

THE COLLECTED POETRY OF PHILIP LARKIN
1945 - 1974

by

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CORRECTIONS

- p. 2 'my bed' (Poem XVII)
p.13 'subtlety' (line 17)
p.23 'dactyl' (line 12)
p.24 'to love' (Poem XXXII)
p.31 'poems' (line 1)
p.56 aspects 'are' (line 5)
p.105 'is' (line 17)

INSERTIONS

- p.40 add 'has' a loveless ... (line 22)

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Winifred Alice Thomson

ABSTRACT

In this dissertation poems of Philip Larkin's four published collected volumes of poetry will be discussed and analysed. Larkin's work first attracted serious critical attention with the publication of his second volume of poetry, The Less Deceived in 1955. The first volume, The North Ship, had until then attracted scant attention, but with The Less Deceived, both volumes caused Larkin to be regarded as a major poetical voice of the post war era. By his own admission, Larkin's chief earliest influence was W.B. Yeats and for this reason, having declared the 'Celtic fever abated', and accepted Thomas Hardy as his mentor, these poems are no longer regarded as 'characteristic' of Larkin.

Larkin was identified with other writers of the period, a group collectively known as 'The Movement'. These writers who had emerged after the Second World War seemed to express a quality of determined 'Englishness' which appeared to resist any foreign influences; posited strong anti-Modernist views and wished to make itself accessible in its deliberate anti-Intellectualism. While much of the poetry in The Less Deceived seemed to satisfy these norms, critics overlooked any hints of Symbolism or Abstract ideas in Larkin's work.

Few complete, individual studies of Larkin's poetry exist, although criticism of his work appears in several collections of critical essays and in literary periodicals. The most

recent study is by Andrew Motion in the Methuen Contemporary Writers series and this posits a Symbolist aspect which, despite Larkin's disclaimers seems to be present. In The North Ship the hints of Symbolism may have been due to the Yeatsian influence, but in later work, hints of Symbolism have persisted and may be detected.

The two later volumes, The Whitsun Weddings (1964) and High Windows (1974) have established Larkin's reputation as a leading contemporary English poet whose poetry captures 'a whole style of life in mid-twentieth-century British Society'.¹ In both these collections, there are elements that still would cause Larkin to be considered as a 'Movement' poet. At the same time, however, the transcendent qualities which point to the inherent complexity in his work are more obvious. The variety of registers which characterizes his poetry makes it at once accessible and abstract, again indicating the fascination this poetry has for a wide poetry-reading public.

The chapters of this dissertation are discrete, each dealing with one of the four collected volumes in an attempt to trace themes and changes of style. His two novels, Jill (1946) and A Girl in Winter (1947) do not constitute a major aspect of this study, but where useful indications of themes or preoccupations occur, these are mentioned. Similarly, Larkin's not inconsiderable body of critical writing, including All What Jazz : A Record Diary 1961 - 68 (1970) provide insights into, and confirmation of, views expressed in this dissertation.

A privately-printed volume of poems, XX Poems appeared in 1951; thirteen of these poems were reprinted in The Less Deceived and, where appropriate, some are discussed in Chapter II. Since some of the poems of The Less Deceived, The North Ship and XX Poems are not easily available, and in order to facilitate reading of my interpretation of these poems, copies have been included following the notes.

In the dissertation, the volumes of poetry are referred to as follows:

TNS : The North Ship

TLD : The Less Deceived

TWW : The Whitsun Weddings

HW : High Windows

1. P.R. King: Nine Contemporary Poets : A Critical Introduction (London: Methuen University Paperbacks 1979) p.41

CHAPTER I

In his introduction to the 1966 re-issue of The North Ship, Philip Larkin humorously and somewhat self-deprecatingly comments:

Looking back, I find in the poems not one abandoned self, but several - the ex-schoolboy for whom Auden was the only alternative to 'old-fashioned' poetry; the undergraduate whose work a friend affably characterised as 'Dylan Thomas, but you've a sentimentality that's all your own'; and the immediate post-Oxford self, isolated in Shropshire with a complete Yeats stolen from the local girls' school. 1

In acknowledging his own immaturity as well as the shortcomings of his early poetry, Larkin nevertheless does not disown these poems. They reveal, not only the shaping influences and the 'several abandoned selves', but also show signs of the poet he was to become. In an interview with Ian Hamilton he says:

A very crude difference between novels and poetry is that novels are about other people and poetry is about yourself. 2

Critics object that the poems are too obviously derivative, that they are coloured too evidently by the tones and preoccupations of Yeats's poetry at the turn of the century. An anonymous contemporary critic wrote of The Wind Among the Reeds:

'It is an inhuman beauty, a haunting of something remote which the poet himself only feels, but cannot trace to its source ... It is when he is obeying the dictates of an emotion, a sentiment as insubstantial and uncapturable as a gust of the night that he achieves this most delicate evanescent charm.'³

Some of the same 'inhuman beauty' and the sense of a 'haunting of something remote which the poet only feels' are conveyed in the poems of The North Ship in lines like:

If hands could free you, heart,
Where would you fly? (Poem XXIII)

or

To write one song, I said
As sad as the sad wind
That walks around my bed ... (Poem XVII)

or

For the heart to be loveless, and as
cold as these [clouds] (Poem IV 'Dawn')

and Who can confront
The instantaneous grief of being alone? (Poem VI)

The poems are self-regarding and melodramatic having qualities which Andrew Motion describes as 'uninventive romanticism'.⁴
He criticises these poems further for their 'languorously

drooping' rhythms. It must, however, be remembered that The North Ship was published in 1945 when Larkin was twenty-three. Elizabeth Jennings's more generous comment:

'It is good to know Larkin could write so well when still so young.' 5

shows just recognition of the poet who is now regarded as one of the finest in England. It is worth emphasizing that The North Ship is the work of a young poet, who in finding a poetic voice and discovering his métier, mirrors the influence which shaped his poetic sensibility while simultaneously struggling to arrive at his poetic identity.

Alan Brownjohn comments:

In fact, the impression left by The North Ship is that of a poet struggling sensitively - with unambitious technical care rather than verbal energy or stamina - to pit some private experiences of exhilaration and release, or some recurrent images of purity and vitality in nature, against the dullness of ordinary, solitary existence and the prevailing sense of death; so the later Larkin is there, though writ very small. 6

For reasons to be shown later, Poem I, 'All Catches Alight', may be considered at this point autonomously. It is a poem about spring and it shows aspects of Larkin's talent which appear in his more mature work while, at the same time evincing, in its structure, marked influences of his mentors. The refrain, for example, is a device which may have been borrowed from Yeats. Counteracting the exuberance expressed

in the four eight-line stanzas, this refrain, 'A drum taps : a wintry drum' foreshadows the realism, the near cynical anti-romanticism of Larkin's poetry.

The first stanza, couched in a single sentence, has an echo (conscious or not) of Gerard Manley Hopkins in 'God's Grandeur.'⁷

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness like the ooze of oil ...
Crushed ...

or in 'Spring'

Nothing is so beautiful as Spring -
When Weeds, in Wheels, shoot long and lovely and lush;...
...With richness; the racing lambs too have fair their fling.⁸

Then the refrain with its staccato rhythm interrupts,

∨ / / || ∨ / ∨ /
A drum taps: || a wintry drum.

Three iambs, plus an extra, medial stress, give to this line the mimetic accuracy of a drum tap. It is probable that Philip Larkin's consuming passion for jazz and his adolescent desire to be a drummer guided him in the accurate distinction between a drum roll and a drum tap.⁹

The single sentence of the second stanza, is shaped with the same verbal convergence as the first. The final clause, in apposition to the ideas expressed in the preceding six lines, summarises the action and implies the metaphor of a whirlpool or eddy with 'all' running 'back to the whole'. As with the 'Catching alight' of the previous stanza, all is 'gathered' up in the repeated cycles of nature. Universal categories of nature are conveyed by the use of singular nouns without articles:

Gull, grass ^{and} girl / In air, earth and bed

In this way all the created order of nature is suggested.

The poem then expands to include the 'resurrected', and although there is no indication that these are references to Easter or to any specific religious belief, the Spring rebirth tradition is clearly implied. Within each stanza there is no regular metrical pattern in the rhythm, but it moves forward with unrestrained swiftness until suddenly the joy and exuberance of the words and their propulsion are negated and checked by the reminder of the refrain. With its final, abrupt rhythm, it provides a chilly, sobering contrast to the unrestrained theme and tenor of the stanza it concludes.

In the third stanza, the movement of the ideas expands outwards and there is a sense of the divergence which embraces all life. Three rhetorical questions follow one another.

While having no immediate interconnection, the beasts, the ploughmen and the lovers in the questions follow the pattern established in earlier stanzas: the figuring forth of universal creation, the animate, the non-animate and the human. Most important are the lovers (implied and foreshadowed by the girl/bed connection in the second stanza). The creatures do not stop or even hesitate in their pursuits; no obstacles, concrete or philosophical, can halt their progress. At the end of the stanza, however, the reader is constrained to stop and consider, for a third time, the implications of the refrain. As always with a refrain, the repetition increases the effectiveness of its message and simultaneously renews in the reader a sense of anticipation. So, here, the reader is dramatically reminded yet again of the inevitability of death.

In the first three stanzas the poet has spoken of Spring occurring in the world and the references have all been spatial (air, earth, bed, the whole, the cloudless air, the ploughman's field). In the fourth stanza, linking the ideas of the refrain to its references, a temporal element is introduced with the wheel spinning out 'till all created things ... cast off rememberings' and 'till centuries of Spring'.

While lacking the rich alliteration and the consciously 'Sprung rhythm' of Hopkins, Larkin conveys with rich suggestion the joy nature reveals at the coming of Spring. He does so by means of an image suggesting a fire which spreads

contagiously through the world lighting and warming all creation, enjoining all to 'Rejoice'. The unchecked movement of the sentence is like fire, or the flight of birds. Everything ('All', 'every one thing' Larkin insists) is affected by Spring and all creation rejoices. The structure of the loose sentence converges on the final word, 'rejoice'. This convergence emphasizes the joy of nature at the coming of Spring thereby highlighting the bleak contrast of the refrain.

This autonomous refrain is perhaps the most interesting feature of the poem. Commonly used as a device to state a theme it is reminiscent of the use Yeats made of a refrain in poems like 'Words for Music Perhaps'¹⁰ in the 'Crazy Jane' sequence, where the refrain might be a jingling 'Fol de rol' repetition in imitation of the Ballad style or, more originally, refrains like 'All things remain in God'; 'Love is like a lion's tooth' or 'The solid man and the cox comb' serve either to state the theme or give the poem a memorable insistence.

If this refrain has indeed been influenced by Yeats, Larkin makes its meaning and rhythm his own property. It expresses the sadness and the littleness of life and serves as a continuous memento mori. It reverses the bright optimism Shelley expresses in the final line of 'Ode to the West Wind':

If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

Here the cycle of nature is viewed in reverse and pessimistically,

Other poems about Spring appear in The Less Deceived and High Windows. While these will be discussed in detail later, it should be pointed out that 'Spring' in T.L.D. is directed more obviously at the human condition in the season described as 'of all seasons most gratuitous' while still, however, noting the wonder in nature. In 'The Trees' in High Windows the memento mori of 'All Catches Alight' is abandoned for the optimism which the season creates:

Last year is dead, they seem to say,
Begin afresh, afresh, afresh.

As far as the rest of The North Ship is concerned, it is not unreasonable to consider most of the poems as forming a sequence constituting the facets and repeated agonies of the same emotional crisis. All but eight of the poems are without titles and are numbered in Roman numerals; their titles being the first line of each poem. Titles, where given, are equally elusive, for example: 'Dawn'; 'Night-Music'; 'Nursery Tale' as well as the title poem itself. In most of the poems there is a recurring sadness caused by an imminent parting and the uncertainty which attends it, or of a parting which has taken place and about which there is regret. ('There has been too much moonlight and self-pity ... There is regret. Always there is regret.' Poem XXIV) Betrayal and disillusionment are themes which complement this feeling of drooping melancholy.

In 'Nursery Tale' (Poem XIV) the speaker, wishing to present

his failures heroically, draws the comparison between his own life and the lives of heroes in literature. Like them, he is betrayed at every turn:

So every journey I begin foretells
 A weariness of daybreak, spread
 With carrion kisses, carrion farewells.

The melodramatic last line looks back to line 10 where the hero is set a meal on... ^{(one unpolished} pewter dish that bore/The battered carcass of a carrion crow.' These may be, of course, an echo of Hopkins's 'Carrion Comfort' and Larkin gives the word with its repetition in the last line, the Hopkins sense of moral decay while at the same time extending its meaning by his own, initial, literal, use of the word.

That love should end in betrayal, sadness or bitterness seems to be common to the love poems. Love is a jejune, depressing experience not elevating or life-enhancing. In Poem XVI this is seen particularly clearly: The hours spent with a lover are tedious and mechanical, producing only bitterness and a sense of failure:

The bottle is drunk out by one;
 At two, the book is shut;
 At three, the lovers lie apart;
 Love and its commerce done;

'Sick for want of sleep' the speaker/disillusioned lover observes the 'luminous watch-hands' showing the hours as he waits impatiently for signs of life in the outside world. The birds' song at dawn and the early footsteps of people going to work herald morning, daylight and normality.

These negative feelings arise, no doubt, from the persona's uncertainty about his own desires and needs. The tension is more explicitly stated in Poems XX and XXXII, where the choice becomes a clear one between the vocation to work (Poetry and service to the Muse) and a life of indulging the senses and the affections. As presented in the poems of The North Ship, the choice is mutually exclusive. As these two 'Dejection Odes' are the most explicit and show more clearly than any of the others the direction which Larkin's later poetry was to take, they will be analysed in some detail.

Poem XX is presented as an internal dialogue, but without the formal dramatic structure of a dialogue. The conflict is of a young man struggling between choosing the life of the senses, with its physical activity and pleasure, and the life of work with the dubious and uncertain rewards which it may provide. The use of the present as the main narrative tense gives the poem an almost cinematic quality as the stages of the walk and the scenes encountered are paralleled by the unfolding of the ideas.

The main lines of the argument are indicated concretely by

nouns and verbs:

I walk ... what I desired ...
 What poor mortar and bricks
 I have to build with ...
 So I walk on ...
 I must repeat until I live the fact
 That everything's remade
 With shovel and spade ...

These are undercut and counter-acted by conjunctions and adverbs: 'Yet'; 'But'; 'else'; 'perhaps'. Exactness and precision are thus balanced very delicately so that the situation with which the speaker is attempting to come to terms is neatly and clearly stated.

In the first stanza, the scene is presented: a girl is dragged across the snow, but the narrator remains aloof and uninvolved. He admits himself ~~once~~ capable of 'powerless jealousies', but is now 'devoid of subtlety' and is able to register the scene in a detached and dispassionate way.

Again, it is easy to detect the influence of Yeats in this poem both in the stanza form (Eight line stanzas are used throughout and the regular a.b.a.b.c.d.d.c. rhyme-scheme) and in the imagery. As David Timms remarks ~~similar~~ features are characteristic of Yeats's poems, 'Sailing

to Byzantium'; 'The Tower' and 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul'.¹²
 The image in line 8,

"Being no more, no less, than two weak eyes"

as well as those in line 24,

"a sack of meal upon two sticks"

and line 35,

"All that's content to wear a worn-out coat"

are particularly reminiscent of Yeats's

"An aged man in but a paltry thing
 A tattered coat upon a stick"

The second stanza begins, 'There is snow everywhere'. The allusion to snow is a link between the speaker and the girl because the snow and the girl merge in a single association. Thus, in the fourth stanza where the snow is being cleared, the speaker is reminded of the girl and she is being swept 'clean from (his) heart', his desire awakens fully and his mind is at 'fever-pitch' again. The suppressed feelings return uncontrolled and unbidden. At this point, though, he remains calm and unmoved. Nothing wild or glad - as in the girl - 'rears up' in him. The refusal of any sexual response and the

control he exerts are states of which he is proud, and his pride is quietly emphasized by the subordinating adverbs, 'still' and 'though'. (The attitude here anticipates 'Dry Point' with its connotations of denial and lack of sexual fulfilment but it must be noted here that this refusal is voluntary, if reluctant.)

The image of deliberately renounced sexuality is continued in the next stanza by the apposition, 'Perhaps what [he] desired'; 'that long and sickly hope,'. But by the end of the stanza he has returned to his starting point and has closed the circle, 'Content to see/What poor mortar and bricks/'[he] has]' to build with.' The Yeatsian image of the old man appears again 'a man ... a sack of meal upon two sticks'. Structurally the theme is closed as well, with the comparison repeated but expanded.

The idea of old age and weakness indicated in line 8 is repeated and expanded in lines 22 - 24. The parallel structure may be more easily demonstrated in tabular form:

	line 8	lines 22 - 24
Present Participle	Being	Knowing that I can
Negative	No more no less	Never in seventy years be more (a man)
Conjunction	Than	Than now
Point of comparison	Two weak eyes	(A man) - a sack of meal upon two sticks

The qualifications, hesitations and explanations in lines 22 - 24

have occurred through the more analytical approach to his feelings. But any sense of resignation is destroyed by the events of the fourth stanza. The words used to describe the the two road sweepers make them unattractive ('old', 'ragged', 'coughing'); and contrast sharply with the words which depict the girl ('dazzling', 'laughs', 'pretends to fight', 'wild', 'glad'). For the girl, the beautiful snow is a source of pleasure and fun; for the old men it is hard work, drudgery and a nuisance which has to be worked at with 'shovel' and 'spade'.

It is important to consider the realism of these words and their near-pathos at this point, and in this poem. The linguistic and idiomatic associations of the words ('Call a spade a spade/call a spade a shovel') indicate Larkin's sensitivity to language and its registers. Both these qualities show very strongly in his later work where he uses demotic expressions and near-obscenity as well as language which is elevated where, despite his own disclaimers, the poetry often approaches a Symbolist style. It is apparent that Larkin is conscious of following Wordsworth in using

language really used by men ... because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived ... (and) convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions. 13

The speaker's reaction to the road-sweepers is far more

positive and violent than it has been to the girl. As long as the snow is there, she will remain in his imagination; once the snow is cleared, she too will be 'swept away' from his heart. For these reasons his mind is brought up 'to fever-pitch again'. Again? There has been no previous indication of the state of his feelings, except those which are deliberately controlled and renounced.

It is only the proviso of 'perhaps' in line 17 which indicates his uncertainty and therefore anticipates the way in which the logical lines of the argument will be demolished in the fourth stanza. 'And yet' and 'else' in the first two lines of the fourth stanza show that his mortar and bricks are indeed 'poor' at this stage. He persists in his fortitude, however, and is determined to resolve the problem.

The remaining three stanzas look back to the scenes described earlier, concrete, 'real' scenes and deal with the moral and personal attitudes which arise from the two events. So there are echoes of the argument:

To be that girl! - but that's impossible.

His future lies in work and in being himself. As 'The beauty (cf fever-pitch) dries [his] throat' he accepts the responsibilities of duty even though not much by way of recompense seems to be forthcoming: 'hopelessness'; 'silences of death' (ignored); 'works^{on} uselessly'; 'breath' is 'shortened.'

The enjambement between stanzas six and seven creates mimetically the leap his spirit will make:

That each dull day and each despairing act
Builds up the crags from which the spirit leaps

The lesson will obviously be long and learned only with difficulty. But it is his sum of work and commitment to it which will build up those crags thus allowing the spirit its complete freedom and fulfilment evoked so beautifully in the image of the unicorn in the following stanza.

In the final stanza the imagination flowers and the achievement is romantic and beautiful. He avows fidelity to the more certain hope of the unicorn, the 'fabulous', 'most innocent' beast, a synonym for the spirit who will give him 'sanctuary' and will 'put into [his] hand its golden horn'.

Again, it is possible to notice Yeatsian parallels:

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing

The unicorn is fabulous and is 'out of nature'. Its legendary elusiveness of being able to be captured only by a virgin makes it rare and precious, accessible only through self-denial. The poet's pure, undivided commitment to poetry is like the damsel's dedication and purity - as she is empowered to capture

the unicorn - so he, too, will be enabled to capture poetry. Having rearranged his priorities, he may even enjoy the rewards of his choice.

The syntactical dislocation of the last line sustains the rhythm and makes the realisation of the reward both believable and more breathtaking. ('And put its golden horn into my hand), which is a normal syntax, detracts from the effect of wonder and breathlessness which is achieved in ('And put into my hand its golden horn') corresponds to the climax which the poet wishes to create with its final dramatic placement of the prize, the treasure and the reward: the 'golden horn'. The final line expresses too, a paradox: inasmuch as the speaker chooses the 'ordinary' world of work, he seems to be moving away from the 'magical' world of love; yet in the last line, he achieves, through his work, the entry into the world of imaginative fulfilment.

In the two most celebrated work poems, 'Toads' and 'Toads Revisited' the mythological unicorn is somewhat transformed. Poem XXXII which did not appear in the 1945 edition of The North Ship belonged originally to XX Poems the next volume which was published privately. (See footnote No.1 Ch. II) This poem forms a fitting conclusion to this first collection as the problems of working or not working and loving or not loving have been resolved. Larkin comments with characteristic wry humour:

As a coda I have added a poem, written a year or so later, which, though not noticeably better than the rest, shows the Celtic fever abated and the patient sleeping soundly.

Feeling that his poetry no longer bears the influence of Yeats, and having discovered the poetry of Thomas Hardy, he acknowledges his new mentor:

One book I had at my bedside was the little blue Chosen Poems of Thomas Hardy: Hardy I knew as a novelist, but as regards his verse I shared Lytton Strachey's verdict that "the gloom is not even relieved by a little elegance of diction." This opinion did not last long; if I were asked to date its disappearance, I should guess it was the morning I first read "Thoughts of Phena At News of Her Death". 14

The more incisive style of Poem XXXII, with its harder edges, anticipates the poetry of The Less Deceived, which was published in 1955. It serves therefore as a useful link between the two collections.

The speaker in the poem is considering the responsibility of a love relationship weighed against his life as a poet. It is, however, easier for him to choose than has been apparent in the earlier poems, and it would seem that his choice had been made before the poem begins. The muse, compared in a simile to a fallow deer, seems far more accessible than the unicorn of Poem XX. No longer a fabulous, innocent beast, the fallow deer is a real animal no less graceful for being more easily and realistically captured:

This realism which is presented like a cinematic tracking shot:

Waiting ... while she brushed her hair ...

I looked down ...

allows the reader to follow exactly the speaker's gaze and in this way he is prepared to follow the development of his thoughts which are set in contrast to the expectations of the opening lines.

The first stanza reaches a firm, but quiet climax in its final line:

I thought: Featureless morning, featureless night.

The colloquial-sounding rhythm of this line is less casual than it seems on first reading. After an opening iambus, there is an ~~anapaest~~ followed by a trochee and another ~~anapaest~~ on the same word followed by a catalectic trochee, but suggesting a sense of order:

$\overset{\cup}{\text{I}}$ $\overset{/}{\text{thought:}}$ $\overset{\cup}{\text{Featureless}}$ $\overset{\cup}{\text{morning,}}$ $\overset{/}{\text{featureless}}$ $\overset{\cup}{\text{night!}}$

Instead of having the balance of a twelve-syllable line, this one is short of a syllable which makes its abruptness seem surprising and it is this element of surprise which makes the line so arresting.

There is no formal metrical regularity in the poem. But this,

together with absence of rhyme does not render the poem a specimen of 'free verse'. The organization of the poem conveys a sense of balance and proportion: the first and third stanzas have eight lines each, the second has nine. The same sense of balance and proportion are brought to bear in the analysis of his dilemma where the moral difficulties of 'Misjudgement' and his returning 'lost lost world' have to be resolved. Having recognized and welcomed his muse, he is able to bid the girl farewell without the guilt and agony evinced in the other poems of The North Ship. The final line and a half of the second stanza, do not express heartlessness, but demonstrate, as Andrew Motion remarks, the Hardy-esque influence. Referring to the older poet's poem, 'At the Word "Farewell"'. Motion points out how:

Turning, I kissed her
Easily for sheer joy tipping the balance to come

echoes

Even then the scale might have turned
Against love by a feather,
- But crimson one cheek, of hers burned
When we came in together ¹⁶

his muse, realising the singleness of purpose that will be demanded:

... Are you jealous of her?
Will you refuse to come till I have sent
Her terribly away, importantly live
Part invalid, part baby, and part saint?

The muse will have to be humoured and cared for, but a decision having been reached with clarity and certainty, there is no doubt in the poet's mind that the decision is right and will lead to personal and poetic fulfilment.

CHAPTER II

The Less Deceived appeared in November 1955 and was the first publicly printed collection since The North Ship (1945). Thirteen of the poems had appeared in the privately-printed XX Poems¹ and one, No. IX - 'Waiting for breakfast while she brushed her hair' - was added as Poem XXXII of The North Ship. Already discussed in Chapter I, page 22 this poem, in Larkin's opinion, shows that he was no longer influenced by, or trying to imitate, Yeats.

The theme of work as an alternative to love so clearly stated in Poems XX and XXXII becomes one of the major themes of The Less Deceived. But in this volume love, with its snares and delusions, is explored in several poems where the cloying melancholy of T.N.S. is no longer evident. (Ophelia's 'Alas, I was the more deceived' in reply to Hamlet's denial of love provides not only the title, but also a clue to understanding many of the poems in this volume). Suffering is the maturing experience which informs Larkin's work as it is in the work of Thomas Hardy. It has already been pointed out that Larkin fully acknowledges his debt to Hardy. (See p. 21)

Writing elsewhere of Hardy's poetry he has stated:

In other words, I'm saying what I like about him primarily is his temperament and the way he sees life. He's not a transcendental writer, he's not a Yeats, he's not an Eliot; his subjects are men, the life of men, time and the passing of time, love and the fading of love. 2

Perhaps his greatest debt to this poet is that 'Hardy gave them [other poets who have admired him]' - as well as Larkin himself - 'confidence to feel their own way ... I didn't have to try and jack myself up to a concept of poetry that lay outside my own life ...'³

It is this writing from within his own life that makes the poems of The Less Deceived so different from those of The North Ship. This 'confidence in what he felt' has allowed the very distinctive voice of Larkin's poetry to be heard and discerned more clearly.

