the summation of all Movement poets. He ignores the substance of the poem and concludes that 'this, in concentrated form, is the image of the post-war Welfare State Englishman: shabby and not concerned with his appearance; poor – he has a bike, not a car; gauche but full of agnostic piety; underfed, underpaid, overtaxed, hopeless, bored, wry.' (1962: 20) Alvarez avers that he is 'wholly in favour of restoring poetry to the realm of common sense' (1962: 21), but objects to the notion of 'gentility' to which all three negative feed-backs conform; that is, that 'life is always more or less orderly, people more or less polite, their emotions and habits more or less decent and more or less controllable; that God, in short, is more or less good' (ibid.) – a bizarre final point considering the poem from which this is distilled. Alvarez objects to what he perceives as the Movement's disregard for the 'forces' which influence our lives; namely the force of 'evil' and the force of 'libido'.

One of the first satirical poems written by Larkin, 'Fiction and the Reading Public' (CP: 34), published in 1954 but composed in 1949 and 1950, concurs with Alvarez's sentiments. It reads:

Give me a thrill, says the reader,
Give me a kick;
I don't care how you succeed, or
What subject you pick ...

But that's not sufficient, unless
You make me feel good –
Whatever you're 'trying to express'
Let it be understood

That 'somehow' God plaits up the threads,
Makes 'all for the best',
That we may lie quiet in our beds
And not be 'depressed' ...

Just please me for two generations –
You'll be 'truly great'.

The clichéd language of the poem signals contempt for the views expressed, which, it could be argued, may or may not intimate at Larkin's own jaundiced view of the reading public. It is also worthwhile to note that many of the clichés – 'trying to express', 'truly great' – are drawn from a literary context. But using these Larkin shows up the venality of those who set themselves up as the arbiters of English taste. But the Movement's relationship with the forces of evil and libido is more complex than Alvarez or the speaker in the above poem allow, and Larkin's poetry is even more deeply connected with these forces. Blake Morrison, in *The Movement* (1986c), argues that the Movement were more aware of the evils of society than has been acknowledged critically, but ultimately he cannot back his assertion up as strongly as he would like. Larkin, however, can stand up to Alvarez's claims, and in his work he deals thoughtfully and deeply with the issues the Movement balked at. Larkin can be seen to exemplify the atmosphere of British post-war society, and although he does not deal overtly with political themes, in poems such as 'The Building' (CP: 191) it becomes evident that there is an undercurrent of social and political awareness which is ultimately more effective than either the reticence of his contemporaries in the Movement or the more flagrant and discomfiting politics of those who deliberately opposed the Movement's neutrality, such as the Group.

In *The Movement* Morrison seems to want to counter Alvarez's views of the Movement, but ultimately he excuses it instead. He states that 'When critics complain that the Movement showed very little awareness of contemporary European history, they are therefore ignoring the presence of oblique historical references in Movement texts' (1986c: 91), and refers to the Huddlesford blitz episode in Larkin's *Jill* (1975) as an example of a Movement text which attempts a direct treatment of war. *Jill*'s protagonist, John, returns to his bombed-out home town and is not sure whether his family has survived, and the scene is a powerful reminder of the violence of war in an otherwise not politically engaged novel. But Morrison admits that such references are few, and although he describes them as 'oblique' from the outset, he seems disappointed when they turn out to be simply that. DJ Enright's 'No Offence' (1987b: 43), is the most confrontational example Morrison is able to find, and yet he admits that the title shows that 'it would not be the wish of a Movement poet to linger on horrific past events.' (1986c: 91) The poem contains a very uncomfortable, although vaguely expressed, association of post-war Germany efficiency with Nazism. The poem comments on how the 'disposal services' are so efficient that 'You could dispose of a corpse like this / Without giving the least offence'; and how ambulances will take you away before your ill health can affect the order of the streets. Although Morrison declares that the poem proves that 'Auschwitz had not been forgotten' (1986c: 91), it is still a fairly angled reference.

Generally, the Movement writers professed to see the '1914' generation, including Pound, Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, Yeats and Lawrence, as having 'openly, or by

implication, assisted the development of Fascism.’ (1986c: 91) Pound in particular was harshly criticised, by Robert Conquest and Donald Davie especially. Davie, in *Ezra Pound: Poet as Sculptor* (1965) claimed that Pound’s ‘political misjudgements’ (in Morrison, 1986c: 91) caused his contemporaries and later poets to ‘turn inward’ (ibid.) and ruled out the possibility that poetry could ever again concern itself with recent history. For the poets of the 1930s – Louis MacNeice, Auden, Christopher Isherwood, Stephen Spender – the Movement had a little more respect. The social crises of the 1930s – unemployment, the rise of Nazism, the Spanish Civil War – were serious enough for the Movement writers to excuse the sense of responsibility or obligation shown by the writers of the day. As Kingsley Amis put it in *Socialism and the Intellectuals* (1957), the ‘readiness to face death in the pursuit of their principles is obviously much to the credit of the young men of the Thirties’. The Movement writers were unable to shed their insolence entirely, and Amis continues ‘It is too easy to laugh at them in retrospect’. (in Morrison, 1986c: 92) John Wain’s opinion was similar; he described the 1930s as:

the last age ... in which people had the feeling that if they only took the trouble to *join* something, get a party card, wear a special shirt, organize meetings and bellow slogans, they could influence the course of events. Since 1946 nobody above the Jehovah’s Witness level has taken this attitude. (in ibid.)

Morrison concludes that the Movement writers seemed to consider Marxism ‘a phase to be passed through in one’s adolescence, and to be grown out of as one matures.’ (1986c: 93)

By stating that to laugh at the poets of the 1930s was ‘too easy’, Amis calls into question the ‘30s writers’ principles, and insinuates naivety on their part. However, he covers

himself with a linguistic twist. The meaning of the statement could also be taken as 'we were being too easy in our laughter when we condemned them'. The Movement, after all, did not experience that which Auden's generation did; the belief, and then the hope, and then the development of doubt in the presumption that theory seemed capable of engaging the material instance. Wain's comments are patently absurd, but within line, just about, with the public face of the Movement. He also, however, compared the situation of a writer in the 1950s to that of 'a batsman going out to the wicket as fifth or sixth man, to follow a succession of giants who have all made centuries.' (in Morrison, 1986c: 133) Anthony Hartley, in *A State of England* (1963), sums up the common sense attitude that seems to have been the Movement's political stance. His account is worth quoting at length:

Believing in the necessity of a Labour government, a Welfare State, independence for India, we none the less had few illusions about the possibility of their leading to a new heaven and a new earth. Political acts seemed necessary, and could be supported, even fought for; political programmes were regarded with scepticism. It was a flight from idealism towards an empiricism which was the more welcome in that ideology had visibly proved itself to be the curse of the twentieth century. Between 1945 and 1950 it was all too evident that nothing very ideal was going to happen, but that if a sort of HCF of decent behaviour and tolerable living could be established that would be enough to be going on with ... we were neither optimists nor pessimists, but sceptics. Zeal was not at all our line. Humanity, we would have liked to think, was – and also common sense. (in Morrison, 1986c: 95)

The statement relates interestingly to Morrison and Alvarez. It appears to give credence to Alvarez's despair at the absence of evil and libido in Movement poetry, but is more willing to provide honest reasons for the Movement's outlook. Morrison argues that the Movement claimed that 'to be politically astute in the 1950s ... was to be politically

inactive' (1986c: 95); that 'neutrality' was their refuge. He argues that even the Movement's politically aware work ultimately reveals a neutral core. Davie's 'The Garden Party' (1972a: 15), 'which has some right to be thought the most politically direct of all Movement texts' (1986c: 97), exemplifies this inclination.

In the poem the lower-middle class speaker's criticism of capitalism and class is astutely and subtly presented by means of the emblematic 'tennis courts' and 'tango'; his foiled relationship with a girl from a higher class, and jealousy of the rich children's 'moneyed ease' fuels his resentment. He mentions the passivity of his father, encouraging the reader to anticipate a colourful conclusion; a more assertive condemnation to contrast with the older man's acceptance of class prejudice. Disappointingly for Morrison, the poem ends:

My father, of a more submissive school,
Remarks the rich themselves are always sad.
There is that sort of equalising rule;
But theirs is all the youth we might have had. (1972a: 15)

The fact that this is the most vicious political diatribe the Movement produced – with emotion kept in check by an ordered abab rhyme scheme – frustrates Morrison immensely, and in his opinion Davie 'compromises by maintaining neutrality while seeming to offer a critique.' (1986c: 98)

Morrison refers to Amis's introduction to *Oxford Poetry* (1949), which he co-edited with James Michie and which served as a vehicle to promote Movement work, in which he complains:

...most of our poets had looked not to Auden and MacNeice, but back to Alfred Noyes ... The typical furniture of the mass of the poems was not, as we soon came to wish it would be, the telegraph pole and the rifle, but the amethyst and the syrup ... the typical rhyme not of 'lackey' and 'lucky', but of 'bliss' and 'kiss'. (1986c: 21)

Thus the Movement's admiration of Auden had nothing to do with social or political consciousness; it had more to do with the language used by Auden's generation, and their 'toughness and modernity'. (1986c: 21) In 'What's Become of Wystan?' (*RW*: 123-128) Larkin writes 'We need not remind ourselves of [Auden's] virtues ... He was ... the first "modern" poet, in that he could employ modern properties unself-consciously.' (*RW*: 123) The Movement's link to Auden is made more evident if one contrasts their admiration of him with that of William Empson, a less politically inclined '30s poet who was enthusiastically endorsed by the Movement's John Wain. In an article for *Penguin New Writing*, in 1950, Wain asserts that Empson has, 'after all, written at least a dozen poems which pass every known test of greatness: and who has done more?' (1986c: 24) This sentiment was echoed by Alvarez, Bernard Bergonzi, George MacBeth, Anthony Hartley, Gordon Wharton, Jonathan Price and James Harrison who, according to Morrison, all write Empsonian verse. Wain advocated reading Empson because of his 'wit and erudition' (1986c: 24), his 'blend of colloquialism and literary allusion' (1986c: 26), and because he was 'an antidote to punch-drunk random "romantic" scribblers', and proposed his work as proof that 'it is harder to produce an accurate statement than a careless rapture'. (1986c: 25) At this point the Movement poets were becoming more cohesive as a group, and were contrasting their work with what they called 'the poetry of the 1940s'. (ibid.) Morrison asserts that the phrase refers to the writers who had appeared in the 'New Apocalypse' anthology *The White Horseman* (1941) – especially Henry

Treece and Tom Scott – as well as Dylan Thomas, David Gascoyne, Edith Sitwell, and WR Rodgers, and presents a deceptive representation of the decade. Larkin's early admiration for Dylan Thomas, which is evident in 'Oils' and 'Two Portraits of Sex' (*XX Poems*: 1951, *CP*: 36), was all but eradicated by 1955, when he published *The Less Deceived*, from which these two poems were dropped. Amis and Michie considered Thomas a 'harmful influence' (in Morrison, 1986c: 25), and excluded poems they adjudged to show this influence in their *Oxford Poetry*. The advocacy of Empson came about for similar reasons as that of Auden; both poets were examples of writers not affected by the neo-Romantic modes of the 1940s.

But Morrison holds that the Movement's admiration for Auden was short-lived; that the group came to admire the Georgians more highly. He quotes Larkin from an article he wrote for the *Guardian* in 1958 entitled 'No Fun Any More', where he looks back to the days when 'sales of "Georgian Poetry" went regularly into five figures.' (in Morrison, 1986c: 134) But there is also the suggestion in much Movement work of a kind of jealousy of the generation before the war, because of their experience of social order and, as can be seen in Larkin's 'MCMXIV' (*CP*: 127), their possession of 'such innocence'. Morrison admits that Larkin resisted such a reading of 'MCMXIV', calling it a 'monument to the dead of the Great War'. (in Morrison, 1986c: 198) But, as Morrison contends, part of the emotion in the poem is 'the sadness of a latecomer.' (1986c: 198) In the poem the sun shines on 'moustached archaic faces' and bleaches the 'Established names on the sunblinds' of 'shut shops', there are 'dark-clothed children at play / Called after kings and queens', and there are 'pubs / Wide open all day'. Morrison suggests that

the 'tidy' and 'established' atmosphere in 'MCMXIV' represents the tidy and established nature of the English poetry of the Georgian period, which was nearly destroyed by Modernism, and which the Movement yearned to recover in order to continue the line of English poetry.

