

## Alienation and Affirmation in the Poetry of Philip Larkin

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I should hate anybody to read my work because he's been told to and told what to think about it. I really want to hit them, I want readers to feel yes, I've never thought of it that way, but that's how it is.<sup>1</sup>

### I

In Larkin's first collection of poems, *The North Ship*, published in 1945, he anticipates certain themes and features of style which he was to bring to maturity in *The Less Deceived* (1955), *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964) and *High Windows* (1974). These youthful lyrics are unashamedly subjective. Reacting against the poetic school of impersonal objectivity and cerebral difficulty initiated by T. S. Eliot, Larkin strives to evoke the simplicities of human emotion in several song-like verses. He is unembarrassed by the traditional disciplines of rhythm and rhyme, and the commonplaces of romantic description:

The horns of the morning  
Are blowing, are shining,  
The meadows are bright  
    With the coldest dew;  
The dawn reassembles.  
Like the clash of gold cymbals  
The sky spreads its vans out  
    The sun hangs in view.

(‘The horns of the morning’)

If the imagery is occasionally arcane — as in the refrain of the first poem:

A drum taps: a wintry drum

(‘All catches alight’)

— it is hauntingly romantic in its eerie obscurity, rather than opaquely modernist.

Larkin's debts to Yeats and Hardy are everywhere apparent in his juvenilia. Phrases, such as the opening line of ‘The moon is full tonight’, reminding us of the title of Yeats's play, *The Full Moon in March*, the poem ‘The Dancer’, with its symbolist epigraph, its romantic image of dancing and its oblique, despairing yet adoring,

evocation of a Maud-like 'she', and the rustic portentousness of 'Nursery Tale', which could have come from *The Tower*, may all be attributed to the influence of the Irish poet. Then, in the poem beginning, 'If hands could free you, heart', with its uncluttered melancholy, and in the ambiguous fatalism of 'Is it for now or for always', we are put in mind of Hardy. Inevitably, there are some more modern touches. The cityscapes of 'One man walking a deserted platform' and 'Morning has spread again / Through every street' suggest the moribund urban world of Eliot's early poems — as in the 'Preludes', where 'morning comes to consciousness'. And the compounding of substantives and participles in hyphenated epithets:

As some vast seven-piled wave,  
Mane-flinging, manifold,  
Streams at an endless shore

(‘To write one song, I said’)

— a device Larkin was to apply effectively, later in his career, to his morally-charged catalogues — is reminiscent of the incantatory music of Dylan Thomas. Yet the romantic connexion is sustained. The realism of the Eliotesque vignette has an epiphanic aura, and Thomas, as Larkin himself reminds us, thought Yeats the greatest of twentieth-century poets, while Hardy was his favourite.<sup>2</sup>

However, in Larkin's introduction for a new edition of *The North Ship* in 1966, he speaks of this first collection (as he was to do of his brief career as a novelist) rather as an end than a beginning. Soon after he had completed it, he remembers, his 'Celtic fever abated'.<sup>3</sup> To demonstrate the point, he closes the new edition with a poem he had written in 1947, to mark the genesis of his mature manner. This work, certainly, is prophetic of later methods and sentiments:

Waiting for breakfast, while she brushed her hair,  
I looked down at the empty hotel yard  
Once meant for coaches. Cobblestones were wet,  
But sent no light back to the loaded sky,  
Such as it was with mist down to the roofs.  
Drainpipes and fire-escape climbed up  
Past rooms still burning their electric light:  
I thought: Featureless morning, featureless night.

1 Larkin, 'An Interview with the *Observer*' (1979), in *Required Writing* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), p. 56.

2 'Introduction', *The North Ship* (third edition; London: Faber and Faber, 1973), p. 10.

3 *Ibid.*

There is the urban, probably provincial, English setting. There is the narrative impulse, the anecdotal content, and the precise particularity of documentary observation — of the unprepossessing detail which is yet charged with metaphorical significance. There is the controlled elaboration of spacious stanzas, unique in *The North Ship*, but familiar later in Larkin's best poems, and a relaxation of the strict rhythmic and rhyming discipline. And, most importantly, there is the first-person tale of passion frustrated and the realistic *dénouement* of the flights of romance. However, as we discern the stirring of Larkin's modernity in this theme, it is well to remember, too, that it was also the preoccupation of Christina Rossetti, his favourite amongst Victorian poets. The moderns do not have the monopoly of disillusionment.