SECTION I

It has been stated that much of Philip Larkin's poetry is about 'not affronting the unproffered occasion'.⁴ One reason for this seems to be that the future cannot easily be foreseen or foretold. One feature of the oeuvre that gives rise to this Prufrockian characteristic is his frequent insistence on the openness of the future:

And we, barely recalled from sleep there, sense
Arrivals lowing in a doleful distance -
Horny dilemmas at the gate once more,
Come and choose wrong, they cry, come and choose wrong;

And so we rise ...

('Arrivals, Departures' p.44)

Whatever choice is made, the venture is likely to be doomed, because in terms of the metaphor employed, the sound of the siren announcing the uncertain traveller's departure disrupts his complacency and offers little comfort:

...O not for long, they cry, O not for long -
And we are nudged from comfort, never knowing
How safely we may disregard their blowing,
Or if, this night, happiness too is going.

The idea makes itself felt in the very texture of the verse where, the last line, with its mournful nasal rhyme repeating the rhymes of the two foregoing lines, continues and mimics the plaintive wailing sound of the siren, while the indeterminate present participles reinforce a situation which is unresolved

or undefined through syntax and grammar. Repetition of complete sentences in a single line ('Come and choose wrong, they cry, come and choose wrong'; and 'O not for long they cry, O not for long -') suggests an insistence and a monotony while the nasal assonance, already remarked on, creates a suitably mournful atmosphere. Insidiously and unavoidably 'We are nudged from comfort, never knowing ... if, this night, happiness too is going ...'. The uncertainty and the creeping nature of the removal are reflected in the pauses in the last line which shows that change, although inevitable, is accepted reluctantly.

The poem is written in an extended sonnet form, with five-line stanzas instead of quatrains, suggesting the deceptive nature of fate or choice. The rhyme scheme

a b b a c / d d c e f / f e g g g /

could be re-arranged as follows:

a b b a / c d d c / e f f e / g g + g

Just as the 'traveller' is unhappily uncertain about his fate, so the reader remains in a state of confusion about a poem which is, but is not, a sonnet. The form skilfully reinforces the meaning and mood already established by the syntax and onomatopoeia.

In the same way that the traveller in 'Arrivals, Departures' is unable to make his commitment to his journey, so other personae discover that it is equally, if not more, difficult to make their choices about friendships and, more specifically,

about sexual commitment. This theme had already been adumbrated in The North Ship and is more fully and explicitly explored in this volume. A number of poems seem to question and to doubt that sex is the sole source of human happiness, yet simultaneously they return almost obsessively to the theme. These poems seem to convey in their preoccupations, imagery and technique, a darker side to human nature, dwelling on the choices which must necessarily be made as well as their consequences.⁵

In No. VII of XX Poems, the struggle is set out in terms of a parliamentary debate:

Since the majority of me
Rejects the majority of you,
Debating ends forthwith, and we
Divide ...

...

A silence of minorities
That, unopposed at last, return
Each night with cancelled promises
They want renewed. They never learn.

This bleakness lingers in several poems of The Less Deceived, but obvious personal references are eliminated. Larkin admits that his personal life was rather harassing; but accepted a change:

Then in 1950 I went to Belfast, and things reawoke somehow. I wrote some poems, and thought, These aren't bad, and had that little pamphlet XX Poems printed privately. I felt for the first time I was speaking for myself. Thoughts, feelings, language cohered and jumped.⁶

In the early poems, sex is seen as dark, enfolding and incomprehensible: light, on the other hand, permits a transcendence, a theme increasingly developed in the mature poetry. At this stage, even if the symbolism is not clearly defined, we are led to ^asense that is analogous with release. It has already been pointed out how Poem XXXII of The North Ship marks the change in direction and expression.

Light imagery is used in a similar way in several poems of The Less Deceived. It is as if the light permits layers of darkness to be shed and, as this happens, comprehension enters the immediate experience. The argument is summarised in the equation of judgement with truth; conversely with misjudgement and lying. Not being deceived - whether it be less or more - must be the ultimate goal.

In 'Dry Point' (p.19) the suffocating darkness of sex and its demands are set against the liberating ideal of light. These images are apparent, too, in the sentence structure: four short, broken sentences in the first ten lines of the poem contrast with the long final sentence of the second section, which flows over six lines, suggesting greater calm and some kind of resolution. With its enclosing darkness and claustrophobic airlessness which eliminate any element of sexual joy, the 'time-honoured irritant' of sex (or lust) is 'endless' and recurs 'restively'. There is no closeness or sense of union or integration; instead only the disharmony, disintegration and dislike, which belong to the 'bestial, intent, real' feeling. The

appetite grows and repeats itself, providing no satisfaction or happiness. Echoes of Baudelaire's Spl  en and the insatiable thirst, found in his poems like 'Sed Non Satiata' or 'Femmes Damn  es' seem to inform this poem as well:

... je vous plains pour vos mornes douleurs,
 vos soifs inassouvies
 Et les urnes d'amour dont vos grands coeurs
 sont pleins.⁷

Baudelaire sees the women condemned to lust, their insatiable thirsts never satisfied and their hearts, like great vessels of love, mocked by their inability to give, or receive, any satisfaction in love. It may also be remembered that Baudelaire's poem, as well as Larkin's of the same title, is about lesbians.

The similarity is that 'Dry Point' is about a sexual longing which is not satisfied by any lover-like exchange. Andrew Motion comments on this, as well as on Larkin's early poem.⁸ In 'Dry Point' the speaker is ^daddressing sex, not his partner. The convulsive sentences imitate an orgasm which is spelt out by the colloquially explicit 'the wet spark comes, the bright blown walls collapse'. The series of exclamations which follow 'What ashen hills! What salted, shrunken lakes!' combine distaste and shame.⁹ As the anonymous, post classical epigram summarises: Post coitum omne animal triste.¹⁰

In contrast, light as an image of the ideal 'bare and sun-scrubbed room ... that padlocked cube of light ...' is 'intensely far'

and 'remote'. There is a lyrical flow in these four lines and it is as if the ineffable ideal is as far in the distance from the 'bestial, intent, real' feeling as is the concrete accessibility of the 'sun scrubbed room'.

But if 'Dry Point' implies loveless or solitary sex, there is no guarantee that marriage with its implications and expectations of love and continuity is going to fulfil its promises. 'Wedding-Wind' (p.15), in which a young bride reflects on her wedding-day and -night, and wonders about her marriage, shows an underlying thread of sadness in:

... Shall I be let to sleep
Now this perpetual morning shares my bed?

While 'The new delighted lakes' of love and marriage at which they kneel 'as cattle by all-generous waters' are the antithesis of 'the salted shrunken lakes', the interrogative form, suggests an uncertainty and implies the possibility that the 'wind's blowing' which 'ravelled' all and made all clear by daylight, may yet bring a certain tenuousness:

... Shall I be let to sleep
Now this perpetual morning shares my bed?

The notion of sex enjoyed by couples may also rest on a fallacious assumption: in 'Reasons for Attendance' (p.18) as the solitary speaker outside the dance-hall observes the young people 'all under twenty-five' who 'move to and fro', he feels excluded.

The rocking rhythm of the poem mimes the rocking movement of the dancers:

Believing this; ^{and} they maul to and fro,
Believing that; and both are satisfied;

But the balance achieved is deceptive because the speaker peremptorily qualifies his facile conclusion with the stern moral attitude implied in the last line. If his assumptions about the dancers reveal his own envy and longing:

Shifting intently, face to flushed face,
Solemnly on the beat of happiness.

- Or so I fancy, sensing the smoke and sweat,
The wonderful feel of girls....

he nevertheless prefers his own situation. The questions, 'Why be out here?/ But then, why be in there?' answered by the single word, 'Sex', are not satisfactorily resolved as he observes at once by adding:

... Sex, yes, but what
Is sex? Surely, to think the lion's share
Of happiness is found by couples - sheer

Inaccuracy, as far as I'm concerned.

The conversational, colloquial debate with its rhetorical questions and answers is deceptive because the speaker ends by being unconvinced by his own argument: the undercutting cynicism of the last two words explodes his argument and his assertion that the

happiness found by couples is 'sheer inaccuracy' is rather to be doubted.

It is the caution against the misjudgement of, and the lying to, oneself that clearly informs many of the poems. This is the theme of 'Deceptions',¹¹ (p.37) which is the poem which provides the title for the volume and should therefore be considered as central to it. It is based on the work of the nineteenth-century sociologist, Henry Mayhew, who, in numerous interviews gathered information to write London Labour and the London Poor. The superscription is part of the autobiographical account of a young woman whose pattern of ruin is the archetypal one of a country girl whose innocent trust is betrayed and who, once seduced, has no other recourse but prostitution.

Larkin's speaker says coldly: 'I would not dare/Console you if I could'. The girl in the poem has been buried by slums and years and is a fragment of history. Yet the poem, written a century later, recreates the sordid circumstances of her seduction. The consolation he offers her is the knowledge (which she would not have had) that, because she has been betrayed, but not led to false expectations of happiness and fulfilment, she has been 'less deceived' than her seducer. He, driven by lust and the expectation of something else will not find fulfilment in the self-destroying and self-perpetuating hunger which led him to betray her.

For you would hardly care
 That you were less deceived, out on that bed,
 Than he was, stumbling up the breathless stair
 To burst into fulfilment's desolate attic.

The pause created by the phrase 'out on that bed' breaks the sentence and anticipates and enacts the breathlessness of the seducer's lust, as well as anticipating the isolation of his thwarted desire. The image of suffocation creates a similar feeling to the one in 'Dry Point'.

Written in iambic pentameter as an extended sonnet, with three tercets and two quatrains, the poem is one in which subject matter does not match lyrical form - planned dissonance of this type has already been noted in 'Arrivals, Departures'. Here three tercets of the first stanza with their a.b.a. c.d.c. e.d.e. rhyme approach a kind of terza rima, and the poem which seems like a sonnet but is not, 'deceives' in its form. In the second stanza there are two distinct quatrains with a repeated f.g.f.h. rhyme-scheme which, while offering a more satisfactory technical resolution, nevertheless do not console, or heal, the girl at the heart of the poem. The narrator, detached in space and time from the event, does not 'dare' offer any pity or consolation. In his rhetorical question, he summarises the situation:

... What can be said,
 Except that suffering is exact, but where
 Desire takes charge, readings will grow erratic?

One aspect of suffering which may possibly be measured is in terms of the physical effects on the victim (pregnancy,

venereal disease, prostitution) and this is expressed in the image:

All the unhurried day
Your mind lay open like a drawer of knives".

However, the image also implies her mental anguish which cannot be accurately assessed. Merely, we are told, '... where Desire takes charge, readings will grow erratic'. This painful experience, though, is like the maturing experience which occurs through the suffering expressed in Hardy's work. David Timms remarks:

This is surely what Larkin is saying in "Deceptions". The only consolation he can offer the girl is that suffering is "exact". She will spiritually grow and mature (sic) by her knowledge, the "fulfilment" of the rapist is in reality not fulfilling, but disappointing, a blundering into empty confusion.¹²

The 'brisk brief worry of wheels' 'where bridal London bows the other way' is a sad alliterative contrast to what has happened in the 'desolate attic'. The persona, here, seems to be underlining the double standards of a society which turns away from facts it would rather ignore and it is not inappropriate to recall the youthful harlot in Blake's 'London'.¹³

However, transcending the horror of the experience, the image of light provides a contrast and becomes a motif of ineffable comprehension and vision:

And light, unanswerable and tall and wide
 Forbids the scar to heal, and drives
 Shame out of hiding ...

This image, in contrast to the disturbing darkness of sexuality, appears again and is used with greater assurance in 'High Windows' (see Chapter IV p.148 for a detailed discussion). It is in images like these that Larkin's poetry, despite his disclaimers, approaches Symbolism.

A short poem using the dense imagery of a sustained metaphor similarly shows the relationship of his figurative language to Symbolist techniques. 'Wires' (p.27) is about learning through suffering. The two four-line stanzas mirror each other in rhyme: a.b.c.d./d.c.b.a., enacting the limitations and creating visually the lesson which the young animals must learn through pain. 'Scenting purer water', the young steers stray close to the electric fences. But do so only once; the experience teaches, and ages, them:

Young steers become old cattle from that day.

The poem contains the same caveat - 'Electric limits to their widest senses' - repeats the doubts and hesitations which assail his human personae in the poems already discussed.

It seems inevitable that any situation is likely to bring with it its component of sadness and while recognising the importance

and relevance of that sadness, Larkin (or his persona) understandably hesitates to embrace the occasion. If the myths about happiness and sexuality have been exploded, the personae are even more wary about marriage which, more often than not, is the 'unproffered occasion' which is not 'affronted'. In 'Places, Loved Ones' (p.16) the speaker remarks:

No, I have never found
 The place where I could say
This is my proper ground,
Here I shall stay;
 Nor met that special one
 Who has instant claim
 On everything I own
 Down to my name; ...

The choice is not as simple as society would like to believe. Further, there is always the possibility of being more deceived, or the fear that the town may turn out to be:

dreary,

The girl a dolt.

Risks, if they are taken, must be calculated. The theme is explored quite fully in the final section of A Girl in Winter, Larkin's second novel:

For she knew, now, that in most lives there has to come a break, when the past dropped away and the maturity it had enclosed for so long stood painfully upright. It could come through death or disaster, or even through a love-affair that with the best will in the world on both sides went wrong ...

Realizing that 'life ceased to be a confused stumbling from one illumination to another', Katherine comes to terms with a sense of the failure of trust and love, and an increasing awareness of self-reliance:

Henceforward, if she needed comfort, she would have to comfort herself; if she were to be happy, the happiness would have to burn from her own nature. In short, since people seemed not to affect her, they could not help her, and if she was going to go on living she would have to get the strength for it solely out of herself ... Life was not going to be as pleasant as it had been ... It would be more cramped, less variegated, more predictable. She was not going to taunt anybody. She was not going to love anybody. And when the time came for her to die, she would die not only without having done anything worthwhile, like most people, but without having done anything she wanted. 14

These are Katherine Lind's thoughts at the end of a day during which she has been criticised and thwarted, and where her attempts at kindness to a junior colleague in the library where she works have been betrayed. The sum of her disillusionment occurs when Robin Fennel, a schoolboy penfriend with whom she had once believed herself in love, arrives at her lodgings on a brief spell of leave between army postings. He is drunk and boorish and so his attempts at seducing Katherine - now unwilling - are clumsy and disappointing.

As the various speakers repeatedly refuse the 'unproffered occasion', their desire - spoken or not - is to 'duck and run', (cf 'Latest Face p.41) because the risks involved are too great. There is, however, a continual wistful longing for such occasions and, in 'Poetry of Departures' (p.34), the speaker envies the person of whom rumour has it, that he left suddenly:

He chucked up everything
And just cleared off.

The language is colloquial with eye rhymes and para-rhymes ('epitaph/off'; 'everything/purifying'; 'hand/sound') giving a jaunty quirkiness to the poem.

The second stanza spells out the distaste with which he faces the order of predictable, regulated life:

We all hate home...
 And having to be there;
 I detest my room,...

And my life in perfect order;....)

while the continued use of para-rhymes like 'think/junk'; 'home/room' points to the disharmony. (The metre is iambic, and the rhyme irregular: hexameters in lines 1, 3, 5 and 6; and shortened metres in lines 2 and 8; line 7 is octosyllabic.) So the 'And my life, in perfect order' is ironic since there is no inner order and the long enjambement across the stanza reflects the increasing anger and frustration. Wanting to use the aggressive language of gangster films or novels, the discontented speaker settles uncomfortably into a compromise of 'a life/Reprehensib^{ly} perfect,' justifying his present existence by considering 'such a deliberate step backwards' as 'artificial'.

'Born Yesterday' (p.24) written for Sally, infant daughter of Larkin's Oxford friend, Kingsley Amis, uses a similar tone and approach. Since the occasion for which this poem was written is so clearly specified, and there is such consistency

in attitude (here, and in other poems) it is reasonable to assume that this person echoes views which are similar to Larkin's own and the wariness, even pessimism, are at 'the roots of his sensibility'.¹⁵

Hoping that the good fairies' wishes for the 'Tightly folded bud' of the newly-born child will be fulfilled, but assuming, realistically, that they may not be, he wishes her ordinariness and 'an average of talents'. He wishes her, too, a quality of mind which will allow her to make correct judgements which, he hopes, will give her the capacity for happiness:

In fact, may you be dull -
 If that is what a skilled,
 Vigilant, flexible,
 Unemphasised, enthralled
 Catching of happiness is called.

This is not, as has been mentioned by some critics, a negative or soured view; it is merely that it is this 'skilled, vigilant, flexible, / Unemphasised, enthralled' attitude that allows happiness to be caught through having been forewarned. Perhaps, too, the emotional wariness is a further guard against deception and disappointment.

Little in life does seem to offer these opportunities for friendship, fulfillment and happiness. In 'No Road' (p.26) a disused road is emblematic of a discontinued friendship. It is reminiscent of a 'bricked and streeted sea / And a cold hill of stars' used in Poem XXI of The North Ship, but used

less fancifully and surrealistically, the imagery refers to the agents of disaffection:

Since we agreed to let the road between us
 Fall to disuse,
 And bricked our gates up, planted trees to screen us,
 And turned all time's eroding agents loose,
 Silence, and space, and strangers - our neglect
 Has not had much effect ...

The irregular metre corresponds to the pain which such a situation must cause, but the regular rhymes, a b a b c c, suggest that the rational decision has been 'for the best'. As the disaffection is complete, there is none of Drayton's optimism that, love about to die and prepared for death, may be spared by the sudden reversal of the lady's attitude.¹⁶

The parting here is planned and deliberate:

Drafting a world where no such road will run
 From you to me;
 To watch that world come up like a cold sun,
 Rewarding others is my liberty.
 Not to prevent it is my will's fulfillment.
 Willing it, my ailment .

'Next Please' (p.20) carries the bleak reminder that all life's promises end in death. The paired rhymes of the poem imitate the movement of the 'sparkling armada of promises' and 'our habits of expectancy' do not seem 'bad' because, optimistically, we look to the future. Yet, when the future, 'refusing to make haste' does arrive, its fleeting visitation leaves us 'holding wretched stalks of disappointment'. Many of Larkin's motifs can be seen in this poem - the stalks of disappointment are

echoed in the 'bitter stalks' of the drug forced on the girl in 'Deceptions'; and there is a similar flavour of disappointment in the association; the way in which time is so quickly absorbed into the past - 'a valley cropped by neglected chances' is a recurrent theme of this collection - a theme which will be discussed more fully in the second section of this chapter. Run-on lines cause the verse to flow - again in imitation of the ship's movement. It is with grim warning that we are told:

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.

'Unfamiliar' used as a noun is itself unfamiliar; and the 'huge and birdless silence' implies a further denial. However, denials and negative words in Larkin's poetry often have the effect of suggesting the opposite and so a negative statement becomes paradoxically, an affirmation.¹⁷

The alliteration of s, w and b reinforces the calmly deceptive situation and the movement implied is like the bobbing movement of a ship. While in this poem it is obviously the ship of death, the 'dark-sailed unfamiliar' which seeks us, the other obvious connotation of the ship and voyage is that of an escape.

The title poem of The North Ship used the sea-ship-voyage image for change; the earlier adumbration is repeated and

developed in 'Arrivals, Departures'; 'Next Please' and also in 'Absences' (p.40):

A wave drops like a wall: another follows,
Wilting and scrambling, tirelessly at play
Where there are no ships and no shallows.

Above the sea, the yet more shoreless day,
Riddled by wind, trails lit-up galleries:
They shift to giant ribbing, sift away.

Such attics cleared of me! Such absences!

The last line, might have been written - Larkin himself points out - by a French Symbolist poet, the 'desire of oblivion' is expressed deliberately and succinctly. The waves, forming repeatedly and endlessly do not seem to tire.

The alternative to 'duck[ing] and runn[ing]', or escaping from responsibility, seems, for Larkin, inevitably, to be work. As in 'The Poetry of Departures' where the mixture of registers is wittily effective, so in 'Toads' (p.32) these two elements are combined very successfully.

Some of the technical aspects which are so skilfully managed in this anthology favourite may be disguised by the aggrieved tone and querulousness of the speaker. The mordant wit, the image of a toad for work - arrived at, Larkin told an interviewer by 'sheer genius'¹⁸ - and a subtle mixture of styles have made this one of his most celebrated poems. As has been shown, Larkin's speakers choose work as the (sometimes) less attractive alternative to marriage and/or love which will only

produce a feeling of jejune dissatisfaction. The work-alternative now has become more mundane than the poetry (which was the work alternative in The North Ship) and this has become a cause for grumbling dissatisfaction:

Why should I let the toad work
Squat on my life? ...

asks the speaker in the opening lines.¹⁹

The eye-rhymes 'work/pitch-fork'; and the para-rhymes 'life/Off' convey an accurately grumbling tone. The juxtaposed accents of 'toad/work' stress not only the apposition but also the speaker's sense of injustice, while in the second stanza, the sibilants of

Six days of the week it soils
With its sickening poison —

imitate his hissing crossness.

Further para-rhymes in 'soils/bills' and 'poison/proportion' spell out his righteous indignation and are at variance with any sense of concord or congruity. The fact that this speaker has to work in order to live, while others manage to live 'and seem to like it', without working, seems to him to be profoundly unjust.²⁰

Punning on the 'wit' in line 3, the third stanza opens with a

description of the people who 'live on their wits' (often as a desperate measure to survive). The alliteration in the catalogue

Lecturers, lispers
Losels, loblollymen, louts

creates a raffish identity which eliminates the social or professional hierarchies of employment (or non-employment.)

The grouse is amusing in its exaggeration and near-outrageousness - with its repetition of the grumbling tone in line 8, ('They seem to like it').

Near syntactical similarity in the third and fourth stanzas is varied by two adverbial phrases: one of manner - 'Lots of folk live on their wits'; and one of place - 'lots of folk live up lanes' - which enhance the off-centre, off-key sound of the deliberately imperfect rhymes. 'They seem to like it' maintains the identity link between the third and fourth stanzas with the same stress on 'They' as that which occurs in line 12: 'They don't end as paupers'. (see Footnote 19)

Using the vocabulary and idiom of 'folk who live up lanes', the next stanza refers to the children as 'nippers'. This prepares for the commonness of the 'unspeakable wives' - a double entendre of significance - since so much of the poem is about modes of speaking, 'lecturers, lispers, ... blarney ...'.

In the sixth stanza there is a marked change of tone and emphasis. After five stanzas of demotic style, the speaker becomes reflective, he adopts language which is more literary both in syntax and allusion.

The opening line

Ah, were I courageous enough ...

has a literary, though fully idiomatic, structure and rings more forcefully than 'if only ...'. The shock of the vulgarity in the second line:

To shout Stuff your pension!

reverts to the sharply resentful tone of what has gone before. But there is another immediate shift: the quotation from The Tempest - 'We are such stuff as dreams are made on' - puns on the word 'stuff' and the coarseness of the ejaculation is thereby both absorbed and stressed. The speaker's dreams in the 1950s are as insubstantial and of baseless a fabric as was the pageant Prospero conjured up for Miranda and Ferdinand.

Squatting in the speaker there is, he tells us, 'something sufficiently toad-like' to make him realise and understand the necessity for work. The squatting toad with its 'hunkers heavy as hard luck/ And cold as snow' implies, not only that work is inescapable, but that it has connotations of slavery

and cold charity, a restatement of the speaker's attitude towards the welfare state. In either interpretation, it is clear that his work brings no comfort or relief.

His enslavement means that however much he may use his wit, he will never be able to 'blarney' his way to sexual conquest, financial success and renown - the trinity of achievement and recipe for happiness in a society which refuses to acknowledge that work often entails drudgery and does not provide instant success. 'The fame and the girls and the money/ All at one sitting' is understated and the scepticism about the possibility of achieving these goals is suggested in the almost bantering tone which implies that life is a lucky dip, and at the same time criticises those who do.

In its almost metaphysical imagery, the final stanza changes tone again. The argument is summarised in compressed poetic imagery and diction (in contrast to the measured directness of the six previous stanzas which express the speaker's bitterness unequivocally). At the same time this stanza extends the theme of the poem beyond the limits of the situation described.

'Toad work' - the words are synonymous - and 'dream' are the respective antecedents of 'the one' and 'the other'; as this is a frequently expressed dilemma in Larkin's poetry, they are presented as mutually exclusive and so he concludes:

... it's hard to lose either,
When you have both.

Unremitting labour seems to be his commitment and his hope of having the unicorn 'put into his hand its golden horn' seems a very distant ideal. In what is considered the later (companion) poem - 'Toads Revisited', the persona (who seems to be Larkin) rather too heartily accepts the work alternative:

No, give me my in-tray ...
My loaf-haired secretary ...

SECTION II

'Time and the passing of time, love and the fading of love' are perpetual and universal subjects of literature and Larkin's work is no exception. Though never sentimental, when he considers these aspects of life, he shows that he is aware of their inherent nostalgia. If youth and childhood, religion and love have failed to provide the proper occasions for happiness, it is still possible to be resigned without despairing. In this section I propose to discuss poems which may be seen as expressions of his unromantic and anti-nostalgic attitude to such subjects. In particular, 'I Remember, I Remember'; 'Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album'; 'At Grass' and 'Church Going' seem to be the best illustrations of this attitude. Other poems, however, will be discussed since they provide further insights.

'I Remember, I Remember' (p.38) has a complicated stanza structure which is deliberately confusing and difficult.²¹ Demythologising any sentimentality about childhood memories, the poem, as some critics have seen, seems to be a parody of the elaborate stanza structure of Dylan Thomas's lyrically nostalgic 'Fern Hill' or 'Poem in October'. There may even be a few indirect references to Thomas - or to D.H. Lawrence:

'By now I've got the whole place clearly charted.

Our garden, first: Where I did not invent

Blinding theologies of flowers and fruits,

... I'll show you, come to that,
The bracken where I never sat,

Determined to go through with it; Where she
Lay back, and 'All became a burning mist'.