'MCMXIV', however, is a rare example of admiration for the Georgians in Larkin's work. As Michael Schmidt says, in *Lives of the Poets* (1999c), 'He does not idealise the past. He does not see it, in Hardy's terms, as unrealised either. It is simply unrealisable Death is his abiding muse'. (1999c: 944-5) For Larkin to rely on nostalgia alone is rare; his relationship with society is more complex, and his inheritance from Auden and MacNeice was more substantial and resilient. Stephen Regan, in his essay '*In the Grip of Light: Philip Larkin's Poetry of the 1940s*' (in Booth, 2000a), reassesses the influence of the socially-conscious poets of the 1930s, such as Auden and MacNeice, on Larkin's early unpublished volume *In The Grip of Light*, written in 1947. The collection was turned down by a succession of publishers, which Larkin later professed to regard as a good thing; he commented in a letter in 1964 'Thank God nobody accepted it'. (2000a: 121) This may have been Larkin's way of undercutting embarrassment or disappointment. But his sentiments are shared by Andrew Motion, who criticises the title of the book because 'its pretentiousness, and its blend of Symbolist vagueness with a precise self-regard, makes it one of [Larkin's] least characteristic phrases.' (in *ibid.*)

But Regan argues for its suitability. He believes that Larkin's writing in the 1940s gestures towards the possibility of happiness, only for the impulse to be 'sedulously

qualified and studiously undermined.’ (2000a: 122) He argues that *In The Grip of Light* is an understated reflection of post-war ambiguities. Whereas the common condition of the 1940s was the optimism that would be expected during the ‘new dawn’, many Britons were also disconcerted by the interminableness of the sunrise. Regan quotes Arthur Marwick from *British Society since 1945* (1986c), who claims that ‘the country lay in a crepuscular zone with shadow of night as firm upon the landscape as the heartening hints of the rising sun.’ (in Regan 2000a: 122) Larkin’s title, then, is not gushing acknowledgment of the immense possibilities available in post-war England, but a more ironic comment on the strained atmosphere of opportunity. Regan believes that ‘the word *grip* hints at the constriction of life’s possibilities, while simultaneously beckoning towards a sense of affirmation and exaltation’ (2000a: 123); that it ‘raises issues that emanate from a very precise moment of social and political transition, issues that are both existential and cultural.’ (ibid.) Regan believes that, unlike other Movement poets, Larkin inherited more from the 1930s poets than most critics realise, and that *In the Grip of Light* is where to begin looking for the evidence.

It is quite plain that Auden and MacNeice had some influence on Larkin. In early Larkin this influence is quite explicit; when Larkin left school he wrote, in collaboration with Noel Hughes, the valedictory poem ‘Last Will and Testament’ (*CP*: 250) for the school magazine *The Coventarian*. The poem is an unashamed imitation of Auden and MacNeice’s closing to *Letters from Iceland*. Tolley, in *My Proper Ground* (1991), concurs. He considers that the poetry Larkin wrote as a schoolboy utilises many of Auden’s poetic techniques. In ‘Having grown up in shade of Church and State’ (*CP*:

229), written in 1939 when Larkin was sixteen, lines such as 'He smiles demurely at his uncle's jokes, / And reads the *Modern Boy* in bed at night' show how he manages to place the subject socially by means of specific contemporaneous detail. Tolley suggests that what Larkin was attracted to in the work of socially-conscious poets of the 1930s, Auden in particular, was the 'acclimatization of the modern world to poetry that he encountered in their work'. (1991: 4) As Larkin himself put it, in a letter to JA Johnson, a student writing his thesis on Larkin in 1964, he 'had been educated in the Auden tradition – objective, outward-looking, political [sic], materialist, unpretentious.' (in *ibid.*) But Larkin's writing in the 1940s hints at the developing importance of more sophisticated social detail in his work, which is linked and, importantly, infused with a 'seeming relish for mild deprivation' (2000a: 122) of the kind pervasive in the post-war years.

Both Tolley and Regan focus on one of Larkin's early poems, 'Midsummer Night, 1940' (*CP*: 244), which was never included in an individual volume, as an example of what Regan notes Larkin inherited from 1930s poetry, 'a realist, metonymic style'. (2000a: 125) The poem chronicles two distinct settings; 'other times' and the time that 'we' inhabit. In 'other times', we are told, 'heavy ploughmen snored', and 'some among the wealthy sneered', while in our time people return home from factory jobs, and crowds visit public halls. From these clipped synecdochic details a complete image is skilfully created. Roman Jakobson, in his seminal *On Language* (1990), was among the first to stress the importance of metonymy to the Realist school of novelist, as a contrast to the emphasis on metaphor particular to Romanticism and Symbolism. He states that 'the Realist author metonymically digresses from the plot to the atmosphere and from the

characters to the setting in space and time' and is 'fond of synecdochic details.' (1990: 130) Larkin's use of metonymy is a strong feature in his novels, but the device in his poetry is more striking.

Regan suggests that the 'variegated landscape and social detail ... clearly owe a great deal' to Auden (2000a: 1), and that in the poem a 'dissident political voice ... sits oddly, though interestingly, alongside the reactionary sentiments of the later Larkin.' The poem begins 'The sun falls behind Wales', which Tolley points out is an echo of 'Night moves over China', from Isherwood and Auden's *Journey to a War* (1939), which had been published the previous year. But there are other similarities. The poem was written in June of 1940, when Larkin was seventeen, and observes the mood of unrest and reflection during World War II. Regan compares it to later poems such as 'The Whitsun Weddings', because of its allusion to a day 'associated with ritual and tradition' (2000a: 124), and consideration of the contemporary world's desires and wants. It is one of Larkin's earliest agnostic poems; in it, modern civilisation appears free of superstition and legend, as well as religion. The poem is worth quoting in full as it shows a remarkable debt to Auden and MacNeice, and noteworthy poetic ability in one so young.

The sun falls behind Wales; the towns and hills
Sculptured on England, wait again for night
As a deserted beach the tide that smooths

Its rumpled surface flat: as pale as moths
Faces from factory pass home, for what respite
Home offers: crowds vacate the public halls:

And everywhere the stifling mass of night
Swamps the bright nervous day, and puts it out.
In other times, when heavy ploughmen snored,

And only some among the wealthy sneered,
On such a night as this twilight and doubt
Would mingle, and the night would not

Be day's exhaustion; there would drift about
Strange legends of the bridge across the weir,
Rings found in the grass, with undertone

Of darker terror, stories of the tarn,
The horned stranger, a pervading fear
No jolly laugh disperses. But

We, on this midsummer night, can sneer
In union at mind that could confuse
The moon and cheese, or trust in lightfoot images,

And point with conscious pride to our monstrosities
– Gained by no cerebral subterfuge,
Yet more convincing – a compulsory snare,

Expending of resources for the use
Of all the batty guardians of pain
– With no acknowledgment of pleasure, even –

The angels yawning in an empty heaven;
Alternate shows of dynamite and rain;
And choosing forced on free will: fire or ice. (*CP*: 244)

Although the poem refers to Midsummer Day, the differences between the two ages alluded to in the poem are revealed properly at night. For the factory workers of Larkin's time, night stifles the 'bright nervous day', and allows respite from the exhaustion of work. In the past, however, night brought about 'a pervading fear' prompted by superstition. Thus 'night' stands for more than merely the opposite of day. The materiality of darkness is representative of a state of mind which alters with what Larkin designates ironically as the development of consciousness. The Audenesque or Kierkegaardian echo in the final line of the poem: 'And choosing forced on free will: fire

or ice' suggests an 'either/or' choice; freedom as commitment.

Although some social or political awareness is clear in Larkin's early work, taken as a whole his body of work resists a political reading; his political views are as muddled as the personality represented in the *Selected Letters*, as a brief summary of his more political moments illustrates. The right-wing thinkers of 'Going Going' (CP: 189) and 'Homage to a Government' (CP: 171), speak in ways David Gervais considers 'frankly embarrassing now'. (1993: 214) The narrator in the latter poem believes that foreign countries need to be 'kept orderly' by the British army; implies that these 'other' places cannot guard themselves. But the holders of these opinions would have balked at Larkin's unpublished novel *No for an Answer* (worked on from 1949-1950), described by Bradford as potentially 'ground-breaking' (2005a: 85) in its depiction of the post-war working class. The more conservative personae would also have frowned on Larkin's experimentation in *Jill* (1975), described by Robert Philips, in the *Paris Review* interview, as 'the forerunner of the new British post-war novel – the literature of the displaced working-class hero'. (RW: 63) Philips suggests that it 'spawned' further works by Alan Sillitoe, Wain, Keith Waterhouse, and Amis, among others. Larkin protested that '*Jill* has none of the political overtones' of the genre of the post-war British novel, and that the protagonist John's 'being working-class was a kind of equivalent of my stammer, a built-in handicap to put him one down'. (ibid.) He also says, in the introduction to the novel, that 'In 1940 our impulse was still to minimise social differences rather than to exaggerate them. My hero's background, though an integral part of the story, was not what the story was about.' (in Morrison, 1986c: 67) There are those, however, who

believe Larkin's politics are more explicit. Tom Paulin, in *Minotaur* (1992b), argues fervently that there are directly political views in Larkin's work.

The personal as political

Minotaur, which is based on Paulin's experience as a Northern Irishman in Britain, explores the relationship between the state and art, and attempts to 'bring to the critical act ... the possibility of an historical method.' (1992b: 17) Paulin analyses Larkin's work in terms of the individual's position within the state structure, and asserts that the lyric poetry that Larkin wrote is therefore deeply connected to that which lyric poetry is usually divorced from: social history. In his analysis of 'Afternoons' (*CP*: 121) Paulin argues, fancifully, that the 'young mothers' who feel that 'Something is pushing them / To the side of their own lives', are a 'metaphor for a sense of diminished purpose and fading imperial power.' (1992b: 233) The poetic voice implies 'an exit from history into personal emotion' (*ibid.*); and Paulin believes that this private space is in fact social. He sees Larkin's work and restrained public persona as a concealment which enables him to 'issue public statements disguised as lyric poems.' (1992b: 235)

Paulin's argument that the poem is a metaphor for the loss of imperial power seems odd, when what seems to be illustrated is the existence of the marginalised and disempowered of Larkin's own country. Thus the poem can be read as political, but in a very different way to that in which Paulin reads it.

But Paulin's reading of Larkin's work is sometimes slightly more credible, especially his analysis of 'At Grass' (*CP*: 29):

Silks at the start: against the sky
Numbers and parasols: outside
Squadrons of empty cars, and heat,
And littered grass: then the long cry
Hanging unhushed till it subside
To stop-press columns in the street.

This scene Paulin compares to the field of battle: 'squadrons, littered grass, the long cry of victory travelling across time and distance into newspapers and history books.'

(1992b: 236) The observation is reinforced by his reading of the first stanza of the poem,

The eye can hardly pick them out
From the cold shade they shelter in,
Till wind distresses tail and mane;
Then one crops grass, and moves about
– The other seeming to look on –
And stands anonymous again.

Here the phrase 'cold shade' is seen by Paulin as an allusion to the classics, the 'underworld of dreary shades that move through the waste dominions of the dead in the *Aeneid*'; the horses appear as 'heroic ancestors – famous generals, perhaps', 'observed almost by a sniper's eye'. (1992b: 236)

Paulin concludes this area of his discussion with the assertion that the 'connection between the personal and the national life is made through the idea of power and its loss. The self desires full and undivided sovereignty but fears a diminution of its personal freedom through marriage' (1992b: 237), which makes Larkin's prolonged battle with the idea of marriage 'almost like a public agonizing about national sovereignty.' (ibid.)