But the obsolescence of the earlier pieces in *The North Ship*, in contrast to this last, is not as cut and dried as Larkin suggests. In several of the lyrics in his first collection, that most enduring and characteristic of his subjects — the experience of being 'on the periphery of things',<sup>4</sup> even of alienation from life — is disclosed in embryo. This idea produces the dominant emotion of Larkin's poems, from first to last: what he described, in reflection on Hardy, as the 'inevitable bias . . . towards unhappiness'.<sup>5</sup>

'Who,' he asks, 'can confront / The instantaneous grief of being alone?'<sup>6</sup> And in several poems in *The North Ship*, Larkin reflects on his estrangement from love — an experience attributed here, as later, to the singularity of his own temperament as much as to the shortcomings of a putative beloved:

To wake, and hear a cock  
 Out of the distance crying,  
 To pull the curtains back  
 And see the clouds flying —  
 How strange it is  
 For the heart to be loveless, and as cold as these.

(‘Dawn’)

The persona's conception of women is Prufrockian. They are an alluring but separate creation:

Among the rain and stone places  
 I find only an ancient sadness falling,

4 'An Interview with the *Observer*', *op. cit.*, p. 55.

5 'Mrs Hardy's Memories' (1962), in *Required Writing*, p. 147.

6 'Kick up the fire, and let the flames break loose', *The North Ship*, p. 17.

Only hurrying and troubled faces,  
 The walking of girls' vulnerable feet,  
 The heart in its own endless silence kneeling.  
 ('Climbing the hill within the deafening wind')

Their active community, contrasting with his passive individuality, emphasizes his isolation:

I lie and wait for morning, and the birds,  
 The first steps going down the unswept street,  
 Voices of girls with scarves around their heads.  
 ('The bottle is drunk out by one')

This, in the world's estimation, is simply the suffering of unhappiness. But what is remarkable is Larkin's later interpretation of it.

His self-characterization as an observer detached from conventional joy unfolds — contentedly, sometimes smugly, but often defensively — as its own kind of fulfilment. What begins, in *The North Ship*, as a typically youthful loneliness, conveyed in romantic diction, became for Larkin a mature awareness and acceptance of the permanent reality of his life, provoking his distinctively laconic utterance. It was an unromantic process, reflected in his technique, of becoming less deceived. His essentially temperate voice, although it ranges from the mordant to the poignant and easily accommodates colloquialism and humour, was steadily tuned to the prevailing matter-of-factness of his worldview:

poetry is an affair of sanity, of seeing things as they are.<sup>7</sup>

Unhappiness — piteous, absurd, unappeasable — was ubiquitous. 'After all,' he remarked, 'most people *are* unhappy, don't you think?'<sup>8</sup> This, in any case, was Larkin's truth. He recognised the seductiveness of ecstasy:

The trumpet's voice, loud and authoritative,  
 Draws me a moment to the lighted glass  
 To watch the dancers — all under twenty-five —  
 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.

7 'Big Victims' (1970), in *Required Writing*, p. 197.

8 'An Interview with the *Observer*', *op. cit.*, p. [47].

But this only confirmed the outsider's separateness. And his dissociation from the rites of sociability is emphasized in a proliferation of disjunctions:

Why be out here?  
But then, why be in there? Sex, yes, but what  
Is sex? Surely, to think the lion's share  
Of happiness is found by couples — sheer

Inaccuracy, as far as I'm concerned.

He is drawn by another music:

What calls me is that lifted, rough-tongued bell  
(Art, if you like) whose individual sound  
Insists I too am individual . . .

Therefore I stay outside,  
Believing this; and they maul to and fro,  
Believing that; and both are satisfied,  
If no one has misjudged himself. Or lied.<sup>9</sup>

The conditional, self-deprecatory close humanely modifies the confidence of his position. But Larkin was in no doubt about the source of his poetic inspiration: 'deprivation is for me what daffodils were for Wordsworth'.<sup>10</sup> His experiences of alienation produced the affirmation of artistry.