There is, too quite apparently, a deliberate literary echo since the poem has the same title as Thomas Hood's:

I remember, I remember,
The house where I was born,
The little window where the sun
Came peeping in at morn

... The roses red and white
The vi'lets and the lily cups ...
Those flowers made of light
The lilacs where the robin built,
And where my brother set
The laburnum on his birthday, -
The tree is living yet! 22

While the title recalls Hood's romanticised, nostalgic poem, this place, Coventry, is industrial and not beautiful. What-ever surprised pleasure there may be in:

"Why Coventry!" I exclaimed, "I was born here."

it is quickly displaced by feelings which are far from happy. When his friend asks him in a deliberately phrase-making question:

"Was that", my friend smiled "where you had your roots?"

the speaker's retorts are suppressed and revealed only as thoughts. Unlike the green and golden lyrical quality of 'Fern Hill', the town did not offer opportunities for expressions of juvenile literary precociousness:

And, in those offices, my doggerel
 Was not set up in blunt ten-point, nor read
 By a distinguished cousin of the Mayor.

His childhood, more ordinary and less eventful, is 'a forgotten boredom'. But as he remarks wistfully at the end of the poem when his friend reads his thoughts:

"Oh well
 I suppose it's not the place's fault", I said,
 "Nothing like something, happens anywhere".

The tricks which memory plays have little to do with 'the place'.

Childhood, as the speaker remarks in 'Coming' (p.17), is a 'forgotten boredom'. This poem, written without rhymes, comprises a series of rapid pictures with the coming of Spring - (there is a sense of daring and high anticipation in the repetition: 'It will be Spring soon, It will be Spring soon') - the child will enter the exciting world of adults:

I ...
 Feel like a child
 Who comes on a scene
 Of adult reconciling,
 And can understand nothing.
 But the unusual laughter,
 And starts to be happy.'

If it is important to find happiness, then it must be attained through the wary, careful alertness which has been discussed in Section I.

In 'Spring' (p.36) the sonnet is used with effective variation: the volta in the last line of the octave is rhythmically out of harmony with the lyrical style and shows how the speaker, too, is out of tune with the season because the line refers to the speaker as 'an indigestible sterility' - two concepts which cut across the fecund harmony of Spring. This allows the sestet to stand in contra-distinction to the octave - it is a season which is 'gratuitous' and

Is earth's most multiple, excited daughter;
And those she has least use for see her best,
Their paths grown craven and circuitous,
Their visions mountain-clear, their needs immodest.

By these means - combining style and content - exploring the possibilities of rhythm, rhyme and poetic form and placing the content in such shapes - Larkin questions some of his apprehensions about life and what to expect of what happens.

Events and experiences as recorded by the memory do not remain themselves, they are smoothed down, alchemised, tampered with. 23

Closely linked with memory and time is the theme of preserving memory - in our age this is most easily done through taking and keeping photographs, though it is debatable whether an $x = x$ equation can be made between the remembered event and the photographic record. Two poems in The Less Deceived use the fact of photography as a direct symbol, but within both 'Whatever Happened?' and 'Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album' (p.13) the empirical quality of photographic truth is

questioned.

The disaster which must have been the informing experience of 'Whatever Happened?' (p.25) is almost incidental to the main concern of the poem. Hidden layers of meaning, like the hidden layers of rock of the 'coastal bedding' will lead to confusion and will probably upset existing ideas and received opinions causing 'mishap' of a different sort. Thus it is that whatever did happen in the unspecified accident is not perfectly recalled. The past tends to recede when viewed through the lens of the camera. In the poem, a striking image conveys how the selection of memories becomes 'Kodak distant' and, because any recall is painful, the recording of the event is fragmented and incoherent. Unable, or unwilling, to revive the events, the victims remember only when asleep; and then involuntarily through dreams and nightmares.

The details of memory and its selectivity are picked out in the terza rima of this sonnet where a detail of rhyme in one tercet is repeated twice in the next: in this way poetic form imitates the content, and memory is evoked by almost random details coming to mind. The para-rhyme 'was/source' is resolved in a full rhyme in the concluding couplet: 'source/course'.

The poetic form therefore carries a great deal of force in this poem and mimics what the intellect refuses to do. The lack of coincidence between the memory and the event is enacted through the imperfect rhymes, while in the last couplet the

actual event is merely suggested, but through the fiction of yarns - or nightmares - remains remote. Tension between the desire to forget the pain or anxiety caused by the accident and the perverse desire to remember, selectively, some of its aspects is also expressed in the rhymes which wind through the poem. Hoping to exorcise the events, the victims say rationally, 'Perspective brings significance' and, 'What can't be printed can be thrown away'. Yet, as nightmares and yarns can so easily recall terrifying experiences, the knowledge of objective realities like 'latitude' and 'maps' is not sufficiently strong to dispel the fears. The 'coastal bedding', lying as a permanent threat to the safety of travellers and boats, is a threat which knowledge and skill might evade, but there is no guarantee that this knowledge is infallible. The 'coastal bedding' of emotions which cannot be so easily plotted and charted is by implication even more hazardous and treacherous.

Attempts to record the past are never entirely objective and therefore are not likely to succeed either:

But O, photography! as no art is,
Faithful and disappointing! ...

How overwhelmingly persuades
That this is a real girl in a real place,

In every sense empirically true! ...

In 'Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph album' (p.13) a one-time (but it is assumed, rejected) admirer looks at snapshots and recalls, or is reminded of, a past which he may, or may not

have shared. The dramatic monologue starts with the speaker presenting himself as raffishly avuncular and assuming a superior, teasing detachment. But as the poem proceeds, the metaphysics of photography, memory and love lead to a more serious consideration about the correspondence between pictorial accuracy and emotional reliability: in other words, how true are photographs and how genuine or trustworthy are emotions?

... All your ages
 Matt and glossy on the thick black pages! ...

In pigtailed, clutching a reluctant cat;
 Or furred yourself, a sweet girl-graduate;
 Or lifting a heavy-headed rose.

Beneath a trellis, or in a trilby hat

(Faintly disturbing, that, in several ways) ...

Already the speaker has shown that his awareness of the girl is more than detached and amused. His earlier comments

Too much confectionery; too rich;
 I choke on such nutritious images.

My swivel eye hungers from pose to pose ...

assume a flirtatiousness which evokes the tone of the first lines of 'To his Coy Mistress'. His undoubted sexual interest in the girl is revealed in the parenthesis, '(Faintly disturbing, that, in several ways)', and develops into openly expressed jealousy:

From every side you strike at my control,
 Not least through these disquieting chaps who loll
 At ease about your earlier days:
 Not quite your class, I'd say, dear, on the whole.

The exaggeratedly condenscending language does not deceive the reader nor does the cri de coeur of the final stanzas come as a complete shock. The photograph, persuading that 'this is a real girl in a real place', transcends the limits of itself and, as the actual camera does not 'ensor blemishes', so the 'inner' camera of the mind and heart will not censor true emotion.

'In every sense empirically true!' is an exclamation which answers the discussion about photography. The lines which follow, however, reveal something which the camera cannot:

Or is it just the past? Those flowers, that gate,
 These misty parks and motors lacerate
 Simply by being over, you
 Contract my heart by looking out of date.

The sadness of 'Contract my heart by looking out of date' and the pain of 'lacerate' point to the real pain of loss and rejection. 'The past' cannot be recalled, and printed in italics in the poem, its irrevocability is emphasized.

'Yes true' he answers in affirmation of his questions, but this does not mitigate the pain. Exclusion from another's life causes grief and the separation between illusion (photograph) and reality (what he is experiencing now) is a cause for grief, but one which cannot be explained. The photograph records

what is 'over'. 'Simply' *has a double meaning* which applies to the photograph, a simple, easily taken snapshot; but belies the complexity of emotions which the photograph evokes. If earlier there was parity between a line of the poem and a photograph, line and photograph are at variance in the later stanzas as emotions have clouded the vision and there is pain, grief and a sense of loss:

We know what was
 Won't call on us to justify
 Our grief, however hard we yowl across
 The gap from eye to page ...

The enjambement across the stanzas enacts the gap in the photograph album (where he has removed the picture); the gap in time (between past and present) and the gap between reality and illusion. The onomatopoeic 'yowl' which seems to be made up of 'howl' and 'yawn' is visual as well as auditory. The space occupied by the photograph 'yawns' as a gap in the continuity or completeness of the album. While the cry of pain is mimicked in the image and the word.

In a diminution of grief, he is left 'to mourn ... to wonder ... to condense', the past and to have for himself one filched photograph (almost as if, in violating the wholeness of the album, he has succeeded in capturing the girl). The photograph will retain and capture something which time cannot, but with the passage of time, the memory becomes less poignant:

'It holds you like a heaven, and you lie
 Unvariably lovely there,
 Smaller and clearer as the years go by'.²⁴

If a photograph is an attempt to capture time, the two poems discussed above show that Larkin is not entirely sure if these attempts are satisfactory. As time is never static, in many of the poems there is a sense of dissatisfaction about time present longing for future or the past.

For example, in 'Triple Time' (p.35) a regular rhyme scheme is counteracted by variations in metre to enact confusion and discontent. The present 'traditionally soured' and 'unrecommended by event' is like an empty street or a 'sky to blandness scoured'. Looking to the future, a time 'lambent with adult enterprise' he ~~undervalues the present~~. However, the promise of the future is dissipated because it:

'On another day will be the past,
 A valley cropped by fat neglected chances
 That we insensately forbore to fleece.'

Perpetual 'seasonal decrease' causes perspectives and hopes to become 'threadbare'. So the hopes of childhood's forgotten boredom moving to where time can be controlled are effectively dashed.

While Larkin's personae do not look back with nostalgia on childhood, and sometimes are dissatisfied with the present, the

future and its possibilities are soon drained of their hope. Larkin himself has remarked in an interview that the prospect of age and, more particularly of death, are not subjects for cheerful contemplation. In answer to a reviewer's question about whether thinking about growing older worried him, he replied:

'Yes, dreadfully. If you assume you're going to live to be seventy, seven decades, and think of each decade as a day of the week, starting with Sunday, then I, m on Friday afternoon now. Rather a shock isn't it? If you ask me why does it bother me, I can only say I dread endless extinction'.²⁵

Thus, in 'Skin' (p.43) he humorously apostrophizes his skin as his 'Obedient daily dress ...' which inevitably will show signs of ageing. Almost as an actor learns a part to his skin must 'learn (its) lines' - the pun does not lessen the grimness of:

'The continuous coarse
Sand-laden wind, time; ...

...And pardon me, that I
Could find, when you were new,
No brash festivity
To wear you at ...

Echoes of the lonely, self-exiled speaker of 'Reasons for Attendance' sound as he accepts, with a sad understanding, the reality of his lost youth.

Similarly, 'Age' (p.30) through a number of linked images,

expresses a mood of disappointment and pessimism. The image of an 'inhabited lighted tenement' anticipates the grim images of 'The Old Fools' but the swift transformation from clothing to cloud to listener to hunter is reminiscent of Symbolism: (my emphasis)

"My age fallen away like white swaddling
Floats in the middle distance, becomes
An inhabited cloud ...

O you tall game I tired myself with joining!

... By now so much has flown
From the nest here of my head that I needs must turn,
To know what prints I leave, whether of feet,
Or spoor of pads, or a bird's adept splay".

The 'prints', 'spoor' or 'adept splay' are the assaults upon time. In 'At Grass' (p.45), acknowledged as one of Larkin's finest poems, the horses accept their loss of fame and the fact of their uselessness. While the horses should not be seen as symbols or mythical beasts, as David Timms points out,²⁶ their stillness is a sign of their resignation. While the men who enjoyed and profited from the horses' fame strove to keep their memories alive ('artificed to inlay faded classic Junes') but failed in spite of having 'almanacked' their names to make them immortal, the horses 'stand anonymous'.

The discreet and almost understated technical skill in 'At Grass' does not obtrude into the poem. An a.b.c. a.b.c. rhyme scheme allows a tolling echo to wind throughout the poem, its to-and-fro movement quietly mimicking the movement of 'tail and mane' or the slow moving about of these horses. The iambic octosyllabic metre is soothing, underlining the dreamily

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reflective mood of the poem.

In the first stanza, an interesting pattern of preposition line-endings 'out'; 'in'; 'about'; 'on' allows a delicate hesitation, at the same time keeping the language direct and non-pedantic. It is only words like 'distresses' and 'cold shade' which evoke sinister meanings and act as warnings that this calm pastoral poem is not all loveliness.

As the horses' former glory is evoked in the second and third stanzas, and the human attempts to make them 'legends in their life-time' it is seen that nostalgia and the urgency of immediate affairs jostle each other. The names of the horses, engraved on trophies are almost forgotten as the marks are rubbed out:

... their names were artificed,
To inlay faded, classic Junes.

The fragmentary expressions in the third stanza convey in visual flashes the excitement of a race meeting and the reversal of the iambic foot in the first three lines imitates the galloping of the horses:

Silks at the start; against the sky
Numbers and parasols: Outside,
Squadrons of empty cars, and heat.

But interestingly, there is little real other verbal evocation of them - the focus is on the race-goers, on the 'Cups and Stakes and Handicaps'. The stanza ends in an imitation of the

excited shout of the cry as the last two-and-a-half lines are unbroken:

... then the long cry
 Hanging unhusht till it subside
 To stop-press columns on the street.

As observations return to the horses' present state, the quiet rhythm of the first stanza is resumed:

Do memories plague their ears like flies?
 They shake their heads ...

Larkin aptly employs longer nine-syllabled lines which contrast with the gaiety of the previous stanza. If the mood is quieter, it is also more sombre. The 'cold shade' of the first stanza has lengthened into an overflowing dark ('dusk brims the shadows') and the allegory of day corresponding to life is clearly stated, and the excitement of the animated, busy race-course has been replaced by the 'unmolesting meadows'. Their names, though 'almanacked' exist only in cold trophies; while 'almanacked' itself has a sinister echo of 'knacker' and the ultimate fate of all useless horses.

The last line runs on into the next stanza and 'slips' into oblivion in the same way that the horses have 'slipped their names' as well as their bridles and saddles. Enjambement across the stanza ensures that the metre 'slips' as well. The anthropomorphic tinge of 'may gallop for what must be joy' emphasizes the poignancy of their present circumstances, and echoes of

their past life linger in 'not a field-glass sees them home'; as they are now anonymous, there is no significance in their movement or in their lives. They await patiently the kindness and care of the 'groom and the groom's boy'.

Whereas 'At Grass' revolves around the differences between the flux and the arrest of time, the unrhymed ten-line 'Going' (p.21) while echoing a number of images from the former poem, makes its statements in less concrete images and the unanswerable questions are posed uncomfortably at the end:

There is an evening coming in
 Across the fields, one never seen before,
 That lights no lamps.

Silken it seems at a distance, yet
 When it is drawn up over the knees and breast
 It brings no comfort ...

... What is under my hands,
 That I cannot feel?

What loads my hands down?

What is concluded from this distressing state is that the heavy and painful burden of the past immobilizes the speaker who is held captive by it.

The past, which has to be accommodated and reviewed with not too much regret or anxiety, is seldom successfully redeemed. However, 'Church Going' (p.28) is a notable exception and probably rates as one of his most important poems, having been frequently discussed and anthologized.

The large nine-line stanzas seem to fulfill Larkin's wish:

I should like to write a poem with such elaborate stanzas that one could wander round them as in the aisles and side-chapels of some great cathedral. 28

Al Alvarez, commenting rather disparagingly on the poetry of the Movement, and on Larkin's in particular, finds:

A kind of unity of flatness. The pieties of the Movement were as predictable as the politics of the thirties' poets. They are summed up at the beginning of Philip Larkin's 'Church Going'.

Quoting two lines from 'Church Going':

... Hatless, I take off
My cycle clips in awkward reverence.

Alvarez makes the following judgement:

This, in concentrated form, is the image of the post-war Welfare State Englishman. 29

This remark which has provided a celebrated anti-Movement summary and a catch-phrase of 'negative feedback' is misapplied to 'Church Going'. While the self-parodying cyclist may not be motivated by piety as he enters the church, his purpose nonetheless is not to sneer.

In two stanzas a passing cyclist's random visit to an empty unprepossessing church is described. His removal of his cycle-

clips, his 'awkward reverence' and exaggerated ignorance about the 'brass and stuff/Up at the holy end' belong to the deliberately forged satiric personae who make frequent appearances in this and later collections and poems. John Wain, in correspondence with London Magazine compares the character to creations of late nineteenth century French poetry - Laforgue and Corbière in particular.³⁰

At the beginning of the poem, in spite of assumed ignorance on the part of the observer, there is a kind of ordering through lists which catalogue the items of church furniture or decoration. In the first two stanzas these are:

... matting, seats, and stone,
 And little books; sprawling of flowers, cut
 For a Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff
 Up at the holy end; the small neat organ ...

This itemization of visible objects corresponds to the 'first-look' inventory of the most obvious items in the church - present in all, or most churches. There is nothing strange or outstanding about them. As he admits in more serious tones in the third stanza, this visitor often does stop at churches in mute appraisal of the function of the church - an admission which he makes still later.

The inventory, however, includes intangible and imponderable aspects, too:

... a dense, musty, unignorable silence,
 Brewed God knows how long ...

At the realization that the Church is likely to fall eventually into disuse and disrepair, there is a sad wondering about its function in the past and its place in the future. These doubts are expressed again in a catalogue of questions:

Wondering ... 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...

As the poem develops, the tone becomes more serious: the self-mocking, self-deprecating cyclist of the first stanza has become critical and sarcastic as he presents yet another catalogue - this time of the possible visitors of the future. If the church and its function fall completely into disuse, then the gatherer of simples for a cancer and the superstitious believing few will be eclipsed by a different group; these people are the 'ruin-bibbers randy for antique', the mock (and mocked-at) self-styled archaeologists and historians. The scorn with which they are described leaves little to be imagined about the speaker's attitude and their inappropriate hungers and lusts will scarcely be satisfied by what the church (building or institution) can offer. The last question returns to the speaker at the start; a diffident, uninformed individual, but who, as his predecessor had, has an inarticulate need for the church because

... knowing the ghostly silt
 Dispersed, yet tending to this cross of ground
 Through suburb scrub because it held unspilt
 So long and equably what since is found,
 Only in separation - marriage, and birth,
 And death, and thoughts of these - for whom was built
 This special shell? ...

The image of the church like a chalice, holding 'unspilt' the most important desires and longings of human existence, is especially felicitous. In an age which has become secularised, this acknowledgement, and from an individual whose agnosticism is less uncomfortable than belief, of 'Power of some sort or other going on' is a poised and noble tribute. The unique, sacramental role of the church holding everything 'unspilt' brings together all the other scattered elements of humanity. These elements are unified not only through images and the associations of those images, but also through the syntax of catalogues and inventories which becomes more explicit and more serious as the poem unfolds. The real function of the church is to bring together the 'dispersed' elements of existence. Sectarian interests of pride and egotism, being divisive, must - or should - be subdued, and this is conveyed in the phrase 'tending to this cross of ground'. (The *two meanings* of 'tending' should not be overlooked: it means 'caring for' as well as 'leaning towards'.) Almost involuntarily the great rites of passage in life are enacted in the church: birth, marriage and death. No wonder that the diffident cyclist is pleased to stand in silence here - even his 'awkward reverence' has been transformed to a more dignified pose.

The final stanza with its thrice-repeated 'serious' is itself weighty and is in complete contrast to the jaunty beginning of the poem while the elevated language allows the 'musty, unignorable silence' to be transformed into the 'blent air' of harmonious understanding and a sense of wholeness and integrity which were

not discernible in the first two stanzas. The random lists of the opening stanzas are no longer important since the 'hunger in one self to be more serious' overwhelms all other impulses. The 'compulsions' met and 'recognised and robed as destinies' have been transcended in expression that attains an almost anthem-like solemnity. 'Gravitating' recalls the 'serious house on serious earth' in its meaning as well as recalling the pun of 'tending'. Drawn to this place because of a 'hunger to be more serious' the people who still come to the church, whether of their volition, or whether through forces which they cannot comprehend, will find that this is a 'proper place to grow wise in'. The final line issues its memento mori and includes the pun in 'gravitating'.

This poem though, is not religious in any sectarian sense; Larkin is concerned 'with going to church', not with religion.

I tried to suggest by the title - and the union of the important stages of human life - birth, marriage and death - what going to church represents. 31

'It describes' continues Andrew Motion, basing his remarks on the above extract, 'a strictly secular faith: his speculation about what churches will become when they fall "completely" rather than partially "out of use" lead him to a conclusion in which the fear of death and the loss of religious belief are counteracted by an ineradicable faith in human and individual potential'. 32

This attitude is one which is consistently held and is expressed again in several poems of High Windows.

CHAPTER III

The Whitsun Weddings, appearing in 1964, nine years after The Less Deceived, had a mixed critical reception. Larkin's admirers acclaimed the book, finding - to quote one representative voice - that:

This unperturbed, unenvious and compassionate poet of doubt, common experience, and the search for truth has a reverence for the vastness around us and stands on the brink of eternity wondering whether it will be day, twilight or night when we are dead. ¹

There were, however, those who felt that since so many of the poems repeat earlier themes and styles none of them 'would look out of place in The Less Deceived ... Mr Larkin is consistent to the point of being static.'² A. Alvarez, whose reservations about Larkin have been expressed in trenchant terms, states in Beyond all this Fiddle that while:

Larkin's themes may have changed superficially [in the last twenty years] ... his style has developed not at all ... his style is his theme, it is a means of deprecation, of playing down, a beautiful avoidance of coming out for anything... in The Less Deceived it was love ... in [The Whitsun Weddings] the constant theme he edges around is death. ³

These critical judgements seem themselves to reflect the paradoxically affirmative quality of the diffident attitudes so often discernible in the poetry itself. Sadness, defeat, failure and impermanence are the themes which constantly recur.

If the poetry is sad, it is because, as Philip Larkin says, much of my life is sad:

It's very difficult to write about being happy.
Very easy to write about being miserable. And
I think writing about unhappiness is probably
the source of my popularity, if I have any -
after all most people are unhappy ...⁴

Having declared Thomas Hardy as his mentor and acknowledged him indeed as his chief influence Larkin remarks on that sadness which was the 'maturing experience' for Hardy's modern man: 'The element which is particularly his ... the imaginative note he strikes most plangently ...' is the sometimes gentle, sometimes ironic, sometimes bitter 'but always passive apprehension of suffering.'⁵ Some of Hardy's titles would suit Larkin: Time's Laughingstocks, Life's Little Ironies, Human Shows. Fifteen of the short poems in Satires of Circumstance show ironic reversals: the woman visitor described in 'At Tea' is, unbeknown to the bride, her husband's former mistress; only in the last line is the situation made clear to the reader:

And he throws her a stray glance yearningly.⁶

Against this revelation, her polite admiration of the new house and its appointments echoes hollowly.

Ironies allow further discoveries to be made about one's own and others' behaviour and it is by means of this device that Larkin's work shows the influence of Hardy. While his poems

may not have the same narrative style, it is true to remark that reflections about curious circumstances reveal the irony and satire of these circumstances to the persona in the poem.

In The Whitsun Weddings a more securely ironic, detached point of view is evident than ^{was discernible} in the two earlier collections. Although Larkin rejects the notion of 'development', he grudgingly acknowledges a certain change:

I suppose I'm less likely to write a really bad poem now, but possibly equally less likely to write a really good one. If you can call that development, then I've developed ... I just don't know. I don't think I want to change, just to become better at what I am. 7

The themes which recur in The Whitsun Weddings are those of the transience of love and life; of failure and the illusory nature of promises. But opposed to these, and often appearing as the implicit alternative, is an expression of optimism and belief in human endeavour which is endorsed by the promise of nature's capacity for renewal. 'First Sight' - p. 36 - is, in part, an example of this. Describing the newly-born lambs stumbling in the snow, the poet emphasizes the dark coldness of their first experience of the world where they 'meet a vast unwelcome'. The lambs do not know about Spring and the changes it will bring - but the poet does. He points out that:

there lies ...
 Hidden round them, waiting too,
 Earth's immeasurable surprise.
 They could not grasp it if they knew,
 What so soon will wake and grow
 Utterly unlike the snow.

There are echoes of the brightness and optimism of 'All catches alight' of The North Ship. (See discussion Chapter I, p.3) - But more often, the discoveries which the poems allow, lead to a deeper definition of one's own sadness, or loneliness leading in turn to a questioning of the validity of one's point of view. Life presents numerous possibilities for choice. A poem which Larkin describes as a 'narrative railway-journey poem'⁸, 'Dockery and Son' (pp. 37 - 38) is a Proustian revival of memories which return when the narrator visits his old college at Oxford after attending the funeral of a friend. (As Larkin's own comment on his being 'death-suited' explains).⁸ There are also deeper considerations and the poem provokes meditations on the part of the persona:

Many of Larkin's poems ... have the specific density of descriptive detail - often autobiographical - ... The detail is at once natural and resonant. The poem has the simple fascination of an honestly reported life - even suggesting the moment-to-moment flow of consciousness.⁹

This 'moment-to-moment flow of consciousness' in 'Dockery and Son' is the reflection on a younger contemporary of the narrator whose son is now a student at his father's college. The bachelor speaker is perplexed about, and slightly envious of, Dockery's ability to have made up his mind about marriage and parenthood

at the age of nineteen or twenty. Larkin says of this poem:

'It is about one of those jolts that life gives you.'¹⁰

This consideration forces the speaker to revise his firmly-held convictions about marriage and its material and emotional responsibilities:

... To have no son, no wife,
No house or land still seemed quite natural ...

Dockery's views, though, are very different:

Convinced he was he should be added to!
Why did he think adding meant increase?
To me it was dilution ...

These admissions, made on the homeward journey occur in the somewhat incoherent way that such thoughts may - between stations or between dozing and being awake. The railway lines seen at the end of a platform at Sheffield seem to be a symbol of the different directions lives may take:

... I...walked along
The platform to its end to see the ranged
Joining and parting lines reflect a strong
Unhindered moon ...