This seems a somewhat far-fetched, if intriguing, analysis of Larkin's work. But Larkin's poetry is shot through with a social interest which hints at a political concern, if somewhat less direct than Paulin claims. The effectiveness of the subtlety of Larkin's political concerns is most obvious if his work is compared with the more political poets of the 1950s. In a chapter on the Movement, GS Fraser, in *The Modern Writer and His World* (1972b), mentions a group of poets – 'The Group' – who reacted to the Movement. They were influenced by FR Leavis, espousing 'concreteness, rootedness, and enactment'. (1972b: 351) Fraser calls them 'difficult to characterise socially', but on the whole more working class, with more school teachers than university lecturers, a few high-salaried advertising copywriters, more worldly and with a greater mix of nationalities, and more political radicalism. Fraser says that the most promising members of the Group – Ted Hughes, Peter Redgrove, George MacBeth and Philip Hobsbaum – had a 'positive taste not only for emotional violence but for the ugly, the grotesque, and sometimes indeed for the cruel.' (1972b: 352) He follows this with a brief description of these poets' work which is worth quoting in full:

Both Redgrove and Hobsbaum ... have written poems, in which there is in the end more distress than humour, about being a fat man. Hobsbaum has written a powerful poem about the premature decay of his teeth. Redgrove is fond of poems about insects, slugs, or spiders, and about squashing them, usually accidentally; he has a poem about watching his wife struggling into, or out of, her girdle, an exercise during which it is difficult for any woman to appear attractive; George MacBeth writes poems about finding and having to kill a small bird outside his kitchen, and also about torture chambers and concentration camps; Peter Porter has a very powerful poem about Auschwitz in which he sees broiler-chickens turning on their spits in a restaurant window, as expressive of the same ruthless human efficiency as the German gas-chambers. It is almost as if the horrors of the Second World War, from Auschwitz to Hiroshima, having failed to penetrate very deeply into the imaginations of men in their forties who served through that war ... had pierced through, twenty years later, to the imaginations of a younger generation. (ibid.)

Larkin does not make use of such intensely emotional political imagery, but at the same time he was not oblivious to the suffering of humankind. His work is less crudely shocking, but indicates a deeper concern with understated and yet profoundly frightening cultural norms.

One of the shorthand devices Larkin was fond of using to address this anxiety were hospitals, doctors and ambulances. Of the following poems, 'Autumn' (CP: 75, 1953), 'Hospital Visits' (CP: 77, 1953), and 'None of the books have time' (CP: 124, 1960) were uncollected in his lifetime, while 'How' (CP: 176, 1970) appeared in *Wave*. In 'Autumn' the wind, intent on 'bringing summer down', 'deals blows' which sound like 'distant collapsing water, / Or empty hospitals falling room by room'. In 'Hospital Visits' a wife who breaks her wrist while her husband is dying in hospital is reminded of his death when, weeks later, she returns to the hospital for her own check-up; a hint at the link between place and memory and the specific implications this idea holds when the place is a hospital. 'None of the books have time' describes 'selflessness' as 'like waiting in a hospital / In a badly-fitting suit on a cold wet morning.' 'How' speaks about the 'cold winter', which ignores 'Our need now for kindness', and how people are 'Held apart by acres / Of housing', and 'children / With their shallow violent eyes.' But the poem begins

How high they build hospitals!
Lighted cliffs, against dawns
Of days people will die on.
I can see one from here.

These poems all refer to winter as well, as if the year is drawing to a close and taking

hope with it. But Larkin's use of the hospital is exemplified and unsurpassed in 'The Building' (CP: 191).

'The Building' links the human dread of the uncertainty of death irrevocably with the mundanity of England's National Health Service. As much as death is the great leveller, the NHS forces all afflicted people to gather together, the 'ground [is] curiously neutral' in more than one respect, and death as well as the NHS claim victims old and young; 'houses and names / Suddenly in abeyance'. The grandeur and glory of death are reduced significantly; the hospital is compared to an 'airport lounge', with 'paperbacks, and tea at so much a cup', and people sitting 'tamely ... On rows of steel chairs', and, significantly, instead of a great quest or the excitement and danger of battle, most of the people in the building 'Haven't come far. More like a local bus'. And as much as Larkin is not the first to observe the all-encompassing force of death, to link it to the welfare state, where it is inevitable that one meets one's end wearing 'washed-to-rags ward clothes'; to associate the fact that 'nothing contravenes / The coming dark' with a government hospital, and to point out that the welfare state merely underlines the impartiality of death, indicates his concern with England's social situation.

After reading 'The Building' it is difficult to argue that, in Alvarez's words, 'God is more or less good'. It may be that in the poem the unadorned, savage terror of death has been removed by a more stark, orderly fear, but the uncertainty is still there; the fact that death has become so disciplined only makes the personal turmoil that a human inevitably goes through much more terrifying because it cannot be expressed. Larkin deals powerfully

with the 'evils' of modern society, and, as will be argued in the following section, his interrogation of society is more convincing than many of his contemporaries because of his treatment of religion.

Part III

The consequences of agnosticism

Gervais addresses the subject of Larkin's religious tendencies in *Literary Englands*, where he compares Larkin's 'Englishness' with John Betjeman's. He contends that although Larkin and Betjeman focus on similar subjects, Betjeman tends to be more general, while Larkin is more specific. Betjeman's 'Business Girls' (in Gervais 1993: 188) suggests that isolation is, paradoxically, experienced by everyone:

From the geyser ventilators
Autumn winds are blowing down
On a thousand business women
Having baths in Camden Town.

While Betjeman defines singleness as something we have in common, for Larkin solitude was a private condition, as 'Mr Bleaney' (*CP*: 102) and 'Aubade' (*CP*: 208) demonstrate. Gervais mentions a similarity between the two poets, however, which he believes is proof of Larkin's deep respect for Betjeman. 'At the heart of Betjeman,' he says, 'there is a feeling of unresolved depression that Larkin could have found in no other predecessor.' (1993: 188) Gervais considers the pessimism evident in Betjeman's work to be the precedent for Larkin's misery in such poems as 'Aubade' or 'The Old Fools' (*CP*: 196). Vitally, however, Gervais states that while Betjeman's fears had their roots in religion, Larkin's are entirely agnostic, which goes some way in explaining his preoccupation with solitude. The sense of depression in Betjeman's work is less frightening because

ultimately it hinges on religion; a shared belief. The lack of belief in Larkin's work means that the individual is entirely alone in his hopelessness.

Larkin's dealings with religion, or at least the Church, are documented most famously in 'Church Going' (*CP*: 189), 'High Windows' (*CP*: 165), 'Aubade', or 'Vers de Soci  t  ' (*CP*: 181), the latter describing going to church as a 'routine / Playing at goodness ... Something that bores us, something we don't do well'. There are many less familiar examples, however, which indicate the extent to which Larkin's attention was arrested by the idea of society's interaction with religion. The early 'Having grown up in shade of Church and State' (*CP*: 229), written in 1939, describes the young life of a middle class schoolboy who follows the 'Test Match', has his 'tea unsweet in Lent', is given 'quite a good bat when aged eight' with which he hits a 'careful twelve' with textbook strokes ('one sees the dotted line'), trying not to 'vex' his onlookers with any of the imprudent sporting behaviour which would be unbecoming of a young Englishmen. The boy is described in the third person throughout, with no other point of view taken into account, until the final lines of the poem, where:

We hear the voice: 'Y'know, he's good! Why, that's
A graceful player! True? Perhaps. Benign,
We diagnose a case of good old sex.

The reader is left pondering who 'we' are; as the speaker attempts an association with his reader. In this case, the poem implicates the reader in his dismissal of the importance of the 'Church and State' in the face of 'good old sex'. At the same time, however, the speaker, who is evidently in attendance at the match, is 'benign', he does not wish to

disrupt the rituals taking place around him. He acknowledges their importance even as he sees their irrelevance.

A poem written later that year, 'Autumn has caught us in our summer wear' (*CP*: 233) is harsher in its evaluation of the church's disconnection from human needs. The poem is in the voice of a vagrant of some kind, insufficiently clothed for the season and out of doors when he would rather be in the warm. It begins

Autumn has caught us in our summer wear
Brother⁶, and the day
Breathes coldly from fields far away
As white air.
We are cold at our feet, and cold at our throats,
Crouching, cold, deaf to the morning's half notes.

The speaker sees 'girls from the Church', coming from 'over the fields', with 'leaves, berries and roots' gathered for that old English ritual the Harvest Festival, and comments wryly 'I do not think that we shall be / Troubled by their piety', implying the church does not take into account the very people in need of the sustenance provided by such 'fruits'.

In 'Autobiography at an Air-Station' (*CP*: 78), written in 1953 and uncollected in Larkin's lifetime, there is an interesting reflection on faith, although admittedly the faith that one would have in the advertised promises made by an airline. In the poem, a group of travellers' flight is delayed, and the speaker ponders his situation. 'No one seems to know' how long the delay will be; people 'amble to and fro', buying cigarettes and

⁶ The word 'Brother' seems odd and unlike Larkin, although he repeats it in the unfinished 'The Dance' (*CP*: 154), which opens with a scornful speech by another working class character: 'Drink, sex and jazz – all sweet things, brother: far / Too sweet to be diluted to "a dance"', which would indicate that Larkin saw the expression as indicative of a person of a certain class.

sweets, reading the newspaper, idly filling time. The speaker wonders whether to attempt to make friends, but decides against it on grounds that 'in the race for seats / You're best alone. Friendship is not worth while.' He considers the fact that if he's 'gone by boat last night' he would 'be there now,' but admits that it's 'too late' to consider that option now.

The poem ends

... I feel staled,
Stupefied, by inaction – and, as light
Begins to ebb outside, by fear; I set
So much on this Assumption. Now it's failed.

Amusing as this is, it is interesting to note how acutely the speaker is affected by the fact that what he expects does not come to pass; he feels staled, not so serious perhaps; stupefied, somewhat more serious; but finally he feels genuine fear. It is not the fact that he is not going to arrive at his destination on time which seems to bother him, but rather the fact that what he trusted would take place does not. If this is the reaction he experiences when something relatively unimportant does not happen as he anticipates, the question that seems to be implied, and which is reinforced by the capital letter of 'Assumption', is how he would react if his entire belief system, Christianity, say, and the ultimate event it promises, the Second Coming, were to fail. To risk such disappointment and – if the aeroplane delay produces fear – terror, does not seem viable, and yet no alternative is suggested.

Gervais, in his comparison of Larkin and Betjeman, refers to the latter's 'N. W. & N.6', in which, he states, 'a puritan nursery-maid persecuted him with her prayers' (1993: 188):

'World without end.' What fearsome words to pray.
'World without end.' It was not what she'd do
That frightened me so much as did her fear
And guilt at endlessness. I caught them too,
Hating to think of sphere succeeding sphere
Into eternity and God's dread will.
I caught her terror then. I have it still.

The poem illustrates the roots of Betjeman's fears or depression; a childhood dominated by an authoritarian Christianity. The poem can be interestingly compared with one of Larkin's more famous takes on religion, from 'High Windows' (CP: 165), which begins with the famous lines:

When I see a couple of kids
And guess he's fucking her and she's
Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm,
I know this is paradise ...

These were the jealousies Larkin's generation felt towards the youth; the freedom and consequence-free sex granted to them. More interesting at this point, however, are the liberties the generation of Larkin's youth took with the law of society. The speaker wonders if:

Anyone looked at me, forty years back,
And thought, *That'll be the life;*
No God any more, or sweating in the dark

About hell and that, or having to hide
What you think of the priest. He
And his lot will go down the long slide
Like free bloody birds. ...

This freedom from the constraints of organised religion was not something Betjeman subscribed to. But for Larkin, freedom, and in a way Englishness, was just that; Larkin's romantic notion of England was utterly unreligious.

But the poem does not end with this revelation. Had he ended it there, his customary sense of dread not having made an appearance, the type of freedom available to him would have seemed to be without consequence. But of course this is not the case, because

...immediately

Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:
The sun-comprehending glass,
And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows
Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.

Here are the consequences of godlessness; an eternal, awe-inspiring, but yawning, lack. The terror of such nothingness is perhaps not as frightening in this poem as it is in others, but it is a constant preoccupation.