The enjambement across the stanza between the two adjectives, 'strong' and 'unhindered', is as Dan Jacobson remarks,

the largest hindrance he can make so the force of 'unhindered' can paradoxically come upon us as the

moon comes between the speaker ... with all the distance and emphasis between it and him mimicked in the blank space the reader's eye has just traversed ... 11

Alvarez's earlier disparaging remark about style being theme is vindicated in 'Dockery and Son' where the iambic pentameters in the eight-line stanzas are scarcely interrupted and the poem acquires the quality of that 'moment-to-moment flow of consciousness'. Enjambement, not only within each stanza, but also across the stanzas ensures that rhythm and rhyme persist, in spite of syntax or 'prose meaning'. This technique is used effectively to convey a degree of subtlety in an apparently 'direct' poem far beyond the limits of its prose meaning.

The half-formulated thoughts ('How much ... How little ... Yawning, I suppose/I fell asleep ...', and 'Of ... No, that's not the difference: rather how ...') are also 'ranged, joining and parting' as has been his life thus far. The railway lines, like the lines of fate upon an upturned palm, seem to part and join arbitrarily without the speaker's being concerned about their implications.

That Dockery had so early made a decision which had deliberately altered the course of his life, makes the narrator aware of his own age, wondering 'Where ... these innate assumptions come from.' Styles and habits, like 'sand-clouds' rear and harden 'into all we've got/And how we got it ...'

The conclusion of the meditation is cogent and depressing:

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 theme of 'boredom' inexorably declining into 'fear' and finally into 'age and then the only end of age' is to become a major preoccupation and appears frequently in the poems of High Windows. More recently, an uncollected poem, 'Aubade' about the horror of what Larkin has called 'endless extinction' spells out the inevitability of death. Larkin prefaces it in a recording by a quotation from Thomas Hardy's 1871 diary: 'Dawn; lying just after waking: the sad possibilities of the future are more vivid than at any other time.' Concurring with Hardy's opinion, but deciding not just to lie there worrying, Larkin says he got up and wrote a poem about it. 'Aubade' confronts the terrifying reality of death, 'the only end of age':

And so it stays just on the edge of vision,
 A small unfocused blur, a standing chill
 That slows each impulse down to indecision.
 Most things may never happen : this one will...³ 12

The irony of this poem - its 'Satire of Circumstance' - becomes apparent when it is seen that it is not a dawn love-song, but a meditation on old age and death.

As has been pointed out, enjambement is an important characteristic of Larkin's style. Its use reinforces irony and enhances meaning; it can serve other purposes as well. Commenting on

'Mr Bleaney' (pp.10-11), Jonathan Raban examines the correspondence between social and poetic order. The almost senseless subordination of rhyme and metre to meaning creates what Raban calls 'a sort of tussle going on between the social dimension of the verse and the verbal patterns into which it is arranged.'¹³ The elegiac iambic pentameter is undercut by either the landlady's or the narrator's remarks, neither of which really fits the metrical pattern. Lines are shortened to suit the pentameter as in:

Flowered curtains, thin and frayed,
 Fall to within five inches of the sill,
 Whose window shows ...

and this creates what Raban describes as 'a chronic case of enjambement, in which the language of the first five stanzas of the poem gets frequently treated as if it were so much faded ribbon purchasable by the yard.'¹⁴ 'Mr Bleaney' conveys, inter alia, that rhythm can create a different sense of the poem from its direct, literal meaning.

The choice of whether or not to marry and of what the consequences of the choice would be was a recurrent theme of The Less Deceived, and it appears again in the present volume as has been shown in 'Dockery and Son'. But in 'Self's the Man' (p.24) the problem is differently stated and it has the recognisably comic trenchancy of Larkin's humorous poems. Slightly irregular metre creates a bantering tone - rhyme and rhythm recall

nursery-rhymes - to become half-mocking imitations of speech-patterns imparting to a serious moral argument the flippancy of a music-hall turn. The language, imitating working-class demotic recalls Giles's cartoons, while the mordant depiction of marriage seems to justify Bruce Montgomery's description of Larkin as a 'Parnassian Ron Glum'.¹⁵

After five stanzas of banter and argument, the tone becomes more sophisticated and the half-rhymes of 'drier/fire', 'supper/paper', 'trousers/houses' give way to rhymes which are more exact (although not as original): 'mistake/stake', 'game/same', 'hand/stand', 'can/van'. Far from being the martyr to matrimony he has appeared to be, Arnold, like Dockery, is 'out for his own ends'. The speaker, playing the 'same game' as Arnold, boasts that he feels better able to determine the limits of his intolerance and sanity. However, the final line undercuts this self-assurance and allows a measure of doubt to appear in the diffident 'Or I suppose I can' following the dash of the foregoing line.

The persona in this poem seems to echo Larkin himself who has 'remained single by choice and shouldn't have liked anything else.'¹⁶ His concluding paragraph of the introduction to All What Jazz reflects much of the humour in 'Self's the Man':

¹⁵ Sometimes I wonder whether [my readers] really exist. Truly they are remarkably tolerant, manifesting themselves only by the occasional query as to where they can buy records: just once or twice I have been clobbered by a Miles Davis fan, or taken to task by the press agent of a visiting

celebrity. Sometimes I imagine them, sullen fleshy inarticulate men, stock-brokers, sellers of goods, living in thirty-year-old detached houses among the golf courses of Outer London, husbands of ageing and bitter wives they first seduced to Artie Shaw's 'Begin the Beguine' or The Squadronaires' 'The Nearness of You'; fathers of cold-eyed lascivious daughters on the pill, to whom Ramsey Macdonald is coeval with Rameses II, and cannabis-smoking jeans-and-bearded Stuart-haired sons whose oriental contempt for 'bread' is equalled only by their insatiable demand for it; men in whom a pile of scratched coverless 78s in the attic can awaken memories of vomiting blindly from small Tudor windows to Muggsy Spanier's 'Sister Kate', or winding up a gramophone in a punt to play Armstrong's 'Body and Soul'; men whose first coronary is coming like Christmas; who drift, loaded helplessly with commitments and obligations and necessary observances, into the darkening avenues of age and incapacity, deserted by everything that once made life sweet. These I have tried to remind of the excitement of jazz, and tell where it may still be found. 17

If 'Dockery and Son' and 'Self's the Man' may appear misogynist in their views about marriage, they are also both wryly funny and the humour seems directed as much at the speaker as at his counterpart in each poem. The speaker looks at himself partly in congratulation and partly out of a rueful sense of having missed something.

In two other poems about marriage a feminine point of view is expressed and compassion for a real dilution and loss is shown. 'Afternoons' (p.44) shows the young mothers in the park with their children, being silent and rather bewildered about the unfulfilled promises of love and marriage. It is true, they have their children who are 'set free'... 'At swing and sandpit' but this brief freedom may be an escape, a needed hiatus and sought by them to remember and recapture youthful love. Their

husbands 'in skilled trades' and the chores of housekeeping and child-bearing are far from the romance represented by:

... the albums, lettered
Our Wedding, lying
 Near the television

Almost sadly they look at corners of the playground which were once their courting places.

That still are courting places
 (But the lovers are all in school)...

As 'their beauty has thickened' and the summer has faded; while the leaves have fallen 'in ones and twos', it would seem that the women too are fading and falling from their youth and almost synonymous beauty. The closing lines,

Something is pushing them
 To the side of their own lives.

summarize the sense of loss and dilution which, though they may not be able to articulate^{it} they feel with considerable pain. Similarly, 'Love Songs in Age' (p.12) shows tenderness and compassion for a widow who has discovered the disillusionment of:

'The glare of that much-mentioned brilliance, love ...'

Alone, with her memories, she must regard with sadness the love songs where the word, repeated endlessly,

Its bright incipience sailing above,
 Still promising to solve, and satisfy,
 And set unchangeably in order ...

once seemed so hopeful and meaningful. Looking at them, she contemplates again how great a gulf there is, or has been, between the words and promises of the songs, and her own knowledge and experience of love and marriage. Human life and emotions do not renew themselves as perfectly and as predictably as does nature:

And the unfailing sense of being young
 Spread out like a spring-awoken tree, wherein
 That hidden freshness, sung,
 That certainty of time laid up in store
 As when she played them first ...

It is in this reflection that she discovers that love, as extolled in love songs, does not 'solve and satisfy'. In her widowhood she understands how thinking about her marriage is not going to bring comfort, for neither now nor then had love fulfilled the promises of the songs.

... So
 To pile them back, to cry,
 Was hard, without lamely admitting how
 It had not done so then, and could not now.

The careful balance of the poem with its lines of uneven length is another glimpse of one of life's little ironies. While metre and form as shown in the above discussions allow an almost visual representation of what is intended, 'Faith

'Healing' (p.15) subordinates sense to the metrical form and Larkin may be thought to be indulging in the 'chronic enjambement' of which Raban accuses him.

In this poem, though, enjambement underlines the paradoxes which point to the ambiguous presentation of the faith-healer. This eponymous figure is an object of well-directed and justified satire. At no point is he given any name, designation or title other than the pronoun 'he' which itself acquires ambiguity and irony:

... he stands
Upright in rimless glasses, silver hair,
Dark suit, white collar ...

He epitomizes a type of American evangelist possessing the folksy sentimentality of a Norman Rockwell portrait¹⁸ and Christ-like qualities of his own endowing. His failure to notice, or to be aware of any lack in charity or pity further underline his arrogance. An early example of such paradox and irony may be seen in the multi-layered language in lines 4-6:

... [onwards to] his voice and hands,
Within whose warm spring rain of loving care
Each dwells some twenty seconds..

The contrast between the inversions in the second and third lines quoted; the biblical and archaic associations of 'dwells' and the colloquially dismissive 'some twenty seconds' - itself a paradox - is a clear example of the ironic effect which

the poem achieves. Later, in the first stanza again, the apparently solicitous questioning^{by} the faith-healer is described:

Now, dear child
What's wrong the deep American voice demands,
 And, scarcely pausing, goes into a prayer
 Directing God

Faith-healing is clearly his business, or industry, as much as car-production is Ford's or soup-making Campbell's: there must be no jolts or breaks in the production line; the prayer he 'goes into' is not unlike the routine song-and-dance of a musical review. His omniscience and failure to listen are further ironic indications of his arrogance. 'Heads are clasped abruptly' then [the sick] are 'exiled'. The women, gullible and unlovely 'sheepishly stray' 'like losing thoughts'; the faith-healer has little real care for the welfare of these petitioners and his actions strongly resemble those of the hirelings condemned by the Good Shepherd:

The hireling fleeth because he is an hireling, and careth not for the sheep. I am the good shepherd and know my sheep and am known of mine.

(St. John, ch. 10 v 13,14)

'Stray[ing] sheepishly' the women are lost to themselves as well as to the preacher from whom they vanish 'like losing thoughts'; uncomfortably the terseness of 'out of sight, out of mind' is suggested.

If the women are at fault for being credulous enough to believe in the man's sincerity, less blame must attach to them than to the preacher. Their unattractiveness, loneliness and dependence expressed as pathetic hopefulness are imperfections beyond their control; yet their poignant need for love and recognition is as valid and as ardent as those of any young beauty.

The last lines of the poem spell out an anguish which belongs to all humans desperate for love:

... In everyone there sleeps
 A sense of life lived according to love.
 To some it means the difference they could make
 By loving others, but across most it sweeps
 As all they might have done had they been loved.

The generalization of 'everyone' shows that these women are emblems of frail and suffering humanity. Their response to the 'spring rain of loving care' (itself an ironic expression) is not joyful, it is:

An immense slackening ache,
 As when, thawing, the rigid landscape weeps,
 Spreads slowly through them ...

This thaw, painfully breaking the ice-floes of loneliness would be far more valuable than the anodyne 'warm spring-rain of loving care' which the faith-healer bestows with bland indifference.¹⁹ Failing to take cognisance of what really is wrong, he would do better not to have asked the question at all.

The most serious 'wrong' is, of course, death, and a number of the poems confront the issue, if only obliquely. In 'Days' (p.27) the unanswerable questions 'What are days for?' and 'Where can we live but days?' are posed. The diurnal course does not solve the problem or help the situation nor are we helped by the ministrations of the priest or the doctor. The 'medicine men' of modern society are as helpless as their primitive counterparts : the mysteries of death confuse and frighten whenever they occur.

'Ambulances' (p.33) confronts death in the oblique way mentioned above. The subtle combination of rhyme (a.b.c.b.c.a. in each stanza), regular rhythm and the echoes of an innocuous children's street rhyme:

Touch your head,
Touch your toes
I hope I never go in one of those

present a complex statement about the suddenness and ubiquity of death. Larkin's comment in a review article of The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren by Iona and Peter Opie in which he quotes this particular jingle is worth noting:

The two chief characteristics of childhood, and the two things that make it so seductive to a certain type of adult mind, are its freedom from reason and its freedom from responsibility. It is these that give it its peculiar heartless, savage strength. 20

This heartlessness is also shown in the almost statistical computation of death and accidents which are the subject matter

of this poem. The iambic rhythm of the octosyllables and the flatness of statements like:

'They come to rest at any kerb:
All streets in time are visited-

make the ambulances modern counterparts for the Angel of Death:

Closed like confessionals, they thread
Loud noons of cities, giving back
None of the glances they absorb.
Light glossy grey, arms on a plaque,
They come to rest at any kerb:
All streets in time are visited.

'Thread' of the first line and the threading rhyme which is developed more strongly in the third stanza where repeated enjambement reinforces its effectiveness, evokes an image of the vicissitudes of life which terminates with death. The image of thread also suggests the Fates who control the lives of men. As people witness accidents, and sense the 'solving emptiness', the question posed in 'Days' is implicitly answered. At the same time there is a reminder that little can be done to alter this commonplace: the women returning home may whisper 'Poor soul' but it is, as the line states, 'at their own distress'.

The final stanza balances the first, and the 'unique random blend' of a life woven with the threads of events which had once 'cohered', 'at last begin[s] to loosen'. The complicated pattern woven during a life-time, is loosened, undone and

forgotten. The complex sentence structure conveys ~~kinetically~~ the loosening, while simultaneously spelling out the complication: if each life is 'unique' but 'random' then being born and dying are universal and unmemorable.

The two lines, 'At last begins to loosen. Far' and 'The traffic parts to let go by', with their prepositional endings 'far' and 'by' point out the looseness of the life which can so easily and so suddenly be unravelled. The commonplace of an ambulance in modern cities is a memento mori of a different kind from those which Larkin has already presented in poems like 'Days', 'Faith Healing' and some of the poems of The Less Deceived.

The poems discussed above show irony or failure in the most important of life's choices. A poem which expresses this irony, and the transience of existence most tenderly is 'An Arundel Tomb' (pp. 45-46). The carved effigies act both as the 'initial experience' and as an emblem of something preserved. Frequently Larkin has stated that for him, poetry is his response to the impulse to preserve which, he says, 'lies at the bottom of all art.'²¹ Elsewhere he has written:

I came to the conclusion that to write a poem was to construct a verbal device that would preserve an experience indefinitely by reproducing it in whoever read the poem. ²²

This 'verbal pickling', as he terms it, is certainly not a new idea:

'So long as men can breathe or eyes can see
 So long lives this, and this gives life to thee'

In 'An Arundel Tomb' there is a harmonious blending of sculpture and poetry. The tenderly sculptured effigies on the tombs of the noble couple in Chichester Cathedral provide the initial impulse and experience for this poem.

The metrical pattern (octosyllables throughout with two notable exceptions) and the a.b.b.c.a.c. rhyme-scheme are both regular with characteristic para-rhymes and one internal rhyme. They form an overall pattern which subtly, yet persistently points to the gently pervasive optimism overlaid on the sadness at the heart of the poem.

It has already been noted in 'Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album' (ch II p.56) that the realism of art and the connection with the reality of life and experience is a theme to which Larkin returns.²³ As photography was 'empirical' and 'faithful' so too should the 'sculptor's sweet commissioned grace' be regarded in 'An Arundel Tomb'. The man looking at the photograph of the girl had to remind himself that 'this was a real girl in a real place', but nevertheless had to prepare himself for the shock and pain of loss - the girl was no longer his (nor may she ever have been). In a similar way, people looking at the effigies on the Arundel Tomb have to be prepared for several 'sharp tender shock[s]'. (The absence of a comma between the two adjectives 'sharp' and 'tender' conveys

to the reader the simultaneous antithesis in what each of the words implies).

The sharpest and tenderest shock though is not in the dead husband's 'hand withdrawn' (from his left-hand gauntlet) holding his wife's hand, but it is the meaning which 'lie in stone' acquires when later questions about fidelity are raised in:

They would not think to lie so long.
Such faithfulness in effigy
Was just a detail friends would see:
A sculptor's sweet commissioned grace
Thrown off in helping to prolong
The Latin names around the base.

If seen only as a decorative element, the surprise of the clasped hands is simply a part of the 'sculptor's sweet commissioned grace' and is a detail as personal and as absurd as the 'the little dogs under their feet'. But at this point the poem moves in a different direction and its metaphorical meaning becomes more apparent, for this poem is not only about fourteenth-century sculptures, but is also about universal human attitudes and emotions which, though they alter in the course of history, have a timeless relevance as well.

If the feudal age has passed and the earl and countess have become redundant or irrelevant, the deeper longings of the human condition persist and recur. Time may have caused:

The air to change in soundless damage [and turned]

the old tenantry away', but the effigies (or the people they represent) continue to exist. As it was for the photograph album, so it is for the statues: the photographer's or the sculptor's intervention has captured a moment for posterity and fixed it for perpetuity. With admirable, but characteristic economy, Larkin conveys 'the lengths and breadths/of time' in a few sentences

... Snow fell, undated. Light
 Each summer thronged the glass. A bright
 Litter of bird calls strewed the same
 Bone-riddled ground ...

The earl and countess,

Now helpless in the hollow of
 An unarmorial age ...

are no longer relevant and their existence, as well as the age they represented, are as insubstantial and transient as the

... trough of smoke in slow suspended skeins
 which floats above their scrap of history

The 'attitude' which 'remains' is either the statue itself - the tomb - or it is the moral disposition which they represent or are believed to represent.

Because of false conjecture, and out of the context of their age:

'Time has transfigured them into

Untruth. The stone fidelity
They hardly meant has come to be
Their final blazon ...'

However, the monument remains as do those in Gray's 'Elegy' where each tomb 'Implores the passing tribute of a sigh'.²⁴

In this way the reader actually becomes one of the 'endless altered people'. The final lines are an even more relevant 'blazon' in an 'unarmorial age' because it is perceived that the tomb can prove

Our almost-instinct almost-true;
What will survive of us in love.

As has been noted, a recurrent theme in Larkin's poetry:

'has been a concern with the ways in which man's dreams, hopes, ideals, pretensions are relentlessly diminished by the reality of life.'²⁵

This does not cancel Larkin's simultaneous concern that poetry should be about giving pleasure for

'... at bottom poetry, like all art is inextricably bound up with giving pleasure, and if a poet loses his pleasure-seeking audience he has lost the only audience worth having.'²⁶

So, while much of the poetry is about failure, it can also please, entertain, elicit empathy and a feeling of identity because it provokes amusement or because, at a deeper level,

it strikes a chord of familiarity in its comment on the human condition.

Although the theme of many of the poems in this collection is the predominant sadness of the human condition, Larkin nevertheless suggests a way in which the time between birth and death may be profitably spent and may even, momentarily, offset the perennial sadness. As had been pointed out in The North Ship and The Less Deceived, work is a desirable alternative.

(The 'work poem' here is 'Toads Revisited' (p.18)). The jaunty rhythm and the paired rhymes - humour pointed often by pararhymes - park/work; noises/nurses; step-takers/jitters - underplay the serious intention of the poem. The method is similar to the one used in 'Toads' (T.L.D. p.32) but here the attitude towards the work is more affectionate. Those who have work to do, have a certain status and do not belong to the band of the eccentric and the failed. The twice-uttered 'Think of being them!' is a serious negation, even if the possibilities of this decline into failure are set in an exaggeratedly comic context:

Turning over their failures
By some bed of lobelias...

Work becomes a life-affirming, positive activity, something with which to shore against one's ruin, or against the depredations of time:

What else can I answer,
 When the lights come on at four
 At the end of another year?
 Give me your arm old toad;
 Help me down Cemetery Road.

If work is a desirable alternative to the depressing contemplation of death, Larkin makes it clear that the work and the person doing it must be worthy. The character in 'Naturally the Foundation will Bear your Expenses' (p.13) draws his biting criticism of scholastic charlatanism. Speaking of it as 'serious a poem as anything [he has] written'^{26a} Larkin has refuted descriptions of its being a lightly funny poem. The speaker, who is certainly not the poet, is a very different persona from others in The Whitsun Weddings. His crassly insensitive egosim is not unlike that of Jake Balokowsky of 'Posterity' (H.W. p.27).

The fast pace of the first sentence-stanza reflects the impatient self-importance of a jet-setting academic. Beginning with a participial phrase, the sentence moves as rapidly as the Comet which his man is impatient to catch:

Hurrying to catch my Comet
 One dark November day,
 Which soon would snatch me from it
 To the sunshine of Bombay.

The lecture which he recently delivered in America is to be rehashed in Bombay - and already the speaker is contemplating its broadcast and publication. The cosily-familiar references

to the B.B.C. and to his publishers are expressed with an irony of which he is no doubt unaware:

Perceiving Chatto darkly
Through the window of the Third.

The ironically biblical allusion shows his own inability to perceive anything at all and his blasphemy indicates his lack of reverence for anything except himself. His name-dropping and his security in his expenses being paid by the 'Foundation' further reflect his vulgarity and speciousness. Scholarship in the hands of such globe-trotters, is indeed in a parlous state. The important 'event' in this poem is not the speaker's impatience: his ire and scorn are directed at a crowd who have turned out seriously and respectfully to observe the Armistice Day ceremonies. In his scathing dismissal of these

'That day [in November] when Queen and Minister
And Band of Guards and all
Still act their solemn-sinister
Wreath rubbish in Whitehall.

It used to make me throw up,
These mawkish nursery games :
O when will England grow up? ...

he reveals his true colours.

Considering himself superior - literally and figuratively - to the crowds, he 'Outsoars the Thames'. Juxtaposed to the implications of childishness in 'these mawkish nursery games', he reveals his own limitations in his self-aggrandising vision. His

casual opportunism and arriviste attitudes are far more condemning than are the 'mawkish games' or the 'solemn-sinister/Wreath rubbish'. The alliteration, while no doubt expressing the speaker's scorn, also points to his shallowness and egocentricity. Yet the 'Crowds, colourless and careworn' referred to so disparagingly by this man are taken seriously and are treated with compassion by the poet.

It has been remarked that since one of Larkin's main concerns in his poetry is for England, someone insensitive to the honour paid to the War Dead is cause for outrage. The ~~com-~~ compassion shown for the events of the First World War and his nostalgia for the period before the war are shown clearly in 'MCMXIV' (p.28). The title, ~~M-C-M-X-I-V~~, Larkin explains in a recording of the poem, is designed to evoke the Latin inscription on a monument. 'Nineteen-Fourteen' (1914) provokes too many rehearsed reactions and as he remarks 'anything which follows is bound to seem an anticlimax'.²⁷

The poem does not attempt to be contemporary in the way that Wilfred Owen's, Siegfried Sassoon's or Isaac Rosenberg's poetry about the First World War is. This poem is really an expression of nostalgia for a period before the war and laments what the war undid. It is possible that the volunteers who fought in the First World War were persuaded by propaganda which minimized the danger and horror of the war while emphasizing patriotic ideals. That these ideals were misplaced, and that this war did not turn out to be the 'War to end all War' has been borne

out by history.

Blake Morrison points out, though, that

Larkin is not interested in the question of whether men are about to die for a false ideal, he is interested in them as privileged participants in an English tradition from which we, because of the intervention of the Great War, are excluded.²⁸

It would seem to me that Morrison's interpretation is the more accurate one for the reason that while the War is the subject of the poem, it is not the subject in the way that it is of Owen's poetry²⁹ nor is it a protest on behalf of duped volunteers.

Larkin's poem, without a main verb, creates a montage of scenes which, though presented successively, are perceived simultaneously and create most poignantly the longing for a tradition exemplified in a way of life which has vanished. The landscape which will be changed is evoked with as much compassion as are the human figures:

Moustached archaic faces
Grinning as if it were all
An August Bank Holiday lark ...

are like sepia-tinted photographs of the period.

Similarly,

... [the] dark-clothed children at play
Called after kings and queens,

are as 'archaic' and unfamiliar as are the vanished 'farthings and sovereigns' and 'The tin advertisements/For cocoa and twist ...'

The countryside, too, has changed: the ancient land demarcations of the 1085 Domesday Book are 'shadows' in the rich wheat fields. There is a probable irony in the War being like a Domesday judgement Day. This is foreshadowed in the 'long uneven lines' [of volunteers] and the 'shadowing Domesday lines' not only of fields but also of the lines of the trenches and later still, the lines of crosses marking graves in Flanders fields.

What has disappeared, too, is a world in which the social hierarchy was clearly defined and understood:

Differently-dressed servants
With tiny rooms in huge houses ...

Morrison suggests that the social order which existed before 1914 offered a stability which Larkin regrets that he and his contemporaries never had the opportunity of experiencing - a nostalgia for a clearly defined class hierarchy. Quoting John Wain, Morrison supports his opinion:

Something in every English breast hankers for the medieval chain of relationships, with everyone paying feudal homage to the person next above and receiving it from the person next below. 30

Equally important, claims Morrison, the poem expresses nostalgia for the 'tidy' 'established' forms of pre-Modernist poetry.

The long uneven lines are not just those of enlisting soldiers they are (one might fancifully suggest) the long uneven lines of Eliot's and Pound's poetry waiting to replace the "Domesday Lines" of Hardy, Housman, Edward Thomas and their forefathers. 31

The last stanza of the poem balances, and comments upon, the first. The almost antiphonial repetition of 'Never such innocence ...' with the time modifiers 'before or since' and 'again' is an elegy for the past and a way of life which has vanished. This innocence 'as changed itself to past/without a word ...' ^{is} as distant, not only as the period before the 'Great War', but as if ^{it} belonged to a Pre-Lapsarian world.

Morrison asks:

What exactly is the myth articulated in "MCMXIV"? Possibly, 'answering his question, 'it is a new version of the myth of the Fall. The Great War is the equivalent of the serpent enticing man away from his paradisaical home amongst the "flowering grasses" of England. Larkin's pity is for a race of innocents about to be exposed to experience ... Less grandiosely "MCMXIV" is a termination myth... a decisive break in English consciousness and experience.' 32

The absence of formal structure gives 'MCMXIV' a transient, floating quality. Like the age, the poem is anchorless, and its evocative collage of the past is almost like a dream. But if the poem is lamenting the past poetry of fixed forms, there are, however strenuously Larkin denies them, certain Modernist echoes. It may be appropriate to quote Ezra Pound:

Daring as never before, wastage as never before
 fortitude as never before
 disillusion as never before ... 33

That Larkin should be associated so strongly with 'tradition' may seem strange to some critics in view of his statement quoted in Enright's Poets of the 1950s:

In fact it would be true to say I make a point of not knowing what poetry is or how to read a page or about the function of myth ... As a guiding principle I believe that every poem must be its own sole freshly created universe, and therefore have no belief in 'tradition' or a common myth kitty or casual allusions in poems to other poems or poets ... 34

Larkin adds in a footnote to this that he had never intended it to be published and that the statement has been frequently misapplied: as has been shown in 'Naturally the Foundation will Bear Your Expenses', Larkin does not admire 'literary understrappers' who quote or drop names to show their importance or learning. It must, however, remain undisputed that he cherishes the tradition of England and the English way of life.

A poem which admirably demonstrates Larkin's concern for England is his own 'By the tide of Humber' poem, 'Here' (p.9) which is the opening poem of the collection. The 'hour-glass' structure follows the movement of the river as it moves from the far outskirts of Hull, to the centre of the city and then, from the river-mouth to the 'untalkative, out of reach unfenced existence' of the sea. Three participial phrases imitate and follow the movement of the river as it meanders to its

estuary. As the flow of the river cannot be checked, so too the structure of the sentence cannot be broken until the last line of the first stanza (8 lines) when the demands of syntax force a subject and a main verb. It is the 'gull-marked mud' which has been 'swerving' for so long and which finally 'gathers to the surprise of a large town'. The combined effects of syntax and prosody convey ~~verbal impacts~~ which are dramatically effective, thus the town is as much a surprise visually as it is syntactically. The cumulative technique of postponing the subject and verb allows a panoramic effect to be created as details of landscape are incorporated into the sweeping sentence which itself 'swerves' through two stanzas. Far more is suggested than would be the case in conventional structures such as 'This is ...' or 'There are ...' (Both these introductory apparent subjects are implied in the title 'Here').³⁵ While the setting for the city is deliberately anti-romantic, as in:

... fields
Too thin and thistled to be called meadows

and

the harsh-named halts ...

The surprise is moving and its

domes and statues, spires and cranes

are reminiscent of London seen in the early morning from Westminster Bridge:

Ships, towers, domes, theatres and temples lie
 Open unto the fields and to the sky 36

Perhaps another observer, in another age and place unmoved by this city, would also be 'dull of soul'.

The second stanza, the opening word of which is the main verb of the first sentence, invokes a technical surprise as well as a sense of surprise at the sight of the city. This stanza may be considered as the pivot of the poem with all the finite verbs being synonyms for converging. As the 'shining gull-marked mud gathers' at the estuary with imitative alliterative plosive consonants, other elements of the city come together: 'cranes cluster'; 'the water is barge-crowded'; residents are 'brought down' and 'push through' into the shops and super-markets. In the following stanzas, the movement unwinds from this centre and the limits of the poem expand to the limits of the horizon.

The people, 'a cut-price crowd' lured by the easy availability of goods such as:

Cheap suits, red kitchen-ware, sharp shoes, ice lollies,
 Electric mixers, toasters, washers, driers -

are not ridiculed, even though their acquisitive embracing of the indiscriminate miscellany of manufactured goods might seem to be a futile shoring up against mortality.

Some critics have observed that Larkin seems to be sneering at

the 'cut-price crowd' and their tastes for cheap, mass-produced goods. John Wain, however, comparing them to figures in an L.S. Lowry painting, finds that, as so often happens in art, these people have been endowed with humanity — ^a humanity which, in ironic reference to the shoppers in the poem, cannot be bought at super-markets or acquired through reading advertisements.³⁷ If their desires are easily satisfied in the shops as they

Push through plate-glass swing doors ...

it is not to be ~~supposed~~ that Larkin despises these shoppers, however ironically he may present them.

As the description moves away from the city, the poem expands to beyond the 'half-built mortgaged edges' to the remoteness and removal of, first 'wheat fields running high hedges', later to the 'bluish neutral distance' 'past the poppies', to a 'beach of shapes and shingle' and finally to the 'unfenced existence' of infinity.

After the realities of —

A terminate and fishy-smelling
Pastoral of ships and streets, the slave museum
Tattoo shops, consulates, grim, head-scarved wives —

none of which are developed, and so are as interesting as a list of 'things to see' in a publicity leaflet, there is an urgent

movement outwards and away from the city.

The poem, having begun with a description at a distance from the city, then moves towards it and the landscape appears to have gathered and clustered around the city and its activities.

However, the panoramic view continues and as the poem ends, so the view again becomes aloof and aerial while the focus of the observer is extended to an indefinable, infinite distance. In fact the reverse of what occurred in the first stanza is being created. Three sentences all with the apparent subject, 'Here', enact the remoteness and silence of the surrounding space:

- 1) Here silence stands
Like heat
- 2) Here leaves unnoticed thicken,
Weeds flower, neglected waters quicken,
Luminously-peopled air ascends;
And past the poppies bluish neutral distance
Ends the land suddenly beyond a beach
Of shapes and shingle.
- 3) Here is unfenced existence
Facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach.

The second of these sentences is worth a brief commentary. The list begins by evoking nature: 'leaves, weeds, neglected waters...' These seem to be quite easily recognisable elements of landscape and are presented logically. The 'luminously-peopled air' which 'ascends' is far from the 'cut-price crowd' in the super-markets. It is again the recurring image in Larkin's poetry of light which transcends and clarifies by its purity and distance. The sentence is balanced by a structure

dislocation of sense corresponds to the unfamiliar presentation of the advertisement hoardings. (Usually perceived visually and pictorially when they become strangely unfamiliar presented verbally). Ambiguities cause humorous hesitations as, for example, in lines 3 and 4:

'Cover slums with praise/Of motor oil ...'

which is as surrealistic as the image in the first part of the line where the advertisement hoardings 'Screen graves with custard' and 'block ends of streets with giant loaves'.

Through deliberate 'fore-grounding' of structure, which places subject at the end of the sentence, an eccentric and surprising effect is created which is a further example of Larkin's mimicking the visual form. Rendered in a more conventional prose word-order, the sentence would be:

'These sharply-pictured groves (line 5)
of how life should be (line 6)
shine (line 4) Perpetually (line 5)
In frames as large as windows (line 1)'

The dislocation underlines the irony in 'groves' which are not of trees, but of the advertisement hoardings - an excrescence on the modern landscape which Larkin implicitly deplores. While the dislocation of order is not disturbing, the new presentation is arresting. Winifred Nowotny,³⁹ showing how 'formal relations modify word meanings' in her discussion of the Imagist poem, 'The Red Wheelbarrow', demonstrates how ordinary

things presented in a non-utilitarian way become significant. Similarly, Larkin alters the usual relationships of language to present the familiar in an unfamiliar, and in this poem, an ironic, way. The 'ideal' presented by the hoardings is vastly different from the reality perceived by 'our live imperfect eyes'. While the pictures show cosy firesides, reality consists of 'rained-on streets and squares'.

The world of the advertisements takes little note of cruel and crude realities. Thus while 'white-clothed ones from tennis clubs' patronise 'dark raftered pubs' their angelic equanimity takes no cognizance of the adverse effects of alcohol and they do not see 'the boy puking his heart out in the Gents'; nor do the sadness of the limited luxuries of pensioners and old age ruffle their healthy, Candide-like perfection. These varying registers of language show the quick changes from the ideal (and its reality) to the real. Similarly, dying smokers experience 'Walking towards them ... As if on water' a visionary appearance on an 'unfocused she'. The near apocalyptic connotations of the vision point to the illusory quality of advertisements. The girl in the advertisement:

Who stands newly clear
Smiling, and recognizing and going dark

is as blandly unmoved by the evils of the product she advertises as are 'the white clothed ones' in the 'Pubs' unaware of the

hapless boy in the 'Gents' who has been seduced by the alcohol
their portrait advertises so winningly.

The irony of 'Essential Beauty' is repeated in 'Sunny Prestatyn'
(p. 35). A poster displaying a flagrantly perfect bathing-beauty
has been obscenely defaced. But this poster, now torn, reveals
the one beneath it which the anodyne sexuality of the girl had
only briefly hidden:

Very soon, a great transverse tear
Left only a hand and some blue.
Now Fight Cancer is there.

'Send no Money' (p.43) uses the techniques already discussed
in Larkin's more humorous poems. The humour, however, is black.
Under the near-caricature of the Victorian engraving, in horrify-
ing discovery, the questioner learns 'the way things go' when
he has let 'occurrence clobber life out/To a shape no one sees.'
Having made some of the discoveries for himself, half his life
being over, he is appalled to meet 'the bestial visor, bent in/
By the blows of what happened to happen'. There are echoes of
the debased, bestial urges of 'Dry Point'. (T.L.D. p.19) In
coarse dismissal of these lessons the speaker deplores not only
their brutality but also his youthful eagerness in:

Tracing the trite untransferable
Truss advertisement, truth

The alliterative 'tr' is like a disgusted spitting out of the words and of the experience.

In slightly different mood, 'The Large Cool Store' (p.30) while not the most profound of the poems in this collection is not merely as Ian Hamilton dismissively states, 'a rather silly poem about nighties!'⁴⁰

The shop could be regarded as a microcosm of society. Where practical clothing like:

(Knitwear, Summer Casuals, Hose,
In browns and greys, maroon and navy)

is sensible, hard-wearing and not particularly attractive. It is worn by people who

... Leave at dawn low terraced houses
Timed for factory, yard and site ...

What seems strange is that they inhabit the same world as the people who buy the 'Modes for Night', fragile garments made of artificial fibres. Their 'pretty'-sounding colours 'Lemon, sapphire, moss-rose, green' and the crisp artifice of newly-coined names like 'Bri Nylon' and 'Baby Dolls' suggest experiences far beyond the imaginings of the wearers of 'knitwear'.

Larkin uses this coy, factitious language fluently to create a

familiar scene. However, the word 'conjures' used of the world of the workers, whose lives seem anything but magical and imaginative, points to an experience which they are scarcely able to articulate. The final stanza brings the 'knitwear' and 'Bri-Nylon' worlds together and explores the world of dreams and longings - about people whose secret or intimate lives seem so different from what is known.

Before considering the title poem, it might be useful to restate Larkin's belief in the traditions, rites and rituals of society. He has repeatedly stated that he has no interest in, or knowledge of, religion and the much-discussed 'Church Going' is not a specifically religious poem, although it does express Larkin's sense of traditions.

'Water' (p.20) considers the question of religion in an unconventional, fairly detached way. This poem, of thirteen unrhymed lines and only two sentences, has a humorously pragmatic opening. Religion, like a problem in business or a bureaucracy, needs its consultants. There is an implication that where (and probably because) conventional religion has failed, a new one must be 'constructed' in much the same way as a bridge or building has to be designed and built. A new terminology and a new set of symbols must be found, too. In Christianity, the traditional initiation into the spiritual life is through baptism and its symbol and sign is water. Larkin, almost evoking fiery revivalists, proposes complete,

and probably repeated, immersion:

My liturgy would employ
 Images of sousing,
 A furious devout drench,

The first stanza consists of one sentence only and is a matter-of-fact statement of what this speaker would do in a given situation. The correct conditional and subjunctive verbs express caution. The second sentence, spread over the next three stanzas, continues the supposition. His 'new' religion would be a thorough-going affair and 'going to Church' would fulfil more than ordinary social niceties.

[It] Would entail a fording
 To dry, different clothes. 41

It seems as if the idea of a sacrament is taken literally; the outward and visible signs of the inner spiritual reality must be tangibly manifested.

The final stanza, of four lines, following the previous three of three lines each, resolves and summarizes some of the violence and movement suggested earlier. The glass of water 'Raised in the east' evokes simultaneously the star which appeared in the east leading the Magi to the Infant Christ, and the chalice raised at Mass in consecration. However, there is no mystery, nor are there any theological arguments about transubstantiation; there is no sense of strife or division because, in its purity

and simplicity, the water allows 'any-angled light' to 'congregate endlessly'. The implications are that there would be no dogma or inflexibility in Larkin's reconstructed religion while certain puns inhere in 'angled' suggesting the earliest inhabitants of England, as well as 'Anglican' the traditional religion of 'Angle-land'. Light, as a recurrent image of freedom and transcendence in Larkin's poetry is the full revelation of this religion.

The speculative mood of the poem with its meticulously correct conditional and subjunctive verbs following the 'If' clause of the first line, may seem dismissive and detached. However, while apparently mocking existing religious practices, the poem has a certain satirical value in pointing to the departures in religious observances from the ideal.

Indirectly, Larkin restates his belief in the traditions which act as social cement at the important moments of life. 'Church Going' was a speculative comment on what England would be like without churches; 'Water' is about a renewed religious rite; 'The Whitsun Weddings' is a serious statement about belief in marriage even if other poems have mocked the institution.

The title poem, occupying a central position in the collection, and immediately following 'Water' is justly celebrated and its frequent anthologizing and the large volume of critical commentary it has attracted, point to it as one of Larkin's major poems.

Using a journey as a metaphor for life, or one of the stages in life is a cliché and in a recording of the poem, Larkin refers to this one and to 'Dockery and Son' somewhat dismissingly as 'narrative railway journey' poems. 'The Whitsun Weddings', however, rises above the cliché and is more than a mere 'railway journey narrative'.

Baudelaire's dictum⁴² that there should be a 'mathematical exactness' in the adaptation of metaphors, comparisons or epithets to the meaning of the poem in which they appear is a rigorous standard, but it can be stated that Larkin's images in this poem do fulfil this demand. Andrew Motion avers that despite Larkin's disclaimers, traces of Symbolism can be found in his poetry and that while 'The Whitsun Weddings' is firmly rooted in concrete reality, the ending of the poem, together with the correspondence between the journey and a stage of life, allows for a possible Symbolist interpretation.

Before considering the poem in greater detail, it might be useful to note that there seem to be technical allusions to Orlando and The Waves. In either case, opposite effects are created: the Orlando reference suggests a fragmentation of images - a frequently-used technique by Larkin. Parts of a whole are glimpsed and then disappear. An illusion is created of fragments moving while the viewer remains stationary. The truth is that this impression can be created only if the viewer is moving (in a vehicle) through a static landscape. In Orlando parts of London are glimpsed in this way and there is a fragmented

sense of aperçus:

'What was seen begun - like two friends starting to meet each other across the street - was never seen ended. After twenty minutes the body and mine were like scraps of torn paper tumbling from a sack and, indeed, the process of motoring fast out of London so much resembles the chopping up small of identity which precedes unconsciousness and perhaps death itself that it is an open question in what sense Orlando can be said to have existed at the present moment.' 43

The first part of the poem is particularly rich in such 'scraps' and little is resolved. The confusion of a railway journey is enacted and there are elements of both the new and the familiar. (Both Larkin's novels use a train journey with convincing effect to introduce the main characters into their new experiences.)⁴⁴ The easy, colloquial tone of the opening lines takes cognisance of the audience - an acknowledged technique in Larkin's work - and the speaker-narrator begins his journey with a sense of relief that he has caught his train and that he can relax and read on his way to London.

'All windows down, all cushions hot, all sense
Of being in a hurry gone.'

The train passes through a recognizable urban landscape:

'Behind the backs of houses, crossed a street
of blinding windscreens, smelt the fishdock...'

However, even at this early stage, there is evidence of the careful craftsmanship. The large ten-line stanzas are all in

near-iambic pentameter (with the notable exception of the second line in each case - which is a four syllabled line) and there is a regular a.b.a.b.c.d.e.c.d.e. rhyme-scheme. These technical aspects, while important structurally, are underplayed: almost like the fact that the train time-table and its route are defined and predictable, while the events of the journey are not, and that each journey, because it transports different passengers is unique and distinct. Similarly, within the images themselves, there are surprises, and if the 'urban landscape' of a receding town is familiar, the way in which it is presented is not.

For instance, the suggestion of a level crossing is rapidly and subliminally conveyed: it is a 'street of blinding wind-screens': there is no further need to describe the lines of cars held up at the crossing.

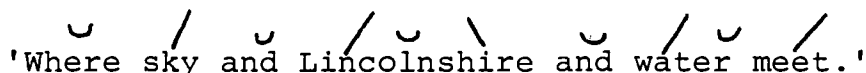
Immediately, as the city is finally left behind, there is the cohesion of landscape in the final line of the stanza:

'... thence

'The river's level drifting breadth began,
Where sky and Lincolnshire and water meet.'

This stately image with its slower rhythm and careful stresses imitates the meanders of the river and evokes, too, the final stanza of 'Here'. The regular iambic pentameter with the final syllable of 'Lincolnshire', placed almost medially bearing a lighter stress than the other stressed syllables, reinforces

the stateliness of the line:


 'Where sky and Lincolnshire and water meet.'

The fragments have already cohered and the archaic 'thence' rather than 'then' or 'there' elevates the tone and points to the more serious considerations which will be presented later in the poem.

The second stanza resumes the mood of the first lines and again there are fragments of landscape. Once more there are echoes of 'Orlando':

'... and then green screens were held continuously on either side, so that her mind regained the illusion of holding things within itself and she saw a cottage, a farmyard and four cows, all precisely life-sized.'⁴⁵

As this train journey continues, details accumulate and the landscape is fragmented:

'Wide farms went by, short-shadowed cattle, and
Canals with floatings of industrial froth..'

But underlying the detail is a sense of permanence or continuity; as in the journey itself, there is a sense of purpose and of destination. So, at the beginning of the second stanza this Whitsun afternoon seems predictable and unremarkable:

'All afternoon, through the tall heat that slept
For miles inland,
A slow and stopping curve southwards we kept ..'

It is this feeling of stability which informs the sustained metaphor of the journey - marriage; the arrival - the sense of becoming.

Details of the journey might at times be like some of the towns, 'New and nondescript'; or like the hothouse which 'flashed uniquely' they could be isolated and particular. What is important is that the first two stanzas deliberately give the setting for the main event which at first is apparently casually observed. The technique was used as well in 'Church Going' when the almost flippant^{ly}-presented, self-parodying glance into the abandoned church sets the scene and prepares, indirectly, for the elegiac ending.

The descriptions of the wedding guests and their clothing have been the subject of much criticism - a great deal of it unfavourable. David Holbrook and Merle E. Brown notably, have accused Larkin of a sneering, slick journalistic approach and have found little in the poem which considers the high seriousness of marriage. It is true that Larkin does not in his epithalamium express his views in the way that Eliot does in 'East Coker'.

The association of man and woman
 In daunsinge, signifying matrimonie -
 A dignified and commodious sacrament. 46

However, he is as aware of the importance of the institution as are the young women spectators and there is admitted change in

attitude from the cynical speaker in 'Self's the Man' or from the sad compassion shown in 'Love Song in Age' and 'Afternoons'.

It might be useful to consider the parts of the poem where 'Bright knots of rail ... Came close': the moments in which, the details of clothing or speech receding, the attitude remains.

As early as the third stanza where the weddings are mistaken for a noise —

... whoops and skirls
of ... porters larking with the mails —

he has begun to take note. As the train leaves the station, the narrator is aware of the girls 'all posed irresolutely, watching us go'.

As if out on the end of an event
Waving goodbye.

The technical point to note is the enjambement across the stanza which enacts the irresolute pose. The implied attitude and frame of mind on the part of the girls also corresponds to their tentative stance. These girls, hoping themselves to be married might yet be uncertain of what marriage will really be like: it is desirable, but uncertain. Larkin's other poems about marriage, as already shown, indicate that the reality is far from the romantic enchantments of popular literature — and also, probably far from the idealism of the sacrament of matrimony.

The girls, through their clothing 'parodies of fashions, heels and veils' are 'marked off unreally from the rest'. The colours of their dresses, 'lemons, mauves, and olive-ochres', together with their 'perms' 'nylon gloves and jewellery substitutes' separate them in a very remarkable way from the coarse uncles, sweaty fathers and 'loud and fat' mothers. These girls are still struck by the mystery of marriage even if the older women have forgotten their own dreams and hopes or have become saddened by marriage and the event is like 'a happy funeral'. For these girls in an unconsciously Freudian attitude, 'gripping their handbags tighter' marriage is a 'religious wounding' at which they stare and perhaps secretly contemplate their own future socially-sanctioned deflowering.

Little has been said about the married couples themselves who have boarded the train out of sight of this spectator whose coach is probably at the head of the train. However, once the last wedding is aboard, the brides and grooms are:

Free at last
And loaded with the sum of all they saw,
They hurried towards London.

The journey which has been 'slow and stopping' is now nearing its end and, 'shovelling gouts of steam' the train picks up speed as the destination comes closer and becomes more attainable. Again details of the fragmented landscape are presented:

Now fields were building-plots, and poplars cast
Long shadows over major roads ...

An Odeon went past, a cooling tower,
And someone running up to bowl ...

The details are fixed and frozen, but seem of little consequence
to all the viewers except one. All the passengers on the train
share the same experience, but are unaware of each other:

... and none
Thought of the others they would never meet
Or how their lives would all contain this hour.

The sense of a common experience, this particular time being
shared and 'contained' by these lives is far from the minds of
most. In The Waves, Bernard observes:

*Our community in the rushing train, sitting together
with only one wish, to arrive at Euston, was very
welcome. But behold! It is over; we have attained
our desire. 47

At this point, the speaker is able to alter his point of view
and imagine the destination in an aerial, or stylized way:

I thought of London spread out in the sun,
Its postal districts packed like squares of wheat.

The rapid move from the real, tangible train to the abstract
view of London looking like a map is convincing: the houses
and the street blocks are like squares - which could be postage
stamps or simply the pastoral image of adjacent fields - 'squares

of wheat'. The simile links the vision of London to the idea of marriage and that of the harvest and fecundity. There are echoes of the simple desires of the correct ordering of human affairs.⁴⁸

Aimed like an arrow, the train goes to its target and the 'frail travelling coincidence', the arbitrary meeting of people, is ready 'to be loosed'. The power of the marriage service, the importance of the tradition is celebrated because, being changed, these newly married couples can go forth and populate the earth.

CHAPTER IV

Most critics are agreed that High Windows which appeared in 1974 is Larkin's finest poetic achievement. Since then, apart from a few uncollected poems, he has published no other poetry. In a recent interview in Paris Review, he has said:

It's unlikely I shall write any more poems ...I did write slowly [referring to the writing of 'The Whitsun Weddings' - poem] partly because you're finding out what to say as well as how to say it, and that takes time. ¹

and elsewhere:

I didn't give poetry up - it gave me up. ²

The themes and preoccupations of the poems in High Windows are not very different from those of earlier volumes. Greeting this one with enthusiasm, Clive James remarks that while there are no startling changes, there are 'surprises':

... the poems which one had thought of as characteristic turn out to be more than that - or rather the character turns out to be more than that. ³

James goes on to discuss Larkin's dislike of the idea of development and remarks on the change in, or the deepening of, Larkin's writing:

He has managed to go on clarifying what he was sent to say. The total impression of High Windows is of despair made beautiful. ⁴

The main thematic concern seems to be the problems associated with life and living and the ordering of one's priorities. In 'Money' (p.40), wondering about his own attitude, the persona comes to this conclusion:

Clearly money has something to do with life.

But the conversational style is deceptive, the maxim too pat and, as the reader discovers as well, the solution is not so simple. A recurrent image of clarity, aloofness, the perspective - that of the 'long french windows' (cf 'Dry Point' T.L.D. p.19 or Poem XXXII T.N.S. p.48) - allows the distance which permits judgement and

... like looking down
 From long french windows at a provincial town,
 ...
 In the evening sun - the distance and clarity allow the
 real conclusion:

It is intensely sad.

Life, then, in these poems often is an affair of sadness - but not always.

Living is not an abstract philosophical concept, but a vigorous, assertive affair expressed in activities as ordinary as eating, drinking, and, most important, earning one's living (a significant preoccupation, if one considers the work poems - inter alia 'Toads', 'Toads Revisited' or Poem 'XX' from TNS).

One of the dominant expressions of living is the creation of a cosy protective interior whose familiarity shelters the inmates from surrounding, inimical darkness. Another aspect is sex which may, or may not, mean marriage (cf 'Self's the Man'; 'Dockery and Son'; 'Afternoons' all in TWW). Set against these intense, and sometimes intimate, expressions of living are two poems which satirically consider a man's superficial involvement in society. The theme of death, frequently underlying other poems, is directly confronted in two massive memento mori poems, 'The Old Fools' and 'The Building'. Two or three poems, however, offer a kind of comfort as they show how secular rituals have a special validity in an age in which the traditional sacramental functions of the Church's liturgical cycle have been superceded for so many. It is not inappropriate to consider 'Show Saturday' and 'To the Sea' as fulfilling these purposes.

Before discussing some of the poems in detail, it might be useful to consider a significant parallel in Larkin's first novel Jill written in 1946 when he was twenty-four. All the important episodes in the novel have food, eating and drinking as their focal points. John Kemp, the timid hero feels excluded from the easy camaraderie enjoyed by Christopher Warner and his friends. He wavers between envy of their apparent social superiority and bonhomie, which he seeks unsuccessfully to emulate; and disapproval of Christopher's laziness, drunkenness and exploitative bad manners. Later, when by chance he meets Gillian, a girl who corresponds to the imagined sister Jill

about whom he has woven a fantasy, he invites her to tea in his rooms. Several pages are devoted to the elaborate preparations made, but when the girl fails to appear and Christopher's friends devour the tea, John's humiliation is complete. Other sequences in the book about food allow the reader to infer that it is a symbol of power, pleasure or comfort (Andrew Motion's chapter on the Larkin novels deals in detail with the food symbolism).⁵ This dissertation has not included any detailed analysis of the novels except insofar as they indicate themes expressed later and more concisely in the poems. It is in some of the poems of High Windows that this relationship between food and life is clearly evinced.