Gervais describes 'Church Going' as 'a prolonged effort to discover a meaning in an experience which has never quite seemed meaningful.' (1993: 209) He states that the fact that the speaker always ends 'much at a loss like this, / Wondering what to look for' indicates a 'certain embarrassment at not knowing what to feel' (ibid.), and that Larkin's attempt to explore the speaker's feelings critically are bound to fail and culminate in speculation. Ultimately Gervais finds the diction of the poem too 'poetic'; the tone, although 'beautifully maintained', 'rather mannered' – he sees the poem as "churchy" without being religious.' (1993: 210)

Gervais states that Larkin wrote about England in two main ways: 'in the first he has a keen eye for the actual texture of English life ("Mr Bleaney") but in the second ("Church Going") he often falls into an unfocussed spirituality.' (1993: 210) This pinpoints the relationship in Larkin's work between agnosticism and English society and landscape. Tolley writes about the 'New Romanticism' of the 1940s and its affect, not only on Larkin, but on many of the Movement writers. He asserts that it was a cultural enterprise that went back to Matthew Arnold, that 'for Yeats and Eliot (despite Eliot's protestations to the contrary) literature was a means of finding or formulating a basis for affirmation and belief that religion had previously provided' (1991: 64), and that the Movement was, to a certain extent, a reaction to this line of thought, its guarded emotion and rejection of high-mindedness demonstrating as much. But Gervais and Tolley do not acknowledge that Larkin did attempt to overcome the hollowness left by a lack of faith. Larkin experimented with two approaches, the first was to evoke English ritual, and the other, which was less successful, was to rely on the regenerative power of nature and the English landscape. Although both of these methods were ultimately (and probably inevitably) fruitless, they are almost successful.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'spiritual, Platonic old England', described in *Anima Poetae* (1895), refers to the English literary tradition he identified with, as opposed to 'commercial Great Britain':

Let England be Sir Philip Sidney, Shakespeare, Milton, Bacon, Harrington, Swift, Wordsworth; and never let the names of Darwin, Johnson, Hume, *fur* it over. If these, too, must be England let them be another England; or, rather, let the first be

old England, the spiritual, Platonic old England, the second, with Locke at the head of the philosophers and Pope [at the head] of the poets, together with the long list of Priestleys, Paleys, Hayleys, Darwins, Mr Pitts, Dundasses, &c., &c., be the representatives of commercial Great Britain. (1895: 151)

If the line of thinkers favoured by Coleridge were extended through Hardy, Eliot, Thomas, Betjeman, Larkin, and even up to Geoffrey Hill, Larkin and his peers would be the first to abandon faith as a constant underlying anchor, and Larkin grappled with the problem perhaps most intently. Fraser points out that

Most younger poets today, though by no means all, are probably agnostics or atheists. If they feel a sense of dependence or contingency, they would not, like a traditional Christian poet, take that as evidence of the existence of a God. If they feel a sense of oneness with Nature, they would not, like Wordsworth, take that as evidence of an immanent and sympathetic life in nature, a spirit attuned to ours. If they feel happy or intensely in love, they would feel it a dishonesty to take that feeling as evidence that the world is good. (1972b: 354)

Edna Longley, in *Poetry in the Wars* (1986b), speaks of Edward Thomas's agnosticism as a 'common starting-point' (1986b: 130) between Thomas and Larkin. In Thomas's 'The Mountain Chapel', the speaker recognises the value of religious ritual, to some. The personified mountain chapel of the poem and its accompanying gravestones, 'old and few', hear only the 'eternal noise / Of wind whistling in grass', saying:

'Tis but a moment since man's birth
And in another moment more
Man lies in earth
For ever; but I am the same
Now, and shall be, even as I was
Before he came;
Til there is nothing I shall be.' (1994b: 151)

The 'Men behind glass', who 'stand once a week, singing', 'drown' the sound of the wind, hearing only the sounds of their own earnest worship. And while 'Their ponies munch', oblivious to the religious ritual taking place so close to where they stand, the speaker concedes that 'there's a man could / Live happy here', although he is not sure where or who this man may be. This fact does not alter the speaker's personal disconnection from the ritual. But it is also true that Thomas's treatment of the natural world, and his belief in its immortality relative, at least, to that of humanity, provided him with, in Longley's words, 'a quasi-religious, quasi-mythological, if not particularly reassuring, faith that ... natural forces preceded and will succeed man and his monuments'. (ibid.)

Longley's believes, on the other hand, that 'Larkin's occasional translations of *his* feeling for Nature on a religious plane ... cannot consistently dissolve the fear of mortality within larger mysteries'. (1986b: 130) In Larkin's work it always seems that nothing except death is certain. 'Aubade' (*CP*: 208) makes this clear, as 'dread / Of dying, and being dead' generates in the speaker:

... 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.

'Forget What Did' (*CP*: 184) is an example of an attempt by Larkin to dispel the fear of getting old by transposing it with a preoccupation with nature. The poem contains strong echoes of Auden's 'Short Ode to the Cuckoo' (1994a: 862), in which the mythology of the cuckoo is denigrated; in modern times it is no longer the great symbol it once was,

and its prophetic ability is mocked. And yet the speaker admits that every year, in his diary, which is usually only used to record 'social / engagements and, lately, the death of friends', he 'scribbles' when he first hears the bird; a 'holy moment.' The poem highlights the enduring and seemingly irrational influence of nature in human life, and the link between religion and myth. Larkin's poem is similar. In it, the speaker has stopped writing his diary because he realises that his life does not warrant such a record.

The poem ends:

And the empty pages?
Should they ever be filled
Let it be with observed

Celestial recurrences,
The day the flowers come,
And when the birds go.

Both 'Forget What Did' and 'Short Ode to the Cuckoo' refer to the English habit of recording the appearance or disappearance of certain birds in order to judge the coming and ending of seasons. In Larkin's poem, then, ritual and nature are combined, and although to record 'when the birds go' is a ritual in itself, the human ritual of keeping a diary is more hollow than the ritual linked to a natural occurrence.

But moments of natural authority over human emptiness are rare in Larkin. 'The Trees' (*CP*: 166), for example, seems at first to be extolling the power of nature, but ultimately confirms Larkin's belief that nature's ability for rebirth does not extend to humanity. In the poem, the trees come into leaf 'Like something almost being said'. The new life or 'greenness' is 'a kind of grief'. In the opening stanza there is an atmosphere of something

unspoken, as if it is not possible to verbalise or explain the phenomenon of spring. It seems that it is the new growth's close relationship with death, explored in the second stanza, that creates this situation. And then, when spring has established itself fully in 'fullgrown thickness', the 'unresting castles' suddenly seem able to articulate their message: 'Last year is dead ... Begin afresh, afresh, afresh.' But this statement, although beautiful, is somehow unsatisfying. After all, its main thrust is merely repetition; an empty poetic device which can be linked to Larkin's pointed failed attempts to use ritual to overcome a fear of death. Thus 'The Trees' highlights the necessity of death in the process of rebirth, but the inarticulacy which accompanies the process seems to undermine the poetic statement.

Symbolic England

Raphaël Ingelbien's essay 'The Uses of Symbolism: Larkin and Eliot' (in Booth, 2000a), provides an interesting means of placing Larkin on the timeline of English letters.

Ingelbien compares Larkin to TS Eliot, and attempts to destabilise the alleged binary opposition between the English, 'empirical' line that Larkin purportedly furthers, or even concludes, in his poetry, and the "'foreign", symbolist Modernism of Eliot'. (2000a: 4) In doing this he shows the similarity between the two writers' use of Englishness; Larkin's lack of a religious base means that the atmosphere of his work is ultimately very different. A link with Eliot, however, goes some way in illuminating Larkin's place in the development of a poetic Englishness.

Ingelbien argues that although Eliot is usually seen as 'cosmopolitan' and opposing local English tradition, his later work, such as the *Four Quartets*, idealises wartime England 'through organic symbols of continuity, such as churches and folk rituals, and endows it with a new, metaphysical significance ("History is now and England").' (ibid.) Larkin's use of a similar symbolic framework creates, according to Ingelbien, 'negative symbolism'. Where Eliot hoped that the war would generate a sense of national community; Larkin 'regarded the changes that affected post-war England as a terminal process'. As Ingelbien writes, 'Church Going' was one of the stages that would lead to 'England gone'. (2000a: 139)

The more pessimistic critics have considered Larkin's musings on post-war society as hopelessly bleak. Terry Whalen, in 'Larkin and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*' (in Booth, 2000a), uses Larkin's near obsession with DH Lawrence to elucidate his concern with the condition of England in the modern industrial age: 'Lawrence's rendition of a diminished post-World War I society colours Larkin's view of his own post-World War II welfare state.' (2000a: 111) In *Lady Chatterley's Lover* Lawrence worries that he lives among 'a new race of mankind, over-conscious in the money and social and political side, on the spontaneous, intuitive side dead, but dead'. (in Booth, 2000a: 110) Whalen believes that Larkin 'absorbs' this feeling from Lawrence, and especially from *Lady Chatterley's Lover*; that it 'shades and focuses his own public commentary on the England of his own time' (2000a: 110), especially in poems such as 'Here', 'Essential Beauty' and 'The Large Cool Store'. Furthermore, in poems like 'The Whitsun Weddings', 'To the Sea' and 'Show Saturday', and more distantly in 'Church Going' and 'Going, Going', Larkin expresses 'a critical nostalgia for a pre-industrial England of rootedness and a more organic life' where an 'organicist ideal is evoked primarily as criticism of the present'. (ibid.) Whalen says of 'The Whitsun Weddings' that a 'moment of spontaneous ritual life' (ibid.) is observed and celebrated, but the ritual takes place in a landscape which includes '[c]anal with floatings of industrial froth' and 'acres of dismantled cars'. (ibid.) Thus 'Old England is erased by the new one, and the cost is a diminution of all human worth.' (ibid.) Gervais says of *A Girl in Winter* (1975), 'England fails to correspond with the literary image of it she has – the twentieth century has blotted it out, as Lawrence foretold it would – but her experience is not one of simple disillusion even so.' (1993: 190)

But Ingelbien argues more optimistically that Larkin engaged consciously in a productive dialogue with the tradition of symbolic England. In the last three *Quartets* Eliot 'was putting symbolism in the service of the Christian faith and of English patriotism.' (2000a:

133) Ingelbien explores Larkin's use of similar imagery in two specific cases:

on the one hand, moments where Eliot's discursive suggestions of transcendence are evoked and then subverted (as in 'Church Going'); on the other hand, visionary moments where the kind of symbols that Eliot had invested with patriotic and religious meanings resurface only to confirm the loss of their power (as in 'The Whitsun Weddings'). (2000a: 136)

In 'Church Going' (*CP*: 189) Larkin contrasts the idea of community with that of solitude, in order to show the emptiness of the symbolic. In the third stanza of the poem 'I' is altered to 'we':

Yet stop I did: in fact I often do,
And always end much at a loss like this,
Wondering what to look for; wondering, too,
When churches fall completely out of use
What shall we turn them into, if we shall keep
A few cathedrals chronically on show,
Their parchment, plate and pyx in locked cases,
And let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep.
Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?

And yet the sense of community is almost immediately destabilised in the sixth stanza, where the church is said to have 'held unspilt / So long and equably what since is found / Only in separation ...'. This is inverted again in the seventh stanza, where 'I' becomes 'our':

A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognised, and robed as destinies.

But Ingelbien points out that the rhetoric utilised in the poem to regain the sense of community 'rooted in its country and institutions' looks 'suspiciously obsolete' (2000a: 138), a sense supported by the 'inversion of the first line, the rare "blent" and the hackneyed "robe of destiny" image'. (ibid.) Furthermore, the poem 'eventually lapses back into the singular' (ibid.), to continue from the previous quotation:

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.

Thus the poem 'becomes a confirmation of solitude and separation' (ibid.), and Larkin exhibits his inability to extend Eliot's idealised wartime England into post-war England; 'the positive transcendence held out at the beginning of the stanza is undercut by a final vision of nothingness.' (2000a: 139) This idea is echoed in 'Nothing To Be Said' (CP: 138), where the rituals of people of all nations, all their 'separate ways / Of building, benediction, / Measuring love and money' are 'Ways of slow dying', and the hours of human life, no matter what human ceremony is taking place, 'advance / On death equally slowly.'