The three poems entitled 'Livings' (pp.13 - 15) and 'The Card Players' (p.23) could, in their robust affirmation of life, be considered as constituting a central statement of this attitude. These poems show people either alone or in a group eating, drinking (or finishing) a meal.

In 'Livings I' the speaker/persona refers less to the means by which he earns his living than he does first to the dully predictable meal in the '-- Hotel' in '--ton'; the progression from 'soup to stewed pears' indicates a movement of time (as do the adverbs at the head of the second and third stanzas). His other preoccupation as he consumes the items on the menu at this table d'hôte, is reading the classified advertisements in 'the --shire Times'. These advertisements themselves are a list and form another sort of progression. After dinner he

joins a few acquaintances in the 'Smoke Room' for 'Whisky and cigars'. If the style and mode of life seem pedestrian, they are justified by Larkin's comment:

Nowadays nobody believes in poetic subjects any more than they believe in poetic diction. 6

Certainly boring menus and predictable advertisements are not 'poetic subjects': the plain style short-hand imitates the short-hand lists by which this man lives and also prepares for the contrast of the simile and change of rhythm in the final stanza. Here, the speaker, almost in spite of himself, is momentarily taken from his egocentric observations to be made aware of the world beyond the hotel. The striking simile and stately rhythm of

/ ... ă big sky /
Drains down the estuăry/like the bed/
Of ă gold/river/...

are in sharp contrast to the matter-of-fact concerns of the first two stanzas. The implied metaphor of 'drains' at the beginning of line 2 (echoing 'empty' which describes the square in the previous line) allows the river mouth to reflect the infinity of the sky as well as suggesting the movement of the water. The solitary light from a building, the night sky, the movement of time and the vastness of space are not merely decorative elements which prepare for the speaker's unexpected doubts; they also serve to link this first section of the poem to the other two where it seems that only the solitary

light-house keeper (in number II) or the detached narrator (III) is aware of the sky wheeling above the distant earth.

As he drowns:

Between ex-Army sheets, wondering why
[He] thinks it's worth coming ...

and moves from controlled, conscious thought to dreams, his doubts are expressed by the present participle 'wondering'. These doubts are continuous; they underlie, it is implied, all his more mundane thoughts. 'Wondering' introduces its own noun clause - 'Why I think' - which, while matching the structure of 'I drowse ... wondering', indicates a still deeper layer of the man's awareness. Vaguely questioning the validity or the relevance of repeating his father's habits, he reflects that 'It's time for change, in nineteen twenty-nine'. Yet it is unlikely that this unimaginative, diffidently self-satisfied man will change. History has allowed the irony of the line to have its fully grim effect. The Wall Street 'crash', world-wide depression and massive unemployment in the 1930s and the Second World War ten years later.

The second poem in the triptych has puzzled those critics who have interpreted the life of the light-house keeper to be symbolic of the artist. While it is tempting to see similarities between this poem and The North Ship and even to recall the Yeatsian imagery of 'The Tower'⁷ it is too tenuous a theory to be seriously considered. The poem is in curious

contrast to its two flanking poems which both deal with recognisable, if not familiar, livings.

Metaphors which are strikingly unusual yet functional rather than ornamental, create the unfamiliar, isolated world of the light-house keeper. The 'stare' from the light and the cosy, familiar interior which he inhabits is a world as safe as the 'elsewhere' of which his radio tells him, for one shuttered against the storm. Any sense of progression is created, not by adverbs or notions of time, but by suggestions of movement given in the strongly kinetic adverbs: 'down'; 'upwards'; 'back'; 'over': these allow the movement of the ebb and flow of the tide to be experienced imaginatively and the sense of repeated movement (as of waves) is created by the line separated from the rest of the stanza in stanzas one and two. While not a refrain in the strict sense, this structure allows such a comparison to be made. Preceded by a dash after the previous four lines, there is an exclamation in stanzas one and two which serves as a refrain summarising the description/action of the foregoing lines:

Running suds, rejoice! ;

and

Creatures, I cherish you!

The fourth stanza repeats the pattern, but the dash at the end of the fifth line and the exclamation at the start of the next stanza make it correspond to a larger tide, a wave, reaching

further up the rocks. This seems likely since 'Keep it all off!' follows a stanza-long description of 'elsewhere':

Barometers falling,
 Ports wind-shuttered,
 Fleets pent like hounds,
 Fires in humped inns
 Kippering sea-pictures ...

As in 'Livingstone I' a strong statement is made about the enfolding interior which protects against the darkness and the outside. Here, although the light-house is strange to an outsider, to its inmate its familiarity is the protection against the hostile remoteness of 'elsewhere'.

A wonderful image of snow swirling and visible only in the beam of the light-house occurs in stanza five. It 'swerves' as it is 'travelling' through the light which is not a glare, but a 'stare'. This personification prepares for the second personification in the last stanza where the lone light-house keeper, 'guarded by brilliance', feels safe in his familiar living. Like the commercial traveller in Number I, his view is also slightly solipsistic since the brilliance of the light seems more significantly to guard him; not the 'lit shelved liners/ (which) grope like mad worlds westward'. The image of the ships 'groping' is an almost surreal personification and the alliterative reinforcement of l and w seems to pick up the l's and w's of 'waves' and 'billows' which, though not mentioned, are implied in the lurching movement as the ships 'grobe ... westward'.

Free verse (though in stanzas of equal length) is a further indication of this poem's independence: the other two poems in the sequence, although not strictly regular in their metre and rhythm, show regular rhyme schemes.

In 'Number III' the regular a.b.a.b.c.d.c.d. rhyme-scheme suggests order and control as might be expected in the scholarly atmosphere in which the poem is set. Although a strong case could be made for its being set in the seventeenth century, there is no real reason to assume that this is so. 'Jack Ketch' (line 8) is a reference to 'a notorious hangman and executioner who was appointed in 1663 and died about 1686. As early as 1678 his name had appeared in a ballad, and by 1702 was associated with the Punch and Judy puppet play.'⁸ Similarly, the vulgarisms 'jordan' and 'bogs' for 'chamber pot' were seventeenth century coinages, but are still current slang. What is implied in the reportage of the discussion is that it is fossilized and has changed little over the centuries.

The pattern of narration established in Number I is repeated here. Three eight-line stanzas describe a third kind of living: scholars comfortable, even smug, in their world protected against the flux and uncertainty of the exterior ^{where}

Nocturnal vapours do not please

and

Our butler Starveling piles the logs
And sets behind the screen a jordan
(Quicker than going to the bogs)

Little having changed in three or four centuries, these scholars are concerned in their living with wordly matters and worldly gain. The title of the poem evokes ecclesiastical livings and is a reminder of the earliest kind of communal scholarly life. That their conversation cannot rise above wondering

Which advowson looks the fairest
What the wood from Snape will fetch.'⁹

or that their slightly unhealthy scholarship is directed at finding 'names for pu^dendum mulieris' points to the pettiness of their donnish concerns.

They seem to be intractably sclerotic in their jokes which are told without any robust or Rabelaisian ribaldry. The alliterative list

Rheumy fevers, resurrection,
Regicide and rabbit-pie

is as random as the

Ships and Shoes and Sealing-wax ..
Cabbages and kings

of 'The Walrus and the Carpenter'. Their 'tempers and complexion' heated by wine and 'assertions' being 'oath-enforced' they express their views seemingly without much concern for one another's opinions. It will be seen that the poem has close affinities with 'The Card Players'.

In the last stanza, however, as in Number I of this sequence, there is a surprise in the last four lines. A carefully-placed line about the chiming and striking of bells allows those bells almost to be heard:

The bells discuss the hour's gradations (my emphasis)
(chiming the quarter hours).

Reminiscent of 'All Souls' Night'¹⁰ it is also a direct quotation from Jill:

He leant against the wall, sobbing dryly, as the numerous bells discussed the hour in the darkness and the frost. Their age was comforting, he could wrap himself in it like a cloak.₁₁ (my emphasis)

'Chaldean constellations' sparkling above suggest that there is a knowledge older than that contained in the 'dusty shelves of prayers and proofs'. (A scholarly *multiplication of meanings* implies manuscripts as well as mathematical 'proofs' or theological 'proofs' of the existence of God.) The poem with its implications of belonging to a different era from the twentieth century is, nevertheless, current and topical because of the consistent use of the present tense and the nature of donnish discussion which has changed so very little over the years.

The adverbs 'around/close by' indicate the town and the fields: both are cold and still, uninhabited and, in spite of the proximity implied by the words, they seem remote, hostile and

dangerous, making life inside more secure, cocooned against the minatory dark. In contrast, in the last two lines the adverbs 'above' and 'over' the 'Chaldean constellations' seem to hover in protection of the fields, the roofs, the college and their inhabitants. In between these two spaces, the tangible, smaller concerns of daily living —

A sizar shivers at his study,
The kitchen cat has made a kill —

contrast starkly with the easy conviviality in the Hall.

If what seems disproportionate attention has been given to these poems it is because, in my opinion, they form a major aspect of the main theme of High Windows. Two poems written as sonnets which make similar statements about living will be seen to complement and expand the theme of 'Livings'.

'The Card Players' (p.23) while written as a sonnet, is characterized by complete absence of lyricism in either style or choice of subject. The last line, set separately from the other thirteen, seems to be the summary and focal point of the poem. 'Rain, wind and fire!' are the hostile elements of storm and chaos and 'The secret bestial peace' is the inner, if ignoble, reality.

The card-playing characters, three of whom have Dutch-sounding names¹² might recall aspects of Dutch interior painting. However, in the same way that the poem, while a sonnet in form,

does not follow the sonnet tradition, neither does it offer the charm and delicacy of the paintings of Vermeer or De Hooch.^{12a} 'Jan van Hogspeuw', 'Dirk Dogstoerd' and 'Old Prijck' are unaware of any ridicule which their parodied names might have acquired, while their activities less centred on card-playing than on 'belching', 'pissing', 'farting' and 'gobbing' cause no offence to themselves. It is only in line 13 where Jan

... turns back and farts,
Gobs at the grate, and hits the queen of hearts.

that there is any allusion to actual card-playing. The outrageousness of the rhyme again subordinates card-playing to a secondary role.

The warm enfolding interior evokes the warm interiors described in 'Livings' - with rain and mud outside and wind clashing 'wet century-wide trees'. In their 'lamplit cave' these men, too, have a living, an island in space and time which is as sheltering and timeless as the other livings just discussed. The contrast between interior and exterior worlds is sharply high-lighted by 'century-wide trees'; the rain-filled cart-ruts and the 'deep mud lanes'.¹³

Jan van Hogspeuw, staggering to the door is in his cups and his 'pissing at the dark', while natural and necessary, is a defiance of the elements as much as an offence against social niceties. The half-line following the caesura continues the movement towards the outside and the 'rain cours[ing] in cart-ruts down the

deep mud lanes' is primitive and hostile. The warmth of the interior is pointed to by 'inside' at the start of line 4 following the brief imaginative excursion to the outside.

'Dirk Dogstoerd' pours himself some more to drink, lights his 'clay pipe with tongs' and 'belch[ing] out smoke' is equally oblivious of any offence his actions may cause. Through all this activity, 'Old Prijk' snores and his sleep is of the dead - 'his skull face firelit'. He is a kind of memento mori in spite of the crude, progenitive irony implied in his name. The fourth person in the 'lamplit cave' is an anonymous 'someone' who drinks, eats and sings. There is, in these 'scraps of song' croaked 'towards the ham-hung rafters' an element of fragmentation and disintegration but the inmates of this shelter are unaware of any disharmony. Like the drunk undergraduates in Jill,¹⁴ they are content within the living they have made, or are experiencing. Any judgement, as of 'Livings III', would be out of place since, in their inward-looking concerns, their living is a source of satisfaction and 'peace'.

The last three-and-a-half lines progress from the outside, back to the warmth and safety of the inside. The trees 'wet' and 'century-wide' may be emblems of timelessness or they may be an oblique reference to seventeenth-century Dutch landscape paintings.

... In surrounding starlessness above

there is darkness and hostility - these unchartered, impenetrable

skies are inimical and in a primitive way, the men retreat into their cave. But any sense of transcendence is wryly cancelled by Jan's turning back to 'fart' and 'gob at the grate'.

The last line summarises these men and their living - it is 'secret' and 'bestial' but it is also a 'peace'. Used in this poem, 'bestial' seems to have lost the judgemental tone it has in 'Dry Point' or 'Send no Money' where it describes a shameful, debased existence centred on unfulfilled sexual desires.

'Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel' (p.18) is one of the 'negative' poems which characterizes much of Philip Larkin's work and, in its refusal to affirm a living, it presents another side of the same coin. Its matter-of-fact title disappoints any expectations of lyricism and the 9 + 5 division is not that of the satisfying octave + sestet structure of a Petrarchan sonnet. Flat, monotonous statements, linking the themes of the poem in some ways to the description of the hotel in 'Livings I' extol neither beauty of place nor person and very little in the poem is directly human: the porter reading 'An unsold evening paper' is static, unoccupied, and the only other human beings alluded to are the departed businessmen. Yet paradoxically, a great deal in the poem is of human interest because the purpose and function of the hotel is for human use and occupation. This provincial hotel with its conventional, but pretentious name, 'The Royal Station' offers no gaiety, while its 'inhabited void' (Barbara Everett's phrase) is a symbol of isolation and loneliness.

'Light spreads darkly' - the oxymoron in the first line has anticipated the last line: 'Night comes on ...' because, wherever light is mentioned in the poem (always artificial) it is a feeble and ineffectual counter to the enveloping darkness of the exterior. Unlike the creating light of Genesis and the symbolic use of natural light in much of Larkin's poetry, these lights seem to deny life.

The poem is poised on, and composed of, paradoxes. The 'clusters of lights' which shine over 'chairs/That face each other' should suggest intimacy or conviviality. Neither result, however, is achieved: the chairs which do not seem to belong to a suite are 'coloured differently' and are 'empty' while the light is 'dark'. The loneliness and cheerlessness are repeated in the deserted dining-room which 'declares/A larger loneliness'. The table-settings ironically do not seem to suggest gastronomic delights - the 'knives and glass' being almost sinister in their shiny sharpness. 'Silence laid like a carpet' is like a shroud spread over the gloomy quiet of the room. There is the sustained anticipation - depressingly never fulfilled - of an occupancy which does not, and is unlikely to, take place. This impression is reinforced by the synonyms for loneliness: 'isolated'; 'exile'; 'shoeless' ... which accumulate in the last five lines to emphasize an atmosphere which is closer to death than to life. The full ashtrays in the Conference Room left by the salesmen who have gone back to Leeds evoke the more sinister ashes of a crematorium, and the departed salesmen themselves are like ghosts. It is worth noting, too, that the only past tense in

the poem is the present perfect which suggests a recent departure; the present participle 'leaving' underlining the recency of this departure.

Line 10 recalls the bleak emptiness of the corridors and continues the descriptions begun in the first nine lines. But the last word of the line introduces a different mood (and a new sentence). If the poem is going to be considered as a sonnet (and not just a poem of 14 lines) such identification can be justified by the last four lines which form a compressed sestet embodying the resolution and abstraction characteristic of a Petrarchan sonnet:

... How
 Isolated, like a fort, it is -
 The headed paper, made for writing home
 (If home existed) letters of exile: Now
Night comes on. Waves fold behind villages.

The hotel, seen no longer from its restricting interior of reception area, dining-room and corridors, but from the outside and with more detachment, acquires a new value. Its being likened to a fort supposes that it offers protection (and this establishes its kinship with the other poems discussed); equally though, it is isolating and, while keeping out the invasive darkness, it shuts in its visitors and by immuring, exacerbates their feelings of alienation in a dark and lonely world.

More concentrated movement and balance in the rhyming of 'How' and 'Now' (lines 10 and 13) each demanding a run-on line to

complete its sense, introduces a note of anticipation which is fulfilled dramatically in the lyrical conclusion. Lines 10 and 11 still concentrate their forces on the inside of the hotel, but lines 13 and 14 break free at last from this claustrophobic vision and swing the perception of the poem up and outwards to the darkening natural world which is indifferent to the man-made desolation and alienation of the Royal Station Hotel.

This deceptively simple sonnet has strong suggestions of Symbolism as the chairs, the ashtrays and the corridors brood and seem to emanate a particular quality of loneliness and desertion. Larkin has renounced any Symbolism or foreign influences in his poetry and has affirmed that he

Wouldn't want to write a poem which suggested [he]
was different from what [he is] ...

^{is}
and ~~not~~ wishing to give)

a false relation between art and life. 15

These statements about his own poetry were made in 1964: ten years later it is certainly possible that his poems might contain elements of Symbolism, even if unconsciously. Barbara Everett refers to:

the self-denying ordinances of Larkin's special
non-symbolic symbols 16

and perceives in this poem a particular insistence on loneliness.

The poem seems to be 'obdurately turned from the coerciveness of Symbolism'¹⁶ but nevertheless operates in the same short-hand and mysterious manner of Symbolist poems. The last lines express isolation in the compressed and almost codified, language of Symbolism.

The poems discussed above are all, directly or by implication, about living with other people and they suggest the importance of society for the individual. In much of Philip Larkin's poetry, though, there is a tension about the problem of being 'sociable' and the wish to be alone. Two such poems are 'Vers de Soci  t  ' (p.35) and 'Sympathy in White Major' (p.11), while 'Annus Mirabilis' (p.34) and 'High Windows' (p.17) offer very different solutions to the problems of living.

The recurrent theme of the shortness of time seems to inhere in most poems and as early as The North Ship ^{Larkin} had written:

This is the first thing
I have understood:
Time is the echo of an axe
Within a wood.

(T.N.S. p.39)

Another poem in The North Ship considers loneliness as 'an instantaneous grief' (poem VI p.17) and the speaker cannot bear the idea of 'dumb idleness' spreading through his life. 'Vers de Soci  t  ' confronts the situation of an older man faced with too much society, who instead prefers and embraces his idleness.

The French title is misleading in some ways because, apart from its polished sophistication, the poetry is not society verse.

Balanced between two imagined responses to Warlock-Williams's invitation the poem explores several possibilities. The recipient's derisive burlesque of the invitation:

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

inspires a refusal which sounds polite but is undercut by its coarseness:

And so [as a result of his former confidences]

Dear Warlock-Williams : I'm afraid

The refusal, however, is incomplete and a more serious interior debate takes place, culminating in an acceptance of the invitation which is matched exactly in tone and rhythm to the refusal begun in line 6:

Dear Warlock-Williams : why of course ---

Both of these expressions imply a social response and, as clichés, belong to the stock requirements of etiquette. On one level, the poem is about society and satirises its frivolity, even having affinities in some ways with Pope's Satires. For example,

over sideways to hear what is being said. This is obliquely underlined by the pun on 'canted' which evokes the passive meaning of being talked to in affected stock phrases, summarised here in the word 'drivel'.

The impetus of the sentence, started at the beginning of the second stanza, cannot be halted and swoops on into the final lines of the third as the persona considers the enormity of spending his precious evenings eating, drinking and listening to nonsense, instead of 'repaying' the time with the pursuit of rich solitude and contemplation, 'under a lamp, hearing the noise of the wind'. Yet simultaneously, he is aware that the maxims 'All solitude is selfish' and 'Virtue is social' are the 'sternly instilled' moral obligations of society and that they are the precepts by which it is regulated. Those who are at odds with society like 'the hermit talking to God' are driven by outmoded ideals such as asceticism and celibacy and can hardly be regarded seriously; the ideal of the twentieth century is 'the big wish' ... 'to have people nice to you'.

He remarks correctly, that the need is reciprocal and expresses his own maxims in language which is deceptively simple. Couched in the plain style of prose, the poem ably conceals the subtleties and complexities of verse. The predominantly decasyllabic metre and the a.b.b.c.a.c. rhyme-scheme are underplayed by the rapid conversational rhythm and tone of the stanzas.

Elevated to a moral duty, being 'nice' 'back' is a boring, but

improving 'routine' ('like going to church?') and asking banal questions.

This more formalized society has its uses and although not as protective or as intimate as the groups described in the 'Livings' poems, it does offer a counter to loneliness, 'failure and remorse'. Contemplation of nature which once seemed attractive is less so now; the 'air sharpened-blade' of the moon is comfortless and cruel. He is nudged by his inadequacies which, like spies on his solitude, make him accept the invitation. As Andrew Motion remarks in his contribution to the Festschrift, Larkin at Sixty:

Going out - particularly when you work in a university - often means "Asking that ass about his fool research". This doesn't imply though, that society - for all its disadvantages - isn't also a way of coping with the 'failure and remorse' which accompany solitude. 18

'Sympathy in White Major' (p.11) has puzzled many critics. Barbara Everett argues very cogently for its associations with, and allusions to Gautier's pre-symbolist poem 'Symphonie en Blanc Majeur' in her article 'Larkin after Symbolism'. Yet apart from the parody of the title, there is little which evokes or repeats the sensuousness of Gautier's apostrophe to the swan. As the poem is juxtaposed in this study with 'Vers de Soci  t  ', it should be seen as another example of social verse. The major theme of the poem is altruism. If 'Vers de Soci  t  ' states that 'all solitude is selfish' this poem examines the

morality of someone who has 'devoted his life to others'.

To understand the poem, it is necessary to establish points of view and identify possible speakers. In the first stanza the 'I' is a persona (who may be the poet) who pours himself a drink and then in imagination, toasts a man who is not present (the italics in the last line of the first stanza as well as those of the last stanza are the persona's imagined words as he toasts someone who believed in his own altruism.) That all these compliments are clichés undercuts them and makes the whole very funny.

In the second stanza, unless it is assumed or understood that the 'I' is again the poet/persona who examines his own attempts at altruism and realises he has failed, the meaning of the stanza is rather obscure and the imprecise and unidiomatic 'lost displays' of this person's futile attempts at being socially virtuous remain undisclosed.

Like many poems in High Windows, there are two (or more) distinct tones. There is the over-hearty bonhomie in the accolade of clichés which is not unlike the larger-than-life advertisement style of the first stanza. The second tone is quieter and suggests more introspective questioning of the assumptions on which the praises are based as well as the inferences to be made about the 'lost displays' of supposed altruism. Ending ruefully, 'it didn't work for them or me', this more truthful speaker perceives the limits of selflessness and egocentric

praise. (It might also be noted that it is generally believed that the precepts of true kindness and real charity demand secrecy).¹⁹

So far, two kinds of living have been discussed: either sheltering from the dark and cold in an almost primitive manner or dealing with the superficialities and artifices of society.

And there is another kind of living as well - that of an intimate or sexual relationship. This kind of living is depicted quite unequivocally in 'Annus Mirabilis' and 'High Windows'. In both poems the persona considers somewhat wryly and with a certain amount of self-directed irony, the sexual freedom and apparently easy fulfilment which has either passed him by or which he has deliberately not chosen (see for example T.W.W. ch III p.78; 'Self's the Man'; 'Dockery and Son' p.74 and 'Afternoons' p.80). The near-identity of the first and last stanzas of 'Annus Mirabilis' (p.34) creates a circular composition which mimics the frustration the speaker may feel at finding that the 'sexual revolution' of 1963 was 'rather late for [him]'. The lifting of the ban on Lawrence's novel and the emergence of the Liverpool singing group became expressions of a sub-culture; and then a cult expressive of, and co-terminous with, youthful enthusiasm and modernity. But the implied socio-historic pointers must be regarded with caution since Larkin's own feelings about the Beatles as well as about modernity have been expressed with asperity:

Finally, what about the Beatles? "With the Beatles" a (record) suggests that their jazz content is nil, but that, like certain sweets, they seem wonderful until you are suddenly sick. Up till then it's nice, though. 20

His introduction to All What Jazz has his often-quoted condemnation of modernism:

No, I dislike such things not because they are new, but because they are irresponsible exploitations of human life as we know it. This is my essential criticism of modernism, whether perpetrated by Parker, Pound or Picasso: it helps us neither to enjoy or endure 21

With these two caveats in mind, a reader might see a greater amount of irony in 'Annus Mirabilis' and appreciate more the tension between the sing-song, sometimes jazzy rhythm of the opening and final stanzas and the flatter tone of the middle two. This self-styled curmudgeon may be half-envious, half-judgemental. Having watched sexual advances change from

A sort of bargaining,
A wrangle for a ring,
A shame that started at sixteen
And spread to everything ..

to

A brilliant breaking of the bank,
A quite unlosable game.,

the speaker wonders if, the 'quarrel' having sunk, any real gain has been achieved. The anaphoric construction 'A sort .. A

wrangle .. A shame .. A brilliant ...' reinforced with jingling alliteration seems to suggest that no significant change has taken place nor that there are any great advantages of which to boast.

'High Windows' (p.17) published for the first time in this volume takes the discussion further.

While the near-prudish note of 'sexual intercourse' used in 'Annus Mirabilis' is clinically correct, it is more distancing and remote than demotic or euphemistic terms and at the same time is probably self-parodying. The reference to Lady Chatterley's Lover is important, too, since it logically suggests the themes and idioms of 'High Windows'.²²

In this poem an ageing persona comments on the changing mores of his society. While the sexual behaviour may not be new, the open flouting of conventions (discussed and questioned in 'Annus Mirabilis') and the flaunting of one's sexuality is new to this observer. He is simultaneously envious and slightly shocked since his own youthful preoccupations and worries seem, like 'the quarrel' which 'sank' in 'Annus Mirabilis', to be unimportant and irrelevant.

Most critics have drawn attention to the explicit sexual word in the second line, which is later balanced by 'bloody' in line 16: the speaker imagining himself 'forty years back' gives words to an older observer of his generation and imagines him

using a shocking demotic term to express exasperation, disgust or anger (cf. Act III of Pygmalion - the 'new language' shocks Mrs Higgins's guests at her 'at home'.) The point I wish to make here is that 'fucking' in line 2 is not deliberately obscene because it is not being used as a swear-word or an intensifier, whereas 'bloody' in line 16 is being used merely as a blasphemous expression of anger.

The single opening sentence extends over the first two stanzas and is completed only in the first line of the third stanza. Progressing from two subordinate clauses, 'When I see .. And I guess ..', the ideas accumulate in interest and breathlessness showing similarities to the meandering opening of 'Here' in T.W.W. The structure is hinged on the short main clause, 'I know' (line 4) and is continued rapidly by the object noun clause, 'this is paradise' with its surprising adjectival clause 'everyone old has dreamed of all their lives'. It is not 'this is the paradise which everyone ...' but an absolute, the only 'paradise'. The irony of the statement in its exaggeration becomes fully apparent only in the last stanza with its transcendent:

deep blue air, that shows
Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.

In lines 1 - 6 there is an interesting play on certain synonyms (or near-synonyms): 'couple'; 'fucking'; 'bonds'.

The conventional 'bonds and gestures' (of marriage, presumably)

are 'pushed to one side' judged as no longer necessary and certainly no longer fashionable. The simile 'like an outdated combine harvester' is at once surprising and outrageous since, in its implications, it enacts the 'coupling' referred to in the foregoing lines, as well as evoking gestures which are clumsy and mechanical. Inherent in the simile too, is the sense of the harvest, wheat and fecundity, like the metaphor concluding 'The Whitsun Weddings'.

Thoughts about God, judgement and 'having to hide/ what you think of the priest' which ramble into the incoherence and vagueness of 'hell and that' are suddenly checked and the envious and guilty musings come to an abrupt end. There is a strong syntactical break at the medially-placed caesura after the bitter meditation (written in italics) and the mood changes with the surprise and delight of, 'And immediately' which leads to the final run-on sentence-stanza. This return to the present is an epiphany as the speaker understands that real freedom is the freedom to be whatever one has chosen and the acceptance of responsibility for that choice. No longer does he envy the 'kids', nor does he feel resentment that his youth was unlike theirs. The leap of thought is to the 'high windows' and, through the repeated references to light, windows and glass it becomes apparent to the reader, too, that the freedom which is complete is ineffable because it is personal and individual.

The light, the deep blue air, like the search for happiness are endless - but this endlessness has meaning precisely because it

really is endless. The infinity indicated in 'Here' (T.W.W.) has a similar quality. This distance and space in Larkin's work, while offering little tangible consolation, does offer something consistent and, in a way, something absolute. The search for happiness is not always successful and the disappointments and uncertainties are the same for each individual and for each generation: conversely, each individual has to come to terms with, and an understanding of, his own particular situation. The beautiful ending of the poem which is poetic (not like the prose, plain-style beginning) posits the ineffability of being human. The image of 'sun-comprehending glass' is as easily understood as it is difficult to explain. Like 'the fresh-peeled voice' of the thrush 'astonishing the brickwork' in 'Coming' (T.L.D. p.17), it is not inappropriate to consider aspects of Symbolism in Larkin's poetry.

Affinities may be found with Baudelaire's prose poem 'Les Fenêtres'.²³

These 'High Windows', so mysterious, illuminating and dazzling, gather the sun and focus its force on the glass which acts as a magnifying - or burning - glass. But the image is not pursued because our thoughts or our gaze are directed at infinity 'the deep blue air that shows/ Nothing, and is nowhere and is endless'.

Larkin uses light imagery consistently as a sign of release or as a symbol of freedom and clarity. Seamus Heaney's contribution to Larkin at Sixty entitled 'In the Main of Light', explores the light imagery used not only in High Windows but in the two

other major collections. He draws particular attention to 'Solar' (p.33) which he describes as:

Frankly a prayer, a hymn to the sun, releasing a generosity that is in no way attenuated when we look twice and find that the praise could be as phallic as it is solar:

'lion face', 'an origin', 'unclosing like a hand',
all phrases of candid feeling ... 24

The poem is 'independent' in that there is no persona, and the monologue is not 'dramatic' in the way that many of the other poems have been. The existence of the poem is as autonomous as the existence of the sun.

How still you stand,
And how unaided
Single stalkless flower
You pour unrecompensed.

Its generosity, unhindered by, and independent of, any human agency is 'simplified by distance' and its 'petalled head of flames/continuously exploding' is perceived as 'an origin'.

Alone and powerful, the sun is addressed like a god; and the poem itself is reminiscent of stylized graphic illustrations of the sun. 25

Coined there among
Lonely horizontals
You exist openly,
Our needs
Climb and return like angels,
Unclosing like a hand,
You give for ever.

So far most of the poems discussed have shown a vigorous affirmation of life: the comfort provided by food, shelter and companionship; the unequivocal affirmation of life through sex and the more etiolated life of polite society. 'The Old Fools' and 'The Building' offer a different perspective - the inevitable end and extinction which death is (for Larkin). But while in seeming contradiction these statements, it must be remembered, are a curious kind of positive (in Larkin's poetry). Bedient, commenting on the uplifting effect of tragedy as an art form, writes:

In truth, Larkin's themes belong to the great negative order of ideas that has always proved the most potent in art ... We home to tragedy - optimism in art commonly leaving us feeling deprived of some deeper truth ... 26

'The Old Fools' (p.19) is one of the 'big' poems of this collection. Its four stanzas are each 12 lines long and with the exception of the last line of each, they all have 12, or even 19, syllables. The tone varies between the grotesquely comic, which at times is almost cruel, to the compassionate which is unsentimentally true, as it seeks identity with the old. The Old People (the poem may be seen as having affinities with Jacques's Seven Ages of Man - presenting here, of course, the humiliating spectacle of the seventh age only) are looked at and framed by the rhetorical 'Why aren't they screaming?' at the end of the first stanza.

The second stanza assumes a more generalised, colloquial tone

for its surrealistic description of death. Countered by a beautiful image of human existence —

... all the time merging with a unique endeavour
 To bring to bloom the million-petalled flower
 Of being here ... —

human life is seen as unique, beautiful and capable of 'infinite variety'. The beauty of the flower-image is undercut by the colloquially brutal: 'Their looks show that they're for it;' followed by a catalogue of decay:

Ash hair, toad hands, prune face, dried into lines . . . 27

The concluding question to this stanza shows incomprehension similar to that at the end of the first stanza: 'How can they ignore it?'

In the third stanza, the mood and tone change again, reworking the Shakespearean image of life as a drama. The Old are envisaged as being in a play - or living their interior lives as if acting out a play. The protection offered by the past, and by memory makes the fact of ageing more bearable. 'Having lighted rooms inside your head' is a way of becoming immune to the chaos and pain of reality. Without negating the cruelty or brutality of the earlier images, the poet presents the old people in a state of having reached a compromise: 'That is where they live:/Not here and now, but where all happened once.' The stanza concludes with a sentence which leads into the final

one, offering a kind of explanation, but quickly returning to another image - not cruel, but frightening:

... crouching below
 Extinction's alp, the Old Fools, never perceiving
 How near it is ...

Like any other species unaware of being endangered, the 'Old Fools' continue their existence in oblivion of their near doom. Doubling back on all the premises set out in the first three stanzas, the poem concludes with a grim 'well/we shall find out' reminding us of the danse macabre: 'Tous sommes soubz mortel coutel'.²⁸ The poem is a massive memento mori and repeats, or contains, many of Larkin's own fears about death and getting old which, as has been remarked in Chapter II, p.61 are explicitly stated.²⁹

'The Building' (p.24) brings two important themes together: its link with 'The Old Fools' as it considers the inevitability of death is fairly obvious, but it also provides a link with the other poems which describe various kinds of habitation which, by implication, are buildings of one sort or another. This poem, starkly titled 'The Building' (as if there were no other) features a structure designed and built for a specific purpose. If it is:

Higher than the handsomest hotel
 The lucent comb show[ing] up for miles ...

as the opening self-advertising symbol announces, this building

is also remote. Aloofly distant from the human beings whose needs it should serve, it is also newer and more striking than the older buildings which surround it:

... but see,
 All round it close-ribbed streets rise and fall
 Like a great sigh out of the last century.

While never specifically described as a hospital, and being compared with a hotel, its ambivalent nature is constantly evoked by the oblique, but negative references to the place. 'Higher than the handsomest hotel' it may be, but the porters are 'scruffy' and 'What keeps drawing up/ At the entrance hall are not taxis..' The receptionist is 'a kind of nurse'. These approximations and denials constitute a sinister guessing game in which the reader knows the answers, but where none is given either affirming or negating his responses. The impersonal atmosphere might suggest an 'airport lounge' but later this is changed to 'more like a local bus'. These two images of a journey bring one close again to the theme of death, 'the undiscovered country, from whose bourn//no traveller returns', and this is confirmed in stanza nine:

All know they are going to die.
 Not yet, perhaps not here, but in the end,
 And somewhere like this.

If life is presented in metaphor as a journey the travelling images implied in 'taxis'. an 'airport lounge' or 'a local bus'

as well as in the usually temporary nature of residence in a hotel, are all brought together in a deceptively bland way.

Like the absent or invisible residents of the hotel described in

~~'Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel' these 'residents'~~

~~become anonymous and, in a way, absent or impersonal to them-~~

~~self:~~

... Humans, caught
 On ground curiously neutral, homes and names
 Suddenly in abeyance; some are young,
 Some old, but most at that vague age that claims
 The end of choice, the last of hope ...

Worse off than any of the other dwellers described in their livings, these people, whose identity is 'suddenly in abeyance', are without choice or hope. The ground on which they find themselves is 'neutral' because it is anonymous and 'curious' for two reasons: the first simply because of its strangeness ~~and unfamiliarity and~~, secondly, because their presence in the out-patients' waiting room evokes the tacit or voiced questions ~~from the others (and about the others): 'What's he/she here for?'~~ This is indeed 'living and partly living'.

Considered technically, the poem presents challenges and complexities which should be regarded as functional as well as conferring a high degree of structural virtuosity and embellishment. The octave rhyme scheme is set within stanzas of seven lines each, becoming resolved only in the final line which, like a lengthy over-ride, stands apart and alone to complete the

pattern.³⁰ As an eight-line stanza, the rhyme scheme would be:

a.b.c.b.d.c.a d

Arranged as they are in stanzas of seven lines, the rhymes become increasingly complicated and the accumulation of overrides (each occurring one line later) mimics the labyrinthine architecture of the hospital whose function is at once arcane and frightening:

For past these doors are rooms, and rooms past those,
And more rooms yet, each one further off

And harder to return from, and who knows
Which he will see, and when? ...

(lines 34 - 37)

The complicated structure of the man-made 'lucent comb' is by no means reassuring in its implications. The hospital is presented continuously as being apart from, and different from, the rest of the world. As has been remarked of lines 2 - 4, its architecture is newer than that of the rest of the neighbourhood.

Later, is uttered an almost agonized apostrophe, addressed to the world from which the building is so noticeably separate:

----- O world,
Your loves, your chances are beyond the stretch
Of any hand from here!

(lines 43 - 45)

These lines, elevated in tone, stand out from the otherwise almost 'plain style' of the rest of the poem. More importantly,

they highlight the theme of separation which is introduced in two ways.

First a vision of 'outside' is presented: the outside of normal, daily living which is depicted here as almost ultra normal in its ordinariness:

.... Outside seems old enough:
 Red brick, lagged pipes, and someone walking by it
 Out to the car park, free. Then, past the gate,
 Traffic; a locked church; short terraced streets
 Where kids chalk games, and girls with hair-dos fetch
 Their separates from the cleaners

(lines 38 - 43)

Seen allegorically, the outside is both a place and a state of freedom; inside is a place of incarceration. The separation is underlined through the enjambement across the stanza where the first part of line 43 completes the sentence begun in line 42. The world, too, is unreal:

A touching dream to which all are lulled
 But wake from separately

Many of the images work as sustained metaphors. In lines 47 - 51, reinforced by the alliteration of 'c', there is an implied metaphor of blood and life:

In it, conceits
 And self-protecting ignorance congeal
 To carry life, collapsing only when
Called to these corridors (my emphasis)

There are the implied references to blood vessels which 'carry life'; 'congealing' blood which has been spilt; the colloquial 'collapsing' may imply a preface to death perhaps in conjunction with the real collapse of blood vessels. 'Called to these corridors' could also be read as a euphemism for death. Some critics have seen this massive poem as a secularised version of 'Church Going'. Apart from its huge structure and the reference to cathedrals in the last stanza, which implies that hospitals have superceded churches, the claim might seem a little over-worked. There is, however, an interesting and oblique reference to the function of healing linked to that of confession. The 'neutral' people have gathered:

..... all

To confess that something has gone wrong.
 It must be error of a serious sort,
 For see how many floors it needs, how tall
 It's grown by now

In this secular world, consultations with doctors and nurses may have replaced the sacramental rite of penance.

If the link between healing and faith is unintentional, it is not unreasonable to make it. The passivity and anonymity of the inmates in this building is what creates the frightening atmosphere of the poem with its Dantesque vision. Like 'The Old Fools' this poem, too, is a memento mori: what it offers is unpleasant and largely an antithesis of living. Cut off from the external world, it is not given to people in 'The Building' - as it is to the readers and the poet - to comprehend the entire edifice

simultaneously. The way in which it is presented with its wholeness unavoidably present, yet with sections cut out to allow an inside view, affords that double perspective to the reader/onlooker which can be likened to an architectural drawing or a Dutch interior with its glimpse through a window or door to the outside or to further rooms within.

These two poems, 'The Building' and 'The Old Fools', are unquestionably two of the darkest in the book. Their sombreness casts a shadow which is not easily dispelled by the wit and bite of 'Posterity' or the serious, but comically presented considerations of 'High Windows'.

There are, though, two poems, 'Show Saturday' and 'To the Sea', which identify something positively affirmative in life and to which, in Seamus Heaney's opinion:

We respond constantly to the melody of intelligence, to a verse that is as much commentary as it is presentation, and it is this encounter between a compassionate, unfoolable mind and its own predicaments - which we are forced to recognize as our predicaments too - that gives his poetry its first appeal. Yet while Larkin is exemplary in the way he sifts the conditions of contemporary life, refuses alibis and pushes consciousness towards an exposed condition that is neither cynicism nor despair, there survives in him a repining for a more crystalline reality to which he might give allegiance. 32

Two 'smaller' nature poems considered here can be viewed as a bridge to the statements about life made in 'Show Saturday' and 'To the Sea'.

The first of these, 'Cut Grass' seems a relatively minor poem in the collection and has not received much critical attention, yet its elegiac qualities, mourning the death of grass - and of summer - summarise many of the themes and preoccupations of High Windows : the briefness of life, its mystery and its fragility. Three quatrains of alternately rhyming lines, mostly of four syllables each, evoke the dreamy slowness of an English summer in this pastoral poem. But the apparent perfection of summer is potentially sad, for the poem is about the death of grass and consequently, about mortality. The image is an old one and has biblical echoes:

... in the morning they are like grass
 Which groweth up. In the morning
 it flourisheth, and in the evening
 it is cut down and withereth

(Psalm 90)

There is a feeling of a plot developing and reaching its climax in the menace of the 'high-builded cloud/Moving at summer's pace' which indicates indeed that the perfection of 'summer's lease hath all too short a date'.

The grass 'lies frail; its 'mown stalks exhale' and 'it dies': (my emphasis) the verbs work towards the inevitability of death and slowly, moving at summer's pace (the implication is of slowness if, by analogy one considers the idiom 'at snail's pace'). Set against the present tense verbs which mark the progression, there are the past-participles ('mown'; 'young-leafed'; 'strewn'; 'lost') which imply a succession of unfinished, or repeated

activities, as nature, too, participates in a cortège of the summer which begins to die almost as soon as it has begun.

Cut early in June, the 'mown stalks exhale' a brief breath and die their 'long, long' death. The delicacy and fragility of the grass are qualities found in the season and, in a series of impressionistic sketches, there is a sense of the surreptitious approach of autumn - as occurs in the next poem to be discussed.

'The Trees' (p.12) presents a different kind of monologue from many of the more apparently dramatic ones in High Windows. The ambivalence the tentativeness of Spring 'like something almost being said' and the 'kind of grief' in the greenness, anticipate that if Spring is a new beginning, it is also a stage nearer age, decay and death. The carefully balanced, enclosing rhymes seem to be attempting protection against the inevitability of what the season - and the continuance of life - means.

Rhetorically it is asked whether each Spring the trees are simply 'born again' while 'we grow old'. There is reassurance in the 'No, they die too' and 'looking new' is just a 'yearly trick'. As in 'Show Saturday' where the return to homes, seasons, activities away from the show-ground lie hidden beneath all, like strength, so here, too, the ageing of the trees is hidden, 'written down in rings of grain'.

Likened as they are to castles, the trees should be stable yet they are 'restless' and they 'thresh' and even though it is May,

the harvest and the end of summer, (the end of the trees' greenness) are all anticipated. Nevertheless, there is the message of 'In Memoriam':

Last year is dead, they seem to say,
Begin afresh, afresh, afresh.

The repeated end-stressed rhyme of 'afresh' in the last line of the poem is as delicate and tentative as the season itself and conveys by meaning, association, and onomatopoeic implication the fragility and the tenuousness of life. Conversely the way in which the first two lines are mirrored by the last two, gives the poem - and the reader - reassurance of the cycle of renewal and (apparent) rejuvenation.

'Show Saturday' (p.37) is a large life-affirming poem which praises recurring and repeated skills on display at an agricultural show.

In Larkin's own work, there is an antecedent where, in A Girl in Winter, the English hosts Robin and Jane Fennel invite Katherine Lind to visit an agricultural show and gymkhana.

The regularly rhyming eight-line stanzas with their long lines - in most cases twelve syllables, but in a few even longer - are well-suited to accommodate the cornucopia-like abundance on display at this secular harvest festival, a modern celebration of rural traditions. The descriptions sprawl to embrace the

The crowd at 'Show Saturday' is described as follows:

The men with hunters, dog-breeding, wool-defined women
 Children all saddle-swank, mugfaced middleaged wives
 Glaring at jellies, husbands on leave from the garden
 Watchful as weasels, car-tuning, curt-haired sons -

The crowds are captured in careful descriptions which hover between the pert style of Thelwel's pony cartoons and the near grotesqueries of Giles. Using specially-coined participles - which are either vividly comic or factitious, Larkin sketches the children 'all saddle-swank'; the 'wool-defined women'; as well as the 'car-tuning, curt-haired sons' with accuracy and humour very close to that of cartoon-caricature. The marvel of the poem is that the show can accommodate all these people and offer them a place in the rural community whose efforts to mount the show - soon to be dismantled - give reality to human skills and abilities.

It is the final stanza which summarises the sentiments engendered by the Show. Even if many of the visitors (or even the participants) are unaware of the relevance of the Show, they are nevertheless unconsciously contributing to an important tradition.

Throughout the poem there has been a subtle insistence on the cyclical repetition of the seasons. In fact, in a 'recession of skills',³⁴ the crowds go:

Back now to autumn, leaving the ended husk
 Of summer that brought them here for Show Saturday ...
 ... Back now, all of them, to the local lives
 In the Corn Exchange, to market days in bars,
 ...
 To winter coming ...

(my emphasis)

The renewal from within which occurs in Spring, the only season not mentioned, but implied in the 'hidden strength', recurs and like the show itself, is a reassurance. In the same way as the flowers and leaves die to regenerate their corms and bulbs for the new season's growth, the Show 'itself dies back into the area of work'.

It must be allowed to 'stay hidden there like strength' worthier and better than the superficial attitudes of a society which may largely have forgotten its rural roots.³⁵ 'Time's ever-rolling stream' of the hymn is now the 'rolling smithy smoke' reminiscent of Blake's 'dark satanic mills'. The shadows the smoke casts either hide 'greater gestures' of industry; or they hide - but cannot annihilate - the greater powers of nature. Perhaps the power that nature has to recreate itself is a correct reading. Each year this force 'breaks ancestrally' 'into/regenerate union'. The force is old and mysterious and in every sense, life-enhancing. As in 'The Trees' where there is an expression of death and renewal, and a sense of some kind of inner strength gained through experience, this poem celebrates nature's 'yearly trick', of renewal.

'To the Sea' (p.9) also expresses belief in the repeated and

continuing rituals and rites of simple human activity. Opening quietly, the poem starts with the speaker/persona/poet crossing a limit into the special paradise of the seaside. The nine-line stanzas are constructed with an ample form, appropriate to the largeness of their subject. Spatial and temporal aspects of the day are encompassed as the speaker's observations lead him to nostalgic consideration of his past. Barbara Everett maintains that the limits which bound the space are important - the view of paradise is more likely a glimpse:

All Larkin's Edens have "bridles" (a reference to "At Grass") .. framing enclosures of the thing looked-back-on like a dream awoken-from matching in-transigent beginnings are the conclusive (in all senses) endings, Where reason and mortality bring their iron bridles All the barriers that enclose Eden or declare it lost. 36

Real physical limits define the scope of the poem:

To step over the low wall that divides
Road from concrete walk above the shore
Brings sharply back something known long before

and, at the end of the day:

... between

The rocks, the rusting soup-tins, till the first
Few families start the trek back to the cars.

Within these limits the poem opens into a large statement about life. If the gaiety is only 'miniature', it has the bright

detail of an illuminated manuscript. As has been noted elsewhere, the montage technique includes many details which create the joyful atmosphere of a day at the sea-side. What should be noted as well is that apparently negative effects create the positive building-up and accumulation of detail:

The small hushed waves' repeated fresh collapse
Up the warm yellow sand

belongs, as Barbara Everett remarks, in 'a world in which "collapse" can mean advance and "protesting" (line 25) seems to have something to do with pleasure.'³⁷

'The white steamer stuck in the afternoon' has painterly qualities (only at the end of the day, as at the end of a play, does it disappear.) It is reminiscent of '(the) painted ship, on (the) painted ocean' in 'The Ancient Mariner' but lacks the menace, even though it too, is a symbol of idleness. The ship is 'stuck' and is also a symbol of a 'temps figé' as well as of a 'temps retrouvé'. When the steamer has 'gone' and the day has become cloudy 'like breathed on glass', life, outside the limits of this special world resumes another rhythm.

But beyond and above the descriptions of what activities are taking place, there is a deeper meaning. The observed details denote not only a present or evoke a past, but refer also to moral obligations and attitudes. The permanence, or annual repetition, of the sea-side activities provides reassurance as each group enjoys themselves in ways appropriate to their age

and ability, thus elevating this annual visit to a ritual, or a pilgrimage.

Showing unusual tolerance towards the young, Larkin allows them their transistors which 'sound tame enough/Under the sky'; these young are independent, but not so are the 'uncertain children' or the 'rigid old' who must be cared for in special, kindly ways. Everett finds other music than that of the transistors and infers from the children being led 'gently up and down', cadences from Handel's Messiah.^{38 and 39}

All who visit the seaside are influenced by the generosity of holidays and in the final lines of this poem the same duty is repeated:

..... teaching their children by a sort
Of clowning; helping the old, too, as they ought.

As these activities occur annually and 'are half an annual pleasure, half a rite', one leaves the poem as one does the seaside, with a sense of having benefited by the experience. The implicit moral values are not laid on as clumsy afterthoughts; they are inherent in the main structure of the poem and therefore never seem awkward or out of place for the reader.

In this consideration of living as a major theme of High Windows, I have attempted to show how the themes of the poems are repeated and reflected across and within one another. The speakers/ personae of the dramatic monologues seem to share a unified

voice - more unified, that is, than has previously been observable.

Alan Brownjohn, reviewing High Windows for The New Statesman

asks:

Is Larkin's an act which can be seen to enhance life or - however finely and eloquently - reduce its possibilities? Is his commitment to a lived, enjoyed and suffered, here-and-now reality, strong and vital? Or is the deep blue air going to seem increasingly, a solipsistic escape for a shy, conservative temperament?

Answering these questions, Brownjohn comments on the way in which the poems:

... balance as unsatisfactory positives versus ambiguous negatives. But the results of one simple test point in the right direction: almost every Larkin poem grows larger and clearer as the years go by. 40

NOTES - CHAPTER I

1. Philip Larkin: The North Ship (London, Faber and Faber, 1979) p.8
 2. Ian Hamilton: Four Conversations, London Magazine, November 1964, vol.4 No.6, p.75
 3. William H. Pritchard: W.B. Yeats Penguin Critical Anthologies, (London, Penguin Books 1972) p.43
 4. Andrew Motion: Philip Larkin (Contemporary Writers, London Methuen, 1982) p.33
 5. The North Ship (back cover)
 6. Alan Brownjohn: Philip Larkin (Writers and their work, London, Longmans) 1975, p.6
 7. Gerard Manley Hopkins: Poems (London, O.U.P., 1970) p.66
 8. Hopkins, p.67
 9. 'When the bands began to visit the local Hippodrome I was able actually to see (those hot numbers) played, the different sections rising suddenly to play four bars ... It was the drummer I concentrated on, sitting as he did on a raised platform ... Even the resident drummer, a stolid man with hornrimmed glasses, excited me enough to insist our tickets were for his side of the house, so that I could see what he was doing. I wanted to be a drummer'.
- Philip Larkin: All What Jazz (London, Faber and Faber, 1970) p.2
10. W.B. Yeats: Collected Poems (London, Macmillan 1933, 1971) p.290
 11. W.B. Yeats: p.152 and p.217
 12. David Timms: Philip Larkin (Edinburgh, Oliver and Boyd, 1973) p.26
 13. William Wordsworth: 'Preface to the Lyrical Ballads' in English Critical Texts, ed D.J. Enright and Ernst de Chickera (London, O.U.P., 1968) p.164
 14. Philip Larkin: The North Ship p.10
 15. Blake Morrison: The Movement (London, O.U.P., 1980) p.125
 16. Andrew Motion, p.35

NOTES - CHAPTER II

1. Anthony Thwaite writes - 'XX Poems which Larkin brought out at his own expense ... most of the copies were sent to well-known literary persons, the majority of whom failed even to acknowledge it, presumably because he had understamped the envelopes at a time when postal rates had just been increased. It was still possible to order it in early 1954, ... and to pay 4/6d for it. Its present dealers' value is £20.