Ingelbien believes that 'The Whitsun Weddings' is as important a poem when

considering Larkin's relationship to Eliot. The dominant metonymic mode of the poem, which places it firmly within the aesthetic paradigm employed by the Movement poets, is undercut at the end by a strongly symbolist image: 'A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower / Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.' Ingelbien believes that this lapse into symbolism highlights the speaker's separation from the working-class couples on the train, thus 'if the metonymic mode of "The Whitsun Weddings" embodies a democratic poetics that reflects the post-war consensus, the final metaphor simultaneously breaks that consensus and fails to elevate it to the status of historical myth.' (2000a: 141) Where Eliot's symbolism created a transcendence infused with patriotic and religious feeling, Larkin's is an 'inverted transcendence' (ibid.) which 'only affords glimpses into lack and absence.' (2000a: 142) Ultimately, according to Ingelbien, Larkin's 'empirical vision of the English landscape eventually falls into an abyss of non-meaning.' In this way Ingelbien designates Larkin, at least in a few examples, as the 'English equivalent' of the original symbolists, with their 'fascination with nothingness.' (ibid.)

Larkin's attempts to counter this nothingness with the use of myth and ritual are perhaps most obvious in 'Show Saturday' (CP: 199) and 'To The Sea' (CP: 173). The two poems are in some respects startlingly similar in their treatment of English society. The speaker in 'To the Sea' is amazed to discover that the seaside ritual he experienced as a child, when 'happy at being on my own, / I searched the sand for Famous Cricketers', is 'Still going on, all of it, still going on!' The experience of the seaside is far from idyllic; there are 'rusting soup-tins' between the rocks, 'cheap cigars', and the bathers are 'clumsily undressed'. Furthermore, the weather, even when 'flawless', merely highlights our

'falling short'. And yet, the speaker concedes,

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.

The observed phenomenon here, where adults lead 'uncertain children' and 'wheel / The rigid old along for them to feel / A final summer' is 'half an annual pleasure, half a rite' – only *half* a pleasure; importantly, the ritual is not carried out for enjoyment's sake only.

In 'Show Saturday' (CP: 199), although the day is 'Grey', 'cars jam the narrow lanes' to visit the country fair. The obscure specialist attractions; dogs, ponies, sheep, 'Cheviot and Blackface', the 'Chain Saw Competition'; each have their 'own keen crowd.' And 'There's more than just animals: / Bead-stalls, balloon men, a Bank; a beer-marquee ... a tent selling tweed, / and another, jackets.' The impression is that the speaker knows as little about these attractions as a reader would. The wrestling matches are the same; incomprehensible and seemingly pointless exercises where

...Two young men in acrobats' tights
And embroidered trunks hug each other; rock over the grass,
Stiff-legged, in a two-man scrum. One falls: they shake hands.
Two more start, one grey-haired: he wins though. They're not
so much fights
As long immobile strainings that end in unbalance
With one on his back, unharmed, while the other stands
Smoothing his hair. ...

The speaker's mystification is not made plain, but the reader is left to question why the older man in the second fight is able to win, why the loser is 'unharmed', and why the

final winner does not celebrate but instead merely smooths his hair in what seems to be the reflex action, not of a fighter, but of a regular Englishman.

But although the speaker does not disguise his incomprehension of the goings-on, and while he implies that the visitors and people taking part are equally mystified by their own actions, he does not overtly undermine the event. Among 'other talents' he lists the 'growing and making' commonly to be found at country fairs, the leeks, broad beans, cabbages, 'Four plain scones, four dropped scones', knitted caps and baskets, and describes them as 'pure excellences'. They are 'all worthy, all well done, / But less than the honeycombs.' This statement hints at the deeper respect for nature Longley suggests. The speaker, unsure of the reasoning behind the events, is in the same position as the ponies, which are 'dragged to and fro for / Bewildering requirements'. He sets himself against the Show Saturday clique who, once the show is over, return to their 'local lives':

To names on vans, and business calendars
Hung up in kitchens; back to loud occasions
In the Corn Exchange, to market days in bars.

There is undeniably a hint of derision here. But the poem's closing displays no such contempt:

Let it stay hidden there like strength, below
Sale-bills and swindling; something people do,
Not noticing how time's rolling smith-smoke
Shadows much greater gestures; something they share
That breaks ancestrally each year into
Regenerate union. Let it always be there.

In these two poems Larkin seems to be hinting, or hoping, that the nothingness which threatens us on an individual level can be kept at bay, or perhaps temporarily forgotten at least, if we concentrate on the regenerative power of societal ritual. The banal lives that the show-goers return to in 'Show Saturday' are ruled by commerce and capitalism, and yet the ritual of the show, not overtly understood by any of the people visiting it, is part of a culture which existed long before 'business calendars'. It seems to be presented as the saving grace of a nation, something shared, something common which lies below consciousness, hinting towards 'greater gestures.' But the 'pure excellences' also 'enclose / A recession of skills'; the politically inflected word hinting at the emptiness of the ritual. The wrestler in the poem is aware of the artifice of his actions.

Michael Schmidt, in *Lives of the Poets* (1999c), sees 'To the Sea' and 'Show Saturday' as poetically ineffective, stating that in them 'lift off' fails, there is 'no modulation of tone or deepening of seriousness', and the poems become 'vivid verse catalogues only'. The 'evocation of eternal', in this case, does not 'release their composite meanings.' (1999c: 948) But the failure in the poems is not poetic at all, but thematic. Ultimately ritual, while possibly sufficient to placate and soothe us, and to allow us to ignore the threat of death, is not enough; it is overridden by an atmosphere of artificiality and attenuated habit. This atmosphere is evident again in 'Dockery and Son' (CP: 152). The speaker visits his alma mater and is reminded of a fellow student named Dockery, whose son now attends the same university. The speaker works out that Dockery must have 'got' his son at nineteen or twenty, and at that age 'must have taken stock // Of what he wanted'. He cannot understand at first how Dockery was so 'Convinced' that 'he should be added to!' But

then the speaker realises that these 'innate assumptions' are not what are 'truest', nor are they what we 'most want to do' but:

...More a style
Our lives bring with them: habit for a while,
Suddenly they harden into all we've got

And how we got it; looked back on, they rear
Like sand-clouds, thick and close, embodying
For Dockery a son, for me nothing ...

The poem, then, spells out the pointlessness of ritual through the example of having children, for whether or not you take part in the ritual the end the result is the same; you die:

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.

'The Importance of Elsewhere' (*CP*: 104) substantiates this point, as the speaker remembers his time as an Englishman in Ireland, where as a foreigner he was not able to take part in the regenerative customs, circumscriptive customs and mere habits of his homeland. The 'difference' and 'strangeness' he felt in Ireland, however, 'made sense'; he enjoyed the separateness which allowed him to disengage himself. He admits that 'It would be much more serious to refuse' his own 'customs and establishments'; in England he has no valid 'excuse' for favouring apartness, and yet the pointlessness of ritual is proved by the fact that he felt more 'in touch' with the landscape of the strange land because of its absence.

'An Arundel Tomb' (*CP*: 110) indicates the hollowness of the ritual of love, and the necessity of that same ritual. The 'earl and countess', the subjects of the poem, lie in their tomb for hundreds of years and are visited by many generations of people. Thus the 'faithfulness in effigy' which was originally intended for their 'friends' is now viewed by strangers every day, who are 'Washing at their identity.' The couple's likenesses were merely supposed to 'prolong' the interest in their names, now the visiting eyes are wont 'To look, not read.' The original intention of the couple was to be remembered as individuals, as a part of history, but 'Time has transfigured them into / Untruth.' The chance 'stone fidelity' has become their only existence, and their only meaning. The poem's final lines declare that their 'stone fidelity' has come:

...to prove
Our almost-instinct almost true:
What will survive of us is love.

The lines allude to the human belief in the clichéd power of love; that love is one of life's ultimate experiences. And the modern visitors to the tomb read that inference into the symbolic setting of the couple. Thus, the symbol of love between the two *is* what has survived of them; their habits cannot be understood (they are 'vaguely shown / As jointed armour, stiffened pleat') and their stone faces are 'blurred' by time. However, it is the empty ritual of love, merely symbolic, which they did not intend to be remembered by at all, that remains of their identities. Therefore our 'almost-instinct' – that love will prevail, and is central to human life – is proved 'almost true' – because it seems to be confirmed by the statues, but is in fact disproved. Love is revealed as yet another misunderstood

ritual, carried out by people who have no real understanding of the original concept. However, those people are reassured by the myth nonetheless, and the poem almost undercuts itself by suggesting that the people viewing the tomb are rewarded and fulfilled for their misuse of the symbols presented to them. Here Larkin recognises that human hope continues to reside in love, false or deluded as such hope may be.

Andrew Swarbrick, in *Out of Reach: The Poetry of Philip Larkin* (1995), suggests that 'nothingness' is precisely what makes Larkin's poetry 'modern'; that one must view it as a quest for 'metaphysical absolutes, for states of being imagined ... beyond the reach of language ... ultimately concerned with existential questions of identity, choice and chance, isolation and communality'. (ibid.) Swarbrick believes that it is Larkin's preoccupation with death and yearning for annihilation which make his work 'more adventurous, challenging and provocatively "modern"' (ibid.) than has been acknowledged by either his critics or his admirers. But Larkin's preoccupation with death is more complex than the glib or simplistic 'yearning for annihilation' suggests.

'Unfinished Poem' (CP: 60), written in 1951 and uncollected during Larkin's career, suggests that Larkin's view of death is more than slightly ambiguous. In it the speaker, terrified, retreats to an attic room to escape Death's notice. In the speaker's mind, Death continues his business in the town below: '...down among the sunlit courts, yes, he was there, // Taking his rent; yes, I had only to look / To see the shape of his head and the shine of his book'. The speaker stays in his attic room 'day in, day out', lying on the bed and smoking, waiting for the day when he will be discovered, until one night he hears 'the feet' coming closer, 'the door swung inwards' and the poem ends:

Nothing like death stepped, nothing like death paused,
Nothing like death has such hair, arms so raised.
Why are your feet bare? Was not death to come?
Why is he not here? What summer have you broken from?

The figure which steps through the door seems unmistakably feminine; the emphasis on hair, arms, and bare feet denotes a certain vulnerability. It is uncertain whether the figure is indeed death, in a form unrecognisable to the speaker, or something entirely different. In the former case the point would surely be that no matter where you hide, death will come to you when it wishes; and that you cannot presume to know what death will be like. In the latter case, the figure is some kind of summery reminder of what there is in life apart from death. But in both cases the message seems to be, get out of the attic. It is pointless to live one's life in isolation for fear of a death that will inevitably find you; or, it is wasteful to spend life waiting for death, when life offers itself to be lived.

Larkin did not merely yearn to overcome death. He attempted to do so in a meaningful, thoughtful way, and struggled mindfully with the problem of irreligiosity. In 'Postmodernism and Postcolonialism in Larkin' Osborne argues that while Larkin is far from Postmodern stylistically, at an ideological level he uses 'his indecisiveness to decisively move British poetry beyond Modernism'. (2000a: 165) Larkin's poetry may be 'indecisive' as a mass, but his indecisiveness seems to be to the profit of a singular intention. Larkin had great faith in the facility of the most ordinary forms of language, in their variety of expression, to allow an investigation of the different perspectives of their readers. And although Larkin's focus on England fails to counter the nothingness which

accompanies his irreligiousness, his poetry demonstrates a faith in English which may do just that.

Part IV

Larkin's use of language

Larkin makes some groundbreaking observations about English society which are overlooked because of his ostensible thematic or stylistic conservatism. Similarly, the language of his poetry is not effusively 'romantic' or programmatically avant-garde. Nonetheless, his use of Englishes becomes a telling commentary on the social situation of the England of his day. Unfortunately Larkin's reputation often seems to precede him, and his subtly skilful use of language to achieve astutely intelligent ends is often disregarded.

'If, My Darling' (*CP*: 41) is a prime example of this, as many critics are eager to point out the misogyny in the poem, missing the degree of separation which Larkin cleverly sets up through language. The poem exemplifies Larkin's ability to use language to sketch the belief system of the society to which he belongs accurately and concisely, while concurrently highlighting the faults within that belief system. But the discussions of 'If, My Darling' by James Booth, in *Philip Larkin: Writer* (1992a), and Andrew Swarbrick place the poem on the masculine side of a male/female divide. Booth declares that the poem 'pits troubling female innocence against interesting male depravity' by means of 'stereotypes of post-war sexual folklore.' (1992a: 112) He compares the poem to Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954), where Jim Dixon is pestered by Margaret to get married and 'settle down'. Booth's analysis of the poem is interesting in that it places Larkin's

consciousness firmly within the social and political situation of post-war England, however he seems to misread or misrepresent the poem's central allegation.

Booth calls the primary setting of 'If, My Darling', '[*h*]er bourgeois myth of paradise' (ibid., my italics), 'the pathetic feminine vision of security ... brutally contradicted by an assertion of male restlessness and intellectual scepticism.' (1992a: 113) He states that her 'substantial and coherent illusion is corrected by his incoherent and dissatisfying reality.' (ibid.) Booth further states that the scene inside the speaker's head is 'designed as much to offend her as to refute her banal expectations'. (ibid.) In all of this Booth is placing the opinion of the male speaker against that of his female companion. But his argument falters when he considers the 'collapse' of the poem into 'desultory truculence and mixed metaphor.' (1992a: 114) Booth attempts to explain away the poem's uncertainty and lack of follow-through on its basic 'male-triumphalist intention' by stating

The poet has set out to launch a simple misogynistic attack on his darling's delusions; instead he has come near to launching a female attack on his own misogyny. The poem is less a masculine manifesto than an unresolved argument. (ibid.)

Swarbrick concurs. He speciously employs a biographical reading, citing Larkin's break-up with his fiancée Ruth Bowman to substantiate his belief that the poem's 'appeal to a misogynistic kind of male heartiness.' (1995: 45) In his discussion of the poem he describes how the 'polite Victorian drawing-room décor' which the woman is 'expecting to find' is explicitly non-existent. Thus Swarbrick too creates a male/female dichotomy of the poem. But, if biography is to be vacuously evoked, Larkin's much-respected and

very English father would equally have expected to find order and respectability within a young man's mind.

In his assertion that the poem resembles an 'unresolved argument' Booth hits closest to the mark, for it seems more likely that the poem is not about masculine intelligence and feminine deficiency, but the shortcomings and constrictiveness of social expectations. Booth complains that the speaker has no "truth" with which to refute' (1992a: 113) the woman's assumption. Booth and Swarbrick consider the poem's subsidence into meaninglessness 'far-fetched', 'contrived', 'forced'; 'muddled' and 'intemperate'. But this atmosphere imparts precisely the hopelessness of the situation in which the speaker finds himself. There is no hint in the poem that the situation involves gender, except perhaps for the final line: 'Might knock my darling off her unpriceable pivot', which parenthetically confounds both Booth and Swarbrick [Booth asks '(why "pivot"?)' (1992a: 114); Swarbrick's aside is '(would it not make more sense to have her knocked off a pedestal rather than pivot?)' (1995: 46)] Admittedly, this usage does suggest that the woman perhaps sees herself as central, the object around which the world turns. But even this does not explicitly condemn her for the situation the speaker finds himself in. The speaker finds himself all alone; his insights into society cannot be communicated. He cannot even express himself clearly verbally, as he himself has been socialised within the very society he loathes and cannot break through the linguistic barrier. The poem focuses on the most intimate of relationships, that of lovers, and demonstrates how they, paradoxically, are perhaps put under the most strain by societal conventions. In this, the word 'pivot' becomes interesting in another way, as its image of spinning or oscillation

suggests that the woman is sometimes facing the speaker, but is likely to swivel away and face away from him. Extended contact between the two of them is unreliable, seemingly through no fault of the woman's, as an object on a pivot cannot usually control its own swivelling. Larkin's use of the negative 'unpriceable' is telling here too, as the slight sarcasm detectable in the contrived construction should make the reader question to whom the pivot is unpriceable; likely not the speaker. The figures of the relationship are in a sense owned, their behaviour dictated by the pivot. Thus to be knocked off the pivot may be a positive concept, hence the oddly frivolous tone despite the violent implications of 'knocked off'.

Larkin is a poet of plain language who manages to create moments of remarkable complexity as well as surprising poeticism out of everyday words. This is partly due to pure talent. More often, however, Larkin achieves these effects by creating startling new words and phrases out of mundanity, as shall be seen. Booth quotes Seamus Heaney's observation in 'Englands of the mind', in *Preoccupations* (1980), that Larkin's voice is 'a stripped standard English voice' offering 'the bright senses of words worn clean in literate conversation' (in Booth, 2005b: 9), and Neil Powell's remarks in 'A Postcard from Pearson Park', in the *PN Review* (2004), that Larkin had the 'ability to know when a 40-watt word will be more telling than a 100-watt one'. (in Bradford, 2005b: 9) Larkin himself suggested, in 'The Pleasure Principle' (*RW*: 80-82) that poems are 'born of the tension between what [the poet] non-verbally feels and what can be got over in common word usage to someone who hasn't had his experience or education or travel grant'. (*RW*: 82) And he was very careful about the words he used. In an interview with Ian Hamilton

Larkin said of his novels 'I think they were over-sized poems. They were certainly written with intense care for detail. If one word was used on page 15 I didn't re-use it on page 115.' (in Tolley 1991: 28) The level of attention paid to the novels is intensified in his poetry.

In 'The Poetry of Hardy' (*RW*: 175-6), Larkin wrote

When I came to Hardy it was with the sense of relief that I didn't have to try and jack myself up to a concept of poetry that lay outside my own life – this is perhaps what I felt Yeats was trying to make me do. One could simply relapse back into one's own life and write from it. Hardy taught one to feel rather than to write ... and he taught one as well to have confidence in what one felt. (ibid.)

Larkin's 'Fiction and the Reading Public' (*CP*: 34) was published in 1954 but composed in 1949 and '50; it is one of his earliest satirical poems. In an interview with Dan Jacobson, he remarked that at the time he felt his poetry should have 'the right to be colloquial ... funny or flippant'. (in Tolley, 1991: 55) The poem is certainly that, bombarding the reader as it does with copious clichés. The 'reader' wraps up his outburst:

For I call the tune in this racket:
I pay your screw,
Write reviews and bull on the jacket –
So stop looking blue
And start serving up your sensations
Before it's too late;
Just please me for two generations –
You'll be 'truly great'.

Tolley writes that 'it was in the continuation of the use of a natural language for poetry, begun by the Modernists and developed by Auden and MacNeice and their

contemporaries, that Larkin showed his great originality, expanding the linguistic range of British poetry.' (1991: 151) He argues that the Larkin 'voice' constituted a 'continuation of the revolution in the language of poetry inaugurated by the great Modernists.' (ibid.) Tolley lists these qualities as 'the use of slang and colloquialism with a subtle (and serious) control of tone', 'the combination of demotic speech with lyricism', 'the masterly modulation of linguistic tone', and 'the careful use of fashion terms and other "in" phrases of everyday speech'. (ibid.)

Tolley writes that the first poem that showed evidence of Larkin's ability – echoed from Hardy – of creating an emotional response from an ordinary domestic scene is 'An April Sunday brings the snow' (*CP*: 21), written in 1948. Larkin wrote the poem after the death of his father, and it details the 'shifting' from cupboard to cupboard of the jam made by his father the previous summer. It ends:

Five loads – a hundred pounds or more –
More than enough for all next summer's teas,

Which now you will not sit and eat.
Behind the glass, under the cellophane,
Remains your final summer – sweet
And meaningless, and not to come again.

Tolley proposes that it is Larkin's 'directness' and 'firm evocation of detail' (1991: 49) in this poem that indicate his emotional engagement. 'Home is so Sad' (*CP*: 119) is a more concentrated example. The poem begins with a description of why 'Home is so sad';

...It stays as it was left,
Shaped by the comfort of the last to go
As if to win them back. Instead, bereft

Of anyone to please, it withers so ...

Larkin realises, however, towards the end of the poem that a direct description of the home is in fact equally, if not more, powerful:

... You can see how it was:
Look at the pictures and the cutlery.
The music in the piano stool. That vase.

The final sentence of the poem is perhaps the most intense example of the emotional response Larkin could create from seemingly insufficient raw material.

But Larkin's use of ordinary language is not always simply seen as an indication of his ability to create poetry out of banality. David Holbrook, in *Lost Bearings in English Poetry* (1977) argues that in 'The Whitsun Weddings' Larkin draws the people around him in caricature, and that 'the language of the poet himself is calculated at the same time to mark him apart'. (1977: 168) He continues

He alone is able to connect them in this way. This detachment, with its air of superiority, ... is an appeal from the half-educated to the half-educated ... This use of art to climb to a position from which one may give free reign to one's hatred of human being is, of course, the death of creativity – and this is the death of humanness too, since in such an atmosphere good feelings cannot survive. (ibid.)

Holbrook briefly discusses Kingsley Amis's work as 'sneeringly superior' (1977: 167), and while he concedes that Larkin's does not 'sneer ... continually and arrogantly' (ibid.), there is nonetheless a 'parallel cruelty'; 'a hostility under the surface'. (ibid.)

grinning and pomaded, girls

In parodies of fashion ...

While girls, gripping their handbags tighter, stared
At a religious wounding ...

Just long enough to settle hats and say
I nearly died ...

Holbrook states that here the clothing worn by the commuters is 'grotesque', and that their language is 'full of commonplace clichés'. (1977: 168) He suggests that in the last stanza of 'The Whitsun Weddings' Larkin is attempting to 'open his heart to others, or about others, in a "Dickensian" way', but that all he achieves is 'dead generalities'.

(1977: 169) Holbrook compares Larkin to Dickens unfavourably, as the latter is

able to elevate his unattractive, working class, commonplace creatures to the level of tragi-comedy: like us, they choose, act, live and die – they 'choose man' in Sartre's sense, and we are involved in their choice. Dickens does not merely caricature their grotesquenesses – he enjoys them, because he enjoys finding the gestures of joy and tragedy even in a 'low-life' characters. He sees them capable of 'peak moments' – perhaps even more capable than us ... tragic figures even though they 'don't know nothink'. (ibid.)

Holbrook is of the opinion that Dickens is able to write about his characters with affection and gravity, 'even when he is being funny' (1977: 170), because he shares a set of values with the reader. Larkin, on the other hand, cannot command this subtlety, according to Holbrook, because he 'does not know what values to share with his reader, and can find no flow of warmth between himself and us, or his subjects'. (1977: 171) He 'keeps himself at a puzzled distance from his wedding subjects' and 'seems clearly to be in a first-class compartment looking at second-class travellers' (ibid.) while also keeping

himself at a distance from his readers. Holbrook believes that Larkin's tone is 'knowing', and that its intelligence is of a kind that knows nothing of the world and human nature.

Holbrook quotes from the poem to support his argument:

And, as we moved, each face seemed to define
Just what it saw departing: children frowned
As something dull; fathers had never known

Success so huge and wholly farcical;
The women shared
The secret like a happy funeral ...

... Free at last
And loaded with the sum of all they saw ... (CP: 114)

Holbrook suggests that this last phrase proves that 'their view is different from his' (1977: 172), and that Larkin 'sees there ought to be a sense of the "power that being changed can give"; but *he* is not changed, since he holds the whole train load at such arm's length. They *none of them*, thought of the others: he had to do it – he had to unite them all with his thoughts.' (ibid.) Holbrook concludes that ultimately this 'frail travelling coincidence' meant nothing to Larkin, and that in the end he fails to feel anything: 'as throughout the *New Lines* movement, what one is left with is a feeling of impotence ... cool detachment, without passion.' (ibid.) 'The Whitsun Weddings', he says, 'not only displays the educated writer cut off from the people, but a man whose perceptions, curiosities and versifications cannot be creative'. (1977: 174) But this assertion could not be more wrong.

Ordinary life, ordinary speech

Larkin's use of cliché has been recognised variously by critics. Swarbrick has noted 'the tendency of the poems to capture attitudes and social location in a representative cliché.' (1995: 21) JR Watson, in 'Clichés and Common Speech in Philip Larkin's Poetry' (*Critical Survey*, 1989), compares Larkin's use of cliché to that of photographs in the media. He states that in the same way that a newspaper offers images of the everyday world with photographs, captions, and commentaries, 'Larkin's poems similarly take the clichés of ordinary life and ordinary speech, and notice them, wryly, with his own version of the editorial caption.' (in Leggett, 1999b: 169) However, it is Leggett's impression which is perhaps most interesting. He notes that the use of common language in a poem serves to establish the 'reality' of the poem. Thus the cliché is 'perceived as a source of the "authenticity"', as 'the "reality" of the everyday world is no more or less than the language ordinarily used to evoke it.' (1999b: 21) It is possible to argue further that Larkin used language to interrogate the social meaning of speech, and through exploring his own position in relation to other people in his poetry, he forces readers to re-examine their own social perspectives.