Anthony Thwaite: 'The Poetry of Philip Larkin' in The Survival of Poetry: A Contemporary Survey, ed. Martin Dodsworth (London: Faber and Faber, 1970) p.43

2. R.W. p.175
3. Ibid p.175
4. Patrick Swinden: Old lines, new lines : the Movement ten years after. Critical Quarterly 9, No.4 (Winter 1967) pp.347 - 59
5. The difficulty of choosing personal fulfilment in marriage is presented and explored in several poems of The Whitsun Weddings - the title poem being the most optimistic - 'Dockery and Son'; 'Self's the Man'; 'Afternoons' and 'An Arundel Tomb' question various aspects of married life. In 'Breadfruit' an uncollected poem, Larkin discusses the myth ruthlessly but with ironic humour:

Boys dream of native girls who bring breadfruit
 Whatever they are,
 As bribes to teach them how to execute
 Sixteen sexual positions on the sand,
 This makes them join (the boys) the tennis club,
 Jive at the Mecca, use deodorants, and
 On Saturdays squire ex-school girls to the pub
 By private car.

Such uncorrected visions end in church
 Or registrar
 A mortgaged semi - with a silver birch,
 Nippers; the widowed mum; age. So absolute
 Maturity falls, when old men sit and dream
 Of naked native girls who who bring breadfruit,
 Whatever they are. Critical Quarterly 3, No.4
 (Winter 1961) p.309

6. R.W. p.68
7. Charles Baudelaire: Les Fleurs du Mal (Paris: Gallimard, 1961) p.131

NOTES - CHAPTER II continued

8. Andrew Motion refers to Larkin's poem also entitled 'Femmes Damnées':

After describing one tousled, weeping woman, Rosemary, the poem turns to a second and ends:

'Stretched out before her, Rachel curls and curves,
Eyelids and lips apart, her glances filled
With satisfied ferocity; she smiles,
As beasts smile on the prey they have just killed.

The marble clock has stopped. The curtained sun
Burns on: the room grows hot. There, it appears
A vase of flowers has spilt, and soaked away,
The only sound heard is the sound of tears'.

Written in 1943 and published by the Sycamore Press, Oxford, in 1978, this poem is not easily available and my attempts to locate or procure a copy of the complete poem have been unsuccessful. Motion's is the only reference to the poem which I have found.

Andrew Motion: Philip Larkin (Contemporary Writers) (London: Methuen, 1982) pp.73 - 74

9. cf James Joyce: Ulysses: (London: The Bodley Head, 1960) p.73:

'A barren land, bare waste volcanic lake, the dead sea, no fish, weedless, sunk deep in the earth ... A dead sea in a dead land, grey and old. Old now it more the oldest, the first race. A bent hag crossed from Cassidy's clutching a noggin bottle by the neck - Now it (the earth) could bear no more. Dead! and old woman's: the grey sunken cunt of the world!

10. Anon. Latin (post-classical) Concise Oxford Dictionary of Quotations (2nd edition) 1981
11. 'Deception' may be seen with its French meaning of 'disappointment' as well, so that the poem is understood as being another example of thwarted expectation
12. David Timms: Philip Larkin (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1973) p.59
13. 'But most thro' midnight streets I hear
How the youthful Harlot's curse
Blasts the new-born infant's tear,
And blights with plague the marriage hearse'.

William Blake: Complete Poems (Oxford: O.U.P., 1966) p.216

NOTES - CHAPTER II continued

14. Philip Larkin: A Girl in Winter (London, Faber and Faber, 1975) pp.183 - 184

15. Anthony Thwaite: p.45

16. 'Since there's no help, Come let us kisse and part,
Nay, I have done: You get no more of Me,
And I am glad, yea glad with all my heart,
That thus so clearly, I my Selfe can free ...

... Now if thou would'st when all have given him over
From Death to Life thou might'st him (i.e. Love) yet
recover'.

Michael Drayton: 'Sonnet to Idea' in The Penguin Book of English Verse (London: Penguin, 1971) p.47

17. Christopher Ricks comments on Larkin's distinctive use of words which are either negatives or which imply negative attitudes:

'Larkin has always worked with an intense and yet commonplace vocabulary of disillusionment. "Disproved", "displaced" ... and of course, "disappointing" a more cruel word than any of them just because although it is a negative, we don't any longer even have a positive of it ... Yet Larkin's sense of the oppressive negatives is not sterile...'

Christopher Ricks: review of 'The Whitsun Weddings' in Phoenix 11/12 Autumn/Winter 1974/74 edited by Harry Chambers. (North West Arts Association, Cheshire) pp.8 - 9

18. Philip Larkin: R.W. p.74

19. Christopher Ricks comments on the italicised 'work' which dictates the tone and expresses the speaker's crossness:

'The general aggrievedness, which is at first all there is to go on, would stress 'should' - But as it then turns out, as things continue, that there is a particular aggrievedness instead or as well, which means why should I who am no fool let the toad work squat on my life?' You can feel the challenging undulations of tone, idiomatic and yet unspeakable, in the fourth stanza.

NOTES - CHAPTER II continued

This needs both the tone of matter-of-fact reportage without argumentative stresses until the last word ('straves') and the pitching on 'have' and 'Are' which will bring out the concessive combativeness: 'True, their nippers have got bare feet and their unspeakable wives - are - oh yes - skinny as whippets - and yet ... Larkin's accents are audible either as equable or elbowing'.

Christopher Ricks: 'Like something almost being said' in Larkin at Sixty ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 1982) pp.128 - 129

20. While this is a persona, it should be observed, that the views are close to Larkin's own. He believes emphatically in the importance of hard work.
21. Complicated rhymes create a structure where the illogical functioning of memory seems to be mimicked. The seven five-line stanzas with an extra 'outriding' line are as follows:

1) a b c c b

2) a a b c/d

3) d e f g h

5) j j h g g

6) h j k l m

7) m l k k l

+ m

However, if set out as four stanzas, each of nine lines, the pattern is seen thus:

1) a b c c b//a a b c

2) d//e f f e d//d e f

3) g h//j j h g g//h j

4) k l m//m l k k l//m

(a double line indicates the existing stanza breaks)

NOTES - CHAPTER II continued

22. Thomas Hood: Poetical Works (London: Frederick Warne and Co. n.d.) pp.281 - 282
23. Patricia Ball: 'The Photographic Art' Review of English Literature April 1962 vol. 9 pp.50 - 58
24. Compare too 'Latest Face' (p.41)

'... I contain your current grace,
 You my judgement; yet to move
 Into real untidy air
 Brings no lasting attribute -

Lies grow dark around us. Will
 The statue of your beauty walk?

Is your power actual - can
 Denial of you duck and run.
 Stray out of sight and double round,
 Leap from the sun with mask and brand
 And murder and not understand?'

25. Philip Larkin: R.W. He was 57 at the time
26. Larkin watched these particular horses at one remove, on a newsreel film of Brown Jack, the racehorse, in his retirement. Being racehorses, they had had glamorous lives, but now they are bothered only by wind and flies.
 David Timms p.74
27. On a technical point, it is interesting to note that this was one of the first poems to be written after The North Ship and worksheets of the poem printed in the Larkin Issue of Phoenix indicate that while the poem was obviously changed and revised, the initial rhythms, rhymes and structure have been little changed and in the various drafts, the first stanza was composed with almost no changes.

'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
 The sky shows dark with new Spring rain'

Phoenix 11/12. 1973/74 pp.91 - 103

NOTES - CHAPTER II continued

28. Anthony Thwaite p.48
29. Alvarez' hyphen in the title is incorrect - the title consists of two words. A. Alvarez: 'Beyond the Gentility Principle' in The New Poetry (Penguin Books 1974) pp.24 - 25
30. John Wain: Letter to London Magazine 4 No.3 March 1957 p.56
31. Philip Larkin interview with Ian Hamilton, 'Four Conversations' London Magazine (n.s. 4 No.8 November 1964) p.73
32. Andrew Motion p.60

NOTES - CHAPTER III

1. John Betjeman: 'Common experiences' Review in The Listener, March 19, 1964, p.483
2. Francis Hope: Review of The Whitsun Weddings Encounter XXII, May 1969, pp.72 - 74
3. A. Alvarez: Beyond all this Fiddle, (London, Penguin Press, 1968, pp.86 - 87)
4. Philip Larkin: 'An Interview with the Observer' in Required Writing (London, Faber, 1983) p.47
5. Philip Larkin: 'Wanted : Good Hardy Critic' in Required Writing (London, Faber, 1983) p.172
6. Thomas Hardy : The Complete Poems, (London, Macmillan, 1976) p.416
7. Ian Hamilton: Four Conversations: Philip Larkin in The London Magazine, Vol. 4, No.6, November 1964, p.77
8. Philip Larkin: Douglas Dunn and Philip Larkin (Faber Poetry Cassette, London, Faber and Faber, 1984)
9. Calvin Bedient: Eight Contemporary Poets, (London, O.U.P., 1974, pp.76 - 77)
10. Philip Larkin: (Poetry Cassette)
11. Dan Jacobson: 'Profile 3' in The New Review, Vol. 1, No. 3, June 1974, p.29
12. Philip Larkin: 'Aubade', Times Literary Supplement, 23 December 1977, p.1491
13. Jonathan Raban: The Society of the Poem, (London, Harrap, 1971) p.29
14. Raban, p.31
15. Quoted by Andrew Motion in Philip Larkin, (Contemporary Writers, London, Methven, 1982) p.59
16. Philip Larkin: 'An Interview with Paris Review' in Required Writing, (London, Faber, 1983) p.65
17. Philip Larkin: All What Jazz, (London, Faber, 1970) p.18

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18. 'Yes, .. they're mugs decorated with Norman Rockwell reproductions Americana at its best, ... Poignant and so touching, each enchanting subject ... is charmingly explained...'

Advertisement in New Connections. Published by New York Telephone (Advertisement Magazine Vol. 1/1984 - 1985
Judith A. Dussman 711 Third Avenue New York NY 10017 p.86)

19. cf. T.S. Eliot: 'The Waste Land',

April in the Cruellest Month ...

Collected Poems 1909 - 1953, (London, Faber and Faber, 1957)
p.61 - also consider the opening bars of Stravinsky's
Rite of Spring

20. Philip Larkin: 'The Savage Seventh' in Required Writing, (London, Faber, 1983) p.111

21. Philip Larkin: 'Statement' in Required Writing, (London, Faber, 1983) p.79

22. Philip Larkin: Poetry Book Society Bulletin, February, 1964

23. Larkin has commented wryly on the fact that the most startling feature of the sculpture is, in fact, a nineteenth century restoration. However, this irony does not detract from the central statement of the poem. See John Haffenden Viewpoints, (London, Faber, 1981) p.125

24. cf. Gray's Elegy

'Yet ev'n these bones from insult to protect
Some frail memorial still erected nigh
With uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture deck'd

Implores the passing tribute of a sigh

For who, to dumb Forgetfulness a prey,
This pleasing anxious being e'er resign'd
Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,
Nor cast one longing ling'ring look behind?'

in Inscapes edited by Robin Malan, (Cape Town, O.U.P., 1970) p.28

25. P.R. King: Nine Contemporary Poets (London, Methuen, University Paperbacks, 1979) p.2

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26. Philip Larkin: Required Writing, p.81
- 26a. Ian Hamilton: 'Four Conversations: Philip Larkin' in The London Magazine, Vol.4, No.6, November, 1964, p.76
27. Philip Larkin: Douglas Dunn and Philip Larkin, (Faber Poetry Cassette, London, Faber and Faber, 1984)
28. Blake Morrison: op cit, p.196
29. cf Wilfred Owen's Preface:
 'This book is not about heroes ... Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion or power, except War ... My subject is War, and the pity of War.' (Wilfred Owen: Poems, (London, Chatto and Windus, 1966) p.40
30. Blake Morrison: p.198
31. Blake Morrison: p.202
32. Blake Morrison, p.195
33. Ezra Pound: 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberley' in The Norton Anthology of Poetry (Revised edition), (New York, W.W. Norton and Co., 1970) p.1002
34. Philip Larkin: Statement in Required Writing, (London, Faber 1983) p.79
35. Two critics, Calvin Bedient and Merle E. Brown, while commenting on the grammatical structure both fail to notice that the subject of the participle is 'the gull-marked mud'. Bedient believes there to be a traveller in a train and Brown refuting Bedient's reading, states that the traveller (none is evident) is in a bus.
- Merle E. Brown: Double Lyric - Divisiveness and Communal Creativity in Recent English Poetry (New York, Columbia University Press) 1980, p.85
- Calvin Bedient: Eight Contemporary Poets (London, O.U.P., 1974) pp.91 - 92
36. William Wordsworth: 'On Westminster Bridge', Poetical Works, (London, O.U.P., 1969) p.214
37. John Wain: 'Engagement or Withdrawal' in Critical Quarterly, Vol.6, No.2, 1964, p.173

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38. David Timms: p.113
39. Winifred Nowotny: The Language Poets Use, (London, University of London, The Athlone Press, 1965) pp.119 - 122 passim
40. Ian Hamilton: Review of The Whitsun Weddings, The London Magazine, Vol. IV, May, 1964, p.71
41. A pun inheres in 'a fording' might be read as 'affording', implying that religion, often an affair of charlatanism and quackery is frequently a money-making enterprise as well.
42. Charles Baudelaire: Oeuvre Poétique, Paris Gallimard, 1961
43. Virginia Woolf: Orlando (London, Hogarth Press, 1928. 1933 ed) p.276
44. 'John Kemp sat in the corner of an empty compartment in a train travelling over the last stretch of line before Oxford ... The windows of the carriages were bluish with swirls of the cleaner's leather still showing on the glass, and he confined his eyes to the compartment. It was a third-class carriage, the crimson seats smelt of dust and engines and tobacco ...'

Philip Larkin: Jill (London, Faber and Faber, 1975) p.21

and

'Blinking, she looked out of the window too: they were on the edge of London. It was a Saturday afternoon and the rows of new brick houses were brilliantly shadowed in the sun. Once she caught a glimpse of a straight road, where an unattended baker's van was being amblingly led by a horse, followed the baker as he went from door to door. Gone in a moment, it filled her with a sense of relaxation, and she watched roads and gardens curiously. After a while the ticket-collector passed along the train.'

Philip Larkin: A Girl in Winter (London, Faber and Faber, 1982) p.78

45. Virginia Woolf: Orlando, p.276
46. T.S. Eliot: Four Quartets (London, Faber and Faber, 1958) p.16

NOTES - CHAPTER III continued

47. Ian Milligan: 'Philip Larkin's "The Whitsun Weddings" and Virginia Woolf's "The Waves"' in Notes and Queries 23 n.s. January, 1976, p.23

48. Lionel Trilling's comment is appropriate:

'.. the norm of life which they pose is one of order, peace, honour and beauty, these qualities being realised in, and dependent upon, certain material conditions. The hope that animates this normative vision of the plays is the almost shockingly elementary one which Ferdinand utters in The Tempest - the hope of 'quiet days, fair issue, and long life'. It is reiterated by Juno in Prospero's pageant: "Honour, riches, marriage blessing/Long continuance and increasing." It has to do with good harvests and full barns and the qualities of affluent decorum that Ben Jonson celebrated in Penshurst, and Marvell in Appleton House, that Yeats prayed for in his daughter's domestic arrangements.'

Sincerity and Authenticity (London, O.U.P., 1972) pp.39 - 40

NOTES - CHAPTER IV

1. Philip Larkin: 'An Interview with Paris Review' in Required Writing (London, Faber and Faber, 1983) p.75
 2. Philip Larkin: The Times (London, February 16, 1984) p.10 columns
 3. Clive James: 'Don Juan in Hull' in At the Pillars of Hercules (London, Faber and Faber n.d.) p.51
 4. Clive James, p.51
 5. Andrew Motion: Philip Larkin Contemporary Writers (London, Methuen, 1982) pp.45 - 49
 6. Philip Larkin: R.W. p.83
 7. cf 'I declare this tower is my symbol; I declare
This winding, gyring, spring tread mill of
stair is my ancestral stair'
- W.B. Yeats: 'Blood and the moon': Complete Poems (London, Macmillan 1933, 1971) p.268
8. Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable, p.57
 9. It is in all probability in a Cambridge College not Oxford as some critics have thought. Sizars were students at Cambridge or Trinity College, Dublin, who paid reduced fees; Snape is a village near Cambridge; an advowson is the patronage of a religious house
 10. W.B. Yeats: 'All Souls Night', op cit, p.256
 11. Philip Larkin: Jill (London, Faber and Faber) p.220
 12. Two interesting points might be noted here. In 1811 the Burgerlijke Stand was established - a census in Holland, declared in 1813 the Kingdom of the Netherlands following Napoleonic victories in Europe. Many citizens, especially Jews, had no real homes and, in the belief that the Kingdom of the Netherlands would be temporary, as well as a mark of protest at foreign rule, they made up names - many of which were ridiculous or even scurrilous, e.g. Citroen (lemon); Agsteribbe (Eighth Rib) etc. The census statistics remained, as did the names. I am indebted for this information to Dr. C. Pama of Newlands, Cape Town. He suggested too that in English, the adjective 'Dutch' often has pejorative associations when prefixed to a noun, e.g. Dutch treat, Dutch courage, Dutch uncle.

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- 12a. Further enlightenment about these card-players comes from an observation made by Leo Colston in The Go-Between when noticing some paintings by the Flemish Teniers.

He indicated a row of small dark canvases, set deep in heavy frames. I looked at the one nearest to me, and saw men wearing broad-brimmed hats, smoking long pipes, sitting on tubs with tankards in their hands, or playing cards. Drinking with the men or serving them were women. They wore no hats; their hair was pulled back from high bare foreheads and kept in place by plain white handkerchiefs. One woman was leaning on the back of a man's chair, watching the card players with avid eyes: the chair-back pressed against her breasts, which bulged over its rim and were of a dirty colour between pink and grey. This made me feel uncomfortable. I didn't like the look of the picture or its feeling; pictures, I thought, should be of something pretty, should record a moment chosen for its beauty. These people hadn't even troubled to look their best; they were ugly and quite content to be so. They got something out of being their naked selves, their faces told me that; but this self-glory, depending on nobody's approval but their own, struck me as rather shocking - more shocking than their occupations, unseemly as those were. They had forgotten themselves, that was it; and you should never forget yourself.

L.P. Hartley: The Go-Between (London, Penguin Books, 1983) p.205

13. Without labouring the point, I should point out that the warm interior is a 'primary experience and has passed into being a primary symbol in human consciousness'. The above remark is from The Coming of God by Maria Boulding O.S.B. (London, S.P.C.K., 1983, p.26 et seq) also

'European peoples have certainly been very sensitive to the ebb and flow of light and darkness since prehistoric times. Midwinter darkness must have been a vast, powerful mysterious reality for generations with no electricity or gas and very little oil. The forests were much thicker and more extensive than today, and there were no lighted buildings or motorways to provide islands or strips of luminosity: only a huge engulfing darkness of which people were afraid. It was not only superstitious terror; the winter was a time to dread, when food would be short, some members of the tribe might die and everyone would be cold and hungry ...'

NOTES - CHAPTER IV continued

14. 'When he (Christopher) was in his pyjamas, he leant over the slop-pail and vomited copiously three times ...'

Jill, p.41 and later,

'I was then compensated by the sight of Pat spitting out his mouthful into the fire (said Christopher) ... I was still hurrying ... things were grim. Still, I did not mark you, lose heart ... I got up and went into a corridor, where I may parenthetically state, I proceeded to micurate'.

Jill, p.126

15. Ian Hamilton: 'Four Conversations' London Magazine, p.75
16. Barbara Everett: 'Larkin after Symbolism' in Essays in Criticism 30, 1980, p.241
17. Alexander Pope: 'Epilogue to the Satires' lines 106 - 111 in Collected Poems (London, J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1956)
18. Andrew Motion: 'On the plain of Holderness' in Larkin at Sixty ed. Anthony Thwaite (London, Faber and Faber, 1982) p.68
19. cf 'Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your father which is in Heaven ... But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth. That thine alms may be in secret ... St. Matthew, ch. 6, vv 1 - 4
20. Philip Larkin: All What Jazz (London, Faber and Faber, 1970) p.106
21. All What Jazz, p.17
22. As an illustration of the bafflement, confusion and embarrassment caused by any explicit discussion of sex, Richard Hoggart, in his introduction to the Penguin edition of Lady Chatterley's Lover related an apocryphal war-time story in which a soldier gives his reasons for assaulting another man:
- 'I come home after three fucking years in fucking Africa, and what do I fucking-well find? My wife in bed engaged in an illicit cohabitation with a male!'
- D.H. Lawrence: Lady Chatterley's Lover (Penguin ed. Richard Hoggart) p.ix 1960

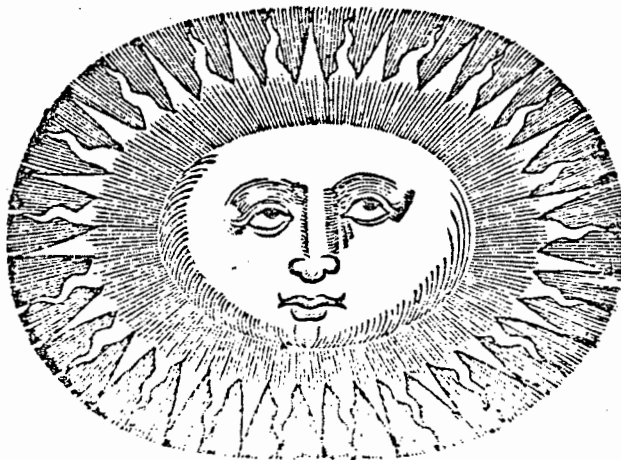
NOTES - CHAPTER IV continued

23. '..... Il n'est pas d'objet plus profond, plus mystérieux, plus fécond, plus ténébreux, plus éblouissant qu'une fenêtre éclairée d'une chandelle. Ce qu'on peut voir au soleil est toujours moins intéressant que ce qui se passe derrière une vitre.
..... Peut-être me direz-vous: Es-tu sûr que cette légende soit la vraie? Qu'importe ce que peut être la réalité placée hors de moi, si elle m'a aidé à vivre, à sentir que je suis et ce que je suis?'

Charles Baudelaire: Oeuvres Complètes (Paris, Gallimard, 1961, p.288)

24. Seamus Heaney: 'In the Grip of Light' in Larkin at Sixty, p.133

25.



Walter Herdeg (editor). The Sun in Art (Zurich, Amstutz and Herdeg, Graphis Press, 1962) p.57

26. Calvin Bedient: Eight Contemporary Poets (London, O.U.P., 1974) p.74
27. Very different from Olivia's inventory of her beauty:
Item, two lips indifferent red: Item, two grey eyes with lids to them: Item, one neck, one chin, and so forth...
(Twelfth Night, Act I, sc. iv)

NOTES - CHAPTER IV continued

28. François Villon: Le Testament XLIII 1 423 ... (Paris, Champion, 1958) p.25
29. See Chapter II p.61
30. A similarly complex rhyme scheme is used in 'I Remember, I Remember' (T.L.D., p.38) See also Chapter II p.51
31. Two oblique references seem to be implied. In 'Show Saturday' (p.37) the 'pure excellences that enclose/A recession of Skills' are praised and admired. Everything is 'worthy, all well done,/But less than honeycombs' It is reasonable, I think, to see this 'lucent comb' as a man-made honeycomb - the cells and interstices of a beehive are not unlike those of a hospital. In 'Show Saturday' the natural honeycombs excel because they are natural and perfect; man's (and woman's) receding skills are good, but a poor second compared with nature's work. The 'lucent comb' of 'The Building' is sinister in its efficient perfection.
- The other image which this suggests is in Christ's farewell discourse to His disciples: 'In my Father's house are many mansions: ...if it were not so I would have told you' (St. John, Chapter 14 verse 2). Again, however, this poem contradicts this reassurance even though the prime function of a hospital is to heal, 'All know they are going to die' is the more important message.
32. Seamus Heaney: pp.131 - 132
33. Philip Larkin: A Girl in Winter (London, Faber and Faber, 1946) p.111
34. It is interesting to note the anaphoric 'back to ...' construction - not at the head of each line, but accumulating. Also 'recession' might suggest its onimous economic connotation of skills which are perceptibly, and sadly, disappearing.
35. cf 'Going Going', H.W. p.21 which is a dirge for a vanishing way of life.
36. Barbara Everett: 'Larkin's Edens' in English 31 No.139 (Spring 1982) 46
37. Barbara Everett, p.52
38. Barbara Everett, p.52

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39. cf Isaiah 40: 11 'He shall feed his sheep like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young'. In the Messiah the music is of a beautifully cadenced pastoral tune.
40. Alan Brownjohn: Review of 'High Windows', New Statesman 14 June, 1974, pp.854 - 855

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Aubade

I work all day, and get half-drunk at night.
Waking at four to soundless dark I stare.
In time the curtain edges grow light.
Till then I see what's really always there:
Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,
Making all thought impossible but how
And where and when I shall myself die
Arid interrogation: yet the dread
of dying, and being dead,
Flashes afresh to hold and horrify.

The mind blanks at the glare. Not in remorse
- The good not done, the love not given, time
Torn off unused - nor wretchedly because
An only life can take so long to climb
Clear of its wrong beginnings, and may never;
But at the total emptiness for ever,
The sure extinction that we travel to
And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,
Not to be anywhere,
and soon; nothing more terrible nothing more true.

This is a special way of being afraid
No trick dispels. Religion used to try,
That vast moth-eaten musical brocade

Created to pretend we never die,
and specious stuff that says No rational being
Can fear a thing it will not feel not seeing
~~That this is what we fear~~ - no sight, no sound,
No touch, or taste or smell, nothing to think with
Nothing to love or link with,
The anaesthetic from which none come round.

And so it stays just on the edge of vision
A small unfocused blur, a standing chill
That slows each impulse down to indecision,
Most things may never happen: this one will
And realisation of it rages ~~out~~
In furnace-fear when we are caught without
People or drink, courage is no good:
It means not scaring others. Being brave
Lets no one off the grave.
Death's no different whined at than withstood.

Slowly light strengthens; and the room takes shape,
It stands plain as a wardrobe, what we know,
Have always known, know what we can't escape,
Yet can't accept. One side will have to go
Meanwhile telephones crouch, and all the uncaring
Intricate rented world begins to rouse.
The sky is white as day; with no sun.
Work has to be done.
Postmen like doctors go from house to house.

Times Literary Supplement 23 December 1977 p.1491