Leggett invokes Riffaterre's 'sociolect': 'a repository of the myths, traditions, ideological and esthetic stereotypes, commonplaces, and themes harbored by a society, a class or a social group'. (in Leggett, 1999b: 161) Leggett suggests that we do not read cliché-based poems such as 'Next, Please' (*CP*: 52) or 'Wires' (*CP*: 48) in relation to an external

reality, but, because the poems' arguments rely on everyday language, we read them in terms of the sociolect.

To replace a common underlying mythology with the sociolect is not something Larkin would have admitted as applicable to his own work. In his interview with the *Paris Review* in 1982 he was asked about statements he made in 1955, about archetypes and myth, in which he said that he had:

no belief in 'tradition' or a common myth-kitty ... To me the whole of the ancient world, the whole of classical and biblical mythology means very little, and I think that using them today not only fills poems full of dead spots, but dodges the writer's duty to be original. (*RW*: 79)

He adds to this in his reply, stating that 'writers should work for the effects they want to produce, and not wheel out stale old Wardour Street lay figures.' (*RW*: 70) Of course Larkin did not take into account the idea that the cliché can create the same kind of atmosphere that mythology creates, in which case he was making use of his contemporary English equivalent of the 'myth-kitty', while at the same time undermining mythic tradition.

Leggett broadens his observation of Larkin's use of cliché by examining the way in which specific poems lull the reader into a false sense of familiarity. 'Next, Please' (*CP*: 52) opens by lamenting how 'we' often pick up bad habits in life, specifically the habit of expectancy, which causes us to anticipate happiness in life instead of realising that the only certainty is death:

Always too eager for the future, we
Pick up bad habits of expectancy.
Something is always approaching every day
Till then we say,

Watching from a bluff the tiny, clear,
Sparkling armada of promises draw near.

We expect each ship to land, but none do:

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.

As Leggett asks, 'Why is expectation a bad habit, and why is it better to dwell on the certainty of eternal extinction than on the possibility of happiness?' (1999: 165) Put like this, it would seem he has a good point. But the reader is tricked into accepting the nihilistic philosophy of the poem precisely because of that which Larkin professed to abhor, the myth-kitty, in this case Riffaterre's 'sociolect'. This is what makes us recoil from 'bad habits' without questioning whether they are really bad at all. The familiarity of phrases such as 'next, please', or 'till then' means that we do not question the use of 'we'; the cliché makes us identify with the guilty party and the crime, and thus are we astounded by the truth of the poem. As Leggett points out, 'we accept it as legitimate without looking at it too carefully.' (ibid.)

A similar force is at work in 'Wires' (CP: 48), a poem describing the eagerness of 'young steers' to seek 'purer water' on the other side of electric fences, the – both literal and

figurative – shock of which creates ‘old cattle from that day’, as the animals cease their search for happiness. Knowledge of the cliché ‘the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence’ is almost crucial to a basic understanding of this poem, although, as Leggett concedes, such a reading is limited.

Leggett links ‘Next, Please’ and ‘Wires’ with ‘The Building’ and ‘Going’, in that all four ‘deliberately and almost perversely ... withhold the one word that gives every line its significance’. (1999: 168) The latter two involve, respectively, a hospital and somebody’s ‘dying day’ (the poem’s original title); the former two, the phrases ‘when my ship comes in’ and ‘the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence’. The fact that the latter is commonly shortened to ‘the grass is always greener’ is, as Leggett suggests, an indicator of how the poem assumes that the phrase is universally shared. This assumed universality, which creates the poem’s foundation, is all the more powerful because it goes unacknowledged.

The fact that these poems operate as riddles, and utilise language which can be described as banal, accounts for their perceived appeal to the ‘common reader’. Swarbrick writes, in his discussion of *The Whitsun Weddings* in *Out of Reach*, that by ‘trading on the familiar, Larkin can seem to speak for the common man’ (1995: 121). But he admits, too, that Larkin’s position in this situation was at one remove, that Larkin was ‘always the voyeur, observing from the window of his railway carriage’. (1995: 121) Barbara Everett questions Larkin’s link to ‘ordinary people’, stating that ‘people who read poetry are never ordinary people’. (in Leggett, 1999b: 170) Thus Larkin’s relationship with his

audience is undeniably, in the words of Everett, 'complex and ironic'. (ibid.)

In the forward to Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984), Jochen Schulte-Sasse describes Renato Poggioli's 1968 study of the same name, and finds it wanting, as it sets out to define the historically specific avant-garde of the 1920s with criteria which are, ultimately, 'historically and theoretically too unspecific'. (1984: x) Although this historical vagueness may be inadequate for Schulte-Sasse's requirements, Poggioli's definition of the avant-garde is interesting with regard to Larkin. Poggioli, according to Schulte-Sasse, makes a distinction between the 'commercialization and dequalification [sic] of language on the one hand and the "avant-garde's" scepticism towards language on the other.' (1984: viii) This is linked to the 'dichotomy between conventional, clichéd language, and experimental linguistic forms that dislodge those clichés.' (ibid.) Larkin's use of cliché makes him an interesting poet to consider with respect to this idea. It is undeniable that he uses the conventional clichéd language, which seems to go against avant-garde sensibilities. However, it could also be said that his use of the cliché revitalises the perception of an audience who have become accustomed to avant-garde modes of language. Leggett compares Larkin's use of cliché to the same aspect of popular music, and states that one of the effects of popular music lyrics 'is to "defamiliarize" the language of everyday, or to bring the listener's attention to the language itself, or to transform to poetry the stale and familiar.' (1999: 20) It is possible to suggest that Larkin's poetry is deeply sceptical towards language and what it stands for, and that his scepticism is made most apparent through his use of clichéd or banal language, which he places into a poetic context, thereby redeeming its value from the

tawdry nature of everyday worth.

In 'Church Going' (*CP*: 97) the use of everyday phrases at the beginning of the poem creates an atmosphere of ordinariness. The speaker visits a church hoping, perhaps, to discover some kind of meaningful connection, only to 'Reflect the place was not worth stopping for.' The position of the speaker is presented in the first stanza as someone ignorant of church buildings, and by implication ignorant, or even dismissive, of religion, with 'little books; sprawlings of flowers ... brownish / now; some brass and stuff / Up at the holy end'. What is especially interesting here is that the last phrase posits the speaker as someone unqualified to comment on religious issues. Towards the end of the poem, however, it becomes patently clear that the speaker is familiar with religious philosophy, as he questions his own strange attraction to holy places, and draws from this attraction the idea of a common human consciousness. The final stanza is constructed from much more formal language, the atmosphere of which overwhelms the ordinariness of the opening stanzas.

In 'Church Going', it is difficult to spot the moment where the speaker alters his discourse. However, in 'Mr Bleaney' and 'The Whitsun Weddings', the differences of position between reader, speaker, and poet are more obvious, and demonstrate the different perspectives language can create.

Similarly to 'Church Going', 'Mr Bleaney' (*CP*: 102) uses clichéd or banal language to set a persona up as 'ordinary', only to interrogate the ordinariness. Mr Bleaney's banal

existence is echoed in his former landlady's conversation; he 'stayed / The whole time he was at the Bodies', took her 'bit of garden properly in hand', and knew 'Frinton folk' who 'put him up for summer holidays'. That Bleaney took his vacation at the same (clichéd) holiday destination each year, and tolerated the landlady's incessant television, indeed 'egged her on' to buy it, suggests that he was himself a dull and one-dimensional mind. We are lulled into believing this through Larkin's use of cliché, which encourages us to see ourselves as more contemplative human beings than he. Larkin then reveals our premature preconceptions, as he wonders to himself whether Bleaney

... 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 ...

What is perhaps especially interesting to note here is Everett's notion that 'people who read poetry are never ordinary people', as this makes the reader extraordinary, and Larkin doubly so, in a positive way. We tend to distance ourselves from the negative depiction of Bleaney, only to be presented, at the end of the poem, with the notion that 'how we live measures our own nature', a disturbing thought if one considers how Larkin himself lived – that is, very much like Bleaney. Thus our conception of the banal is drawn upon and then dismantled in the space of seven stanzas. The bookless world of saucer-souvenir ashtrays and insufficiently long curtains is, as an informed reader of Larkin will know, the very world of the poet being read, the man being admired for fine verse occupies the same space as Bleaney, and the reader is left unsure of whose position is more familiar.

This use of cliché is perhaps slightly unusual, as both the poet and reader are simultaneously distanced from and implicated in the reality represented by the cliché. In 'The Whitsun Weddings' (*CP*: 114), however, Swarbrick's notion that Larkin's position was at one remove, that he was 'always the voyeur observing from the window of his railway carriage' (1995: 121), is more obvious. In this poem the speaker is at a distance from the newlyweds he observes, not only physically but also socially and intellectually. Physically, the speaker is in an interesting position. Both he and the couples are aboard the train, separate from the families and friends bidding farewell from the platform. This relationship is exemplified by the repeated 'we', used first to define those aboard the train in opposition to those on the platform, and which comes to define those affected by the weddings (the speaker included, though he is affected differently to the married couples themselves) and those not directly affected.

However, the speaker's relationship to the newlyweds is also split intellectually, as while they did not think '...of the others they would never meet / Or how their lives would all contain this hour', this thought clearly does occupy the speaker's mind. This split in the relationship of those on the train is made clear by the use of cliché in the penultimate stanza, '*I nearly died*', which serves to create a second degree of separation between the persona of the poem and the other passengers. In an interview with Melvyn Bragg, quoted by Bradford, Larkin recollects the train journey which inspired the poem: 'you hurtle on, you felt the whole thing was being aimed like a bullet – at the heart of things you know. All this fresh, open life. Incredible experience. I've never forgotten it'. (in Booth, 2005a: 157) Although the poem seems to suggest that the newlyweds are aware of

their new, different status, they do not seem to be aware of the 'Travelling coincidence' or that it is an 'incredible experience'. The use of cliché in this poem, however, makes it clear that only the speaker is truly aware of the feeling of being aimed 'at the heart of things you know'. Thus the banality of human existence, which cannot recognise common experience even when it rides with it on a train, is linked to the banality of language. By using a cliché here Larkin seems to be interrogating everyday reality, and in this poem it is patently obvious that the perspective of the speaker is not from within that reality.

A similar distance is written into a later poem, 'Posterity' (CP: 170), written in 1968 and published in *High Windows*. Here, Larkin's life and work are under the scrutiny of an American biographer Jake Balokowsky, a man whose priorities lie with earning money and working on 'Protest Theater'. His involvement in consumer culture is signified by the Coke dispenser, symbol of capitalism and instant gratification. His use of familiar phrases like 'on the skids', 'textbook stuff' and 'out of kicks', and even of hackneyed gestures: 'he makes the money sign', signal that he is part of a new reality, one with concerns wildly different to those of Larkin as an English poet of the 1950s and '60s.

It is Larkin's use of cliché, then, which places the reader, almost unconsciously, into – and in opposition to – a particular context. Larkin seems to use cliché in the same way that Osborne believes he uses literary allusion, 'like an underground river that shapes the surface vegetation whilst remaining unhidden.' (2000a: 150) From this concealed position Larkin uses linguistic experimentation to place himself, unobtrusively, as deeply

sceptical towards the structure of society, and the place of language within that structure, but he also relies on language to create the societies he is concerned with. His poetry does not, in any way, support Poggioli's suggestion that conventional, clichéd language disqualifies itself, for through his linguistic depiction of the banal Larkin revitalises and defamiliarises the stale and familiar, an attempt which perhaps goes some way to dislodging the very cliché used.

In his chapter on Edward Thomas, Gervais speaks about Tony Harrison's use of Northern dialect; a 'local language' which would seem to nullify general notions of 'Englishness'. But, as Gervais points out, 'what other way is there to affirm that English poetry *is* "English", not just "written in English"?' (1993: 29) Larkin asserts his poetry's Englishness by means of his subject matter; his reference to English rituals and the English landscape. But his rejection of English faith exacerbates his preoccupation with death, and highlights his inability to counter this fear in a meaningful way. Colloquial, often clichéd forms of English, while seemingly flippant or superficial, allow him to do just that. His use of language recreates the half-dismantled or outmoded systems of ritual and myth, and his faith in the language can be seen as the aspect of English society which could fill the lacuna created by agnosticism.

Conclusion

Larkin's enduring influence

David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2003)⁷ is an interesting fictional construction of the world Larkin created in his poetry, and the world his correspondence showed him to be fearful of. The novel is divided into eleven stories, concerning six main characters. The narratives are arranged in what has been dubbed a Matryoshka doll pattern⁸, as each of the six characters begins his or her story, before being interrupted by the next. The story that forms the central part of the book is followed by the ends of these stories in reverse. Each main character has a comet-shaped birthmark, and certain characters share memories, the implication being that all share a soul or spiritual connection.

Each of the stories takes place in a different time, beginning in the nineteenth century and ending in a post-apocalyptic society, and each story parodies the major anxieties of its age. The story that is interesting in the context of this essay is 'The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish', which is replete with Larkinesque details.

Timothy Cavendish is the editor of a vanity publishing house in London in the 1980s who is forced to flee to Hull to escape the thuggish family of one of his authors. He travels by train to what he believes is a hotel, where he will stay at his brother's expense. The hotel

⁷ Shortlisted for the 1994 Booker Prize. Mitchell is the author of *Ghostwritten* (1999) and the Booker-shortlisted *number9dream* (2001).

⁸ The narrative structure is likened to the arrangement of Russian dolls by AS Byatt in her review of *Cloud Atlas* in the *Guardian* ('Overlapping lives', 2004).

turns out to be a rest-home, which he believes to be a practical joke on his brother's part. Unfortunately, Cavendish's brother dies shortly afterwards, and he is trapped at the rest-home by its sinisterly efficient staff, who refuse to believe his story.

For someone familiar with his work, there are a number of obvious references to Larkin. Cavendish comes across a former lover, and spies on her and her children and grandchildren through the window of her home, which is named 'Dockery House' (2003: 165). The hotel he stays in on his way to the rest home is described pointedly as having 'high windows' (2003: 168). He refers in passing to an old acquaintance, Jake Balokowsky. In a nod to 'Dockery and Son', he eats an unappetising pie at a train station in Adlestrop, the place represented in the well-known Edward Thomas poem of the same name, which has been compared to Larkin's 'I Remember, I Remember' (*CP*: 81)⁹. Then, in the most obvious allusion, he tells a Rastafarian he meets in the station's public toilets that the purpose of his journey is to travel to Hull: 'To return a novel. To a librarian who works there. A very famous poet. At the university.' (2003: 172) The Rastafarian offers him a draw on his 'cigar', which turns out to contain marijuana, and during the sequence that follows Cavendish declares, 'My head enlarged itself by a magnitude of many hundreds, *Alice*-style' (*ibid.*), in an episode reminiscent of the opening lines of 'If, My Darling' (*CP*: 41):

If my darling were once to decide
Not to stop at my eyes,
But to jump, like Alice, with floating skirt into my head ...

⁹ In 'Adlestrop' (1994b: 66) the speaker recollects how the express train he was on once stopped there, 'unwontedly'. The town seems deserted, but is 'still and lonely fair'. The poem ends with an image of birdsong, connecting this village to other towns. The fortuitous stop at a surprisingly affecting town in Mitchell's novel has different consequences, but the link between the two is telling.

and the nightmare world that follows in the poem is echoed in the unfolding narrative of the novel. When Cavendish reaches what he believes to be the safety of the hotel, his final words before falling asleep are 'In the morning life would begin afresh, afresh, afresh.' (2003: 175) The next day, after he has discovered that he is being held captive in a rest-home, and during his first – unsuccessful – escape attempt, he comes across the groundsman 'removing the remains of a hedgehog from [a lawnmower's] blades with his bloody hands' (2003: 179), which echoes Larkin's 'The Mower' (CP: 214), in which a hedgehog is killed by a lawnmower¹⁰. 'The Mower', however, concludes with a sentimentality not frequent in Larkin's work:

...we should be careful

Of each other, we should be kind
While there is still time.

The disjunction in sentiment between Mitchell's Larkinesque representation and that of the original poem suggests that he has exaggerated Larkin's world for the purposes of parody. It is unsurprising, therefore, that there is less kindness than cruelty in Mitchell's reconstruction. After all, one of the most hateful occupants of the rest-home, and head of the Residents' Committee, is named Gordon Warlock-Williams, the man who in Larkin's 'Vers de Société' (CP: 181) invites the disenchanted speaker to join him and his wife and 'a crowd of craps' for dinner. Disenchantment in Larkin becomes abject terror in Mitchell.

¹⁰ A poeticised account of a real event. In June 1979 Larkin wrote to his friend Judy Egerton 'killed a hedgehog when mowing the lawn, by accident of course. It upset me rather.' (in 2005b: 251)

These allusions are worthy of an essay of their own, as they offer much in the way of possible analysis. But what is perhaps most pertinent in this paper is the atmosphere of the piece. It seems that Mitchell has deliberately created the world of which Larkin was terrified. He does so as if to point out the absurdity of Larkin's fears, as Cavendish is trapped in a rest-home with patients seemingly directly lifted from 'The Old Fools' (*CP*: 196), and treated, literally, like children. After his abortive escape attempt Cavendish experiences Larkin's 'hideous inverted childhood' (*CP*: 197) taken to its logical conclusion in his confrontation with the groundsman:

In one powerful yank my trousers were pulled from my waist – was he going to bugger me? What he did was even less pleasant. He laid me on the body of his mowing machine, pinned me down with one hand, and caned me with a bamboo cane in the other. (179)

Disturbing as such events may be, the 'Cavendish' narrative remains lighter in tone than Larkin's poetry. This may be because Mitchell, in exaggerating Larkinesque anxieties, also trivialises them. Mitchell's portrait of contemporary England is nevertheless fascinating in terms of its relationship to the England contemporary to Larkin. For instance, Cavendish travels in a taxi driven by a man in a turban, who complains:

'Always they say, "Bet it ain't this cold where you come from, eh?" and always I say, "Dead wrong, mate. You've obviously never visited Manchester in February.'" (2003: 173)

Thus the threatened national identity that lies latent in Larkin's poetry, and that of the Movement, is confirmed, and yet undercut: here is a 'foreigner' who considers himself an Englishman. Moreover, there is evidence of 'foreignness' in his speech; but it is also undeniably idiomatic English. Thus Mitchell shows how modern English life is intensely

more complex than life in Larkin's time, with the boundaries between classes and nationalities blurred beyond categorisation, and yet English is none the worse. Although Larkin frequently used humour to undercut his own fears, Mitchell's brand of humour is an indication of how the worries of Larkin's generation would not unnerve a contemporary reader.

The world that Mitchell creates borders on the absurd, while for the poets of Larkin's era it was too soon after the breakdown of what were considered the central aspects of Englishness for such absurdity to be acceptable. Even for Larkin, the habits of Englishness were to be respected, an aspect of his work which is often overlooked.

Charles Tomlinson's essay 'Poetry Today' (in *The Pelican Guide to English Literature*, 1969), which was written in 1961, remarks that Larkin's work, in *The Less Deceived*, 'shows real promise ... and some pleasant accomplishment' (1969: 471), but wonders whether Larkin's 'tenderly nursed sense of defeat can take him any further'. (ibid.) He declares that Larkin's 'subject matter is largely his own inadequacy' (ibid.) and states that 'a movement in which he is the star performer can scarcely be thought of as having the energy to affect the ultimate destinies of English poetry.' (1969: 472) But Larkin's defeatism conceals a deep-set faith in the value of cultural ritual.

GS Fraser calls Larkin's 'Church Going' ('the Movement's prize poem') 'an agnostic's reluctant recognition of what the Church has meant.' (1972b: 348). Fraser astutely apprehends Larkin's ability to see through the conventions of his age. Larkin fully

understands that they have made him miserable, but recognises that ritual, rite or social custom need to be acknowledged.

In 'The Explosion' (CP: 175) 'reluctant recognition' of ritual is demonstrated. The poem describes a group of coalminers, 'men in pitboots / Coughing oath-edged talk and pipe-smoke', who discover 'a nest of lark's eggs' on their way to work, admire them, and leave them 'in the grasses'. The men are later killed in an explosion in the mine. The next stanza reads:

*The dead go on before us, they
Are sitting in God's house in comfort,
We shall see them face to face –*

Plain as lettering in the chapels
It was said, and for a second
Wives saw men of the explosion

Larger than in life they managed –

This highly ritualised language, then, allows the wives a final glimpse of their husbands, and as the poem ends the positive impact of this language is revealed, in the image of the dead men 'walking / Somehow from the sun towards them, // One showing the eggs unbroken.' The biblical declaration, however, does not affect the people in the poem because of their faith; the crucial point is that it is once 'It was said' that its power is revealed – and this only 'for a second'.

Fraser, in *The Modern Writer and His World*, mentions an astute point made by Lytton Strachey about Hardy, which can equally be applied to Larkin. Fraser affirms that the

'central technical paradox' (1972b: 257) in Hardy's work is the 'paradox of expressive clumsiness'. (ibid.) Strachey believes that Hardy's poetry is clumsy, prosaic and even ugly, and that in many of his poetic arrangements he is 'incorrect; but then how unreal and artificial a thing is correctness. He fumbles; but it is that very fumbling that brings him so near to ourselves.' (ibid.) Larkin's work is beset with clichéd language, and yet it is that vulgarity of language which conveys precisely his perception of the world. 'The Explosion' exemplifies this, as the key phrase – 'it was said' – is a cliché, and yet offers a sublime image to the wives of the deceased. It is important to note, however, that Larkin distances himself from the subjects of this poem. The phrase 'It was said' can also be read as a kind of storytelling device through which the events in the poem become true, not for Larkin or the speaker, perhaps, and possibly not for the reader, but for those willing to accept the possibility. Larkin is thus willing to acknowledge the potential influence of ritual, and yet, in Fraser's words, remains a 'reluctant agnostic' himself. Schmidt believes that Larkin's 'attempt to celebrate social customs and rites is hampered by his temperament'. (1999c: 949) This may be true, but it is also true that Larkin does not disregard the temperaments of his fellow Englishmen.

Larkin's position on the timeline of English letters is an important milestone regardless of the lack of 'weightiness' in his work. For him, a lack of belief was an almost insurmountable poetic problem. His sceptical stance in relation to ritual, habit and tradition, and his rejection of organised politics in favour of a more nuanced social awareness, merely emphasises the isolation of the non-believer. As a binding force the language he uses in his work exemplifies Englishness, in all its incarnations, and with all

its contradictions. Whether he was attempting to overcome the nothingness he confronted through the rituals he evoked, or to expose the emptiness of social rituals in an age without faith, Larkin ultimately diverged from that poetic path and created a powerful secular mythology through his use of language. The lines from 'Talking in Bed' (*CP*: 129), which describes this 'emblem of two people being honest', encapsulate Larkin's work in miniature.

... Nothing shows why
At this unique distance from isolation

It becomes still more difficult to find
Words at once true and kind,
Or not untrue and not unkind.

Larkin craved isolation, and yet when he was alone fears of death and annihilation plagued him. When alone, however, as the poem suggests, it is easier to 'find words' which express a positive truth. When at a 'distance from isolation', in the society of anyone else, such language, or even a non-offending neutral language, is 'difficult to find'. The subtle wording of the phrase, 'It becomes still more difficult to find', however, significantly indicates that the search is a worthy one, and that the speaker is intent on completing it. Larkin undeniably reveals and intensifies the divisions within English society, and yet these divisions are overpowered by his recourse to a poetics both elegant and demotic. Larkin's respect for English custom and common English language, however uncertain, are reflected by the fact that his popular appeal was greater than any of his peers, and that he remains one of the most admired English poets of modern times.

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