## II

In *The Less Deceived*, *The Whitsun Weddings* and *High Windows*, through an extraordinary variety of poetic structures adapted to the presentation of a range of moods, Larkin explores the sub-themes of unhappiness. In the opening poem of the first book — 'Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album' — he mourns the passing of the youth so sweetly captured in the snapshots. Although he claims to find the confectionery of reminiscence too rich — 'I choke on such nutritious images' — he still delights in the intoxication, as his indulgence grows through the stanzas:

My swivel eye hungers from pose to pose —  
In pigtails, clutching a reluctant cat;

9 'Reasons for Attendance', *The Less Deceived* (London: The Marvell Press, 1973), p. 18.

10 'An Interview with the *Observer*', *op. cit.*, p. [47].

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) —  
 From every side you strike at my control.

At the heart of the poem, Larkin must explain and justify his appetite: he is always the moralist. Was he enthralled by the factuality of photography — the candour of her face, so accurately captured by the camera?

That this is a real girl in a real place,  
 In every sense empirically true!

Or, more generally, '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.

Our yesterdays, by virtue of their pastness, are absolved. We may yearn for them uncritically:

We know *what was*  
 Won't call on us to justify  
 Our grief.

Larkin's precise explanation, however, is revealed in his details. The 'Hall's-Distemper boards', her 'trilby hat' and the furred bachelor's hood, 'these misty parks and motors', the 'disquieting chaps who loll / At ease about your earlier days', have strayed from a Betjemesque tableau. They are objectively true, but Larkin cannot view them dispassionately. Nor does he admit them merely as representative of pastness *per se*. Lamenting the demise of the lady's enchanting youth, he is also mourning a way of life — that of the English middle classes in the earlier twentieth century. As such, Larkin's poem is an implicit critique of the contemporary English environment — the 'cast of crooks and tarts'<sup>11</sup> — which he found so alienating:

11 'Going, Going', *High Windows* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), p. 22.

of cold-eyed lascivious daughters on the pill, to whom Ramsay MacDonald is co-eval 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.<sup>12</sup>

From its spatio-temporal focus, the poem expands into a statement about innocence and its loss — in a manner similar to 'MCMXIV', in *The Whitsun Weddings*, where a generation's expulsion from a paradisaical Englishness is precisely dated at the beginning of the First World War: 'never such innocence again'. Accordingly, it is ultimately a discourse on mortality, as its last stanza shows. This is a familiar destination for a Larkin poem. Souveniring one photograph from the collection, the persona treasures it as an imperishable icon in the midst of personal and societal decay:

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

Where the 'Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album' are ordered into verse-length meditations, at first wistful, then analytic and finally philosophic — matching the cumulative act of perusing the album and weighing the experience — 'Places, Loved Ones' has a crisp Hegelian design. Larkin is a master of intensifying the mood of his poems through their structure and style. In the opening stanza, brusque line-lengths and the rhyming pattern are firmly established as technical correlatives of the persona's conviction of his rootlessness:

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 an instant claim  
On everything I own  
Down to my name.

The alternative condition is seen unsympathetically in the second verse:

To find such seems to prove  
You want no choice in where  
To build, or whom to love;

12 'Introduction to *All What Jazz*' (1970), in *Required Writing*, p. 298.

You ask them to bear  
 You off irrevocably,  
 So that it's not your fault  
 Should the town turn dreary,  
 The girl a dolt.

The unexpected synthesis of the third, however, shows that Larkin does not confer superiority on solitude. On the contrary, he wryly suggests that his autonomous condition perversely entails a lover's devotion:

Yet, having missed them, you're  
 Bound, none the less, to act  
 As if what you settled for  
 Mashed you,<sup>13</sup> in fact;  
 And wiser to keep away  
 From thinking you still might trace  
 Uncalled-for to this day  
 Your person, your place.

While the pragmatism of the last quatrain proposes the sanity of self-acceptance, this has already been qualified by the destabilizing ambiguity of 'missed', in the opening line of the stanza, and is further undermined by the *occupatio* in which it is couched. The *brio* of the technique is now ironic, for the judgement is perfectly ambivalent. Larkin is settled in the state of lovelessness, but he is disquieted by its persistence.

The rhetoric of debate, of proposal and counter-proposal, dominates Larkin's consideration of his alienation in *The Less Deceived*. In the later collections, as his vision darkens, his acceptance of its validity increases. Here, he is more likely to blame himself for his condition, while recognizing its inevitability. So, in the terse 'No Road' — an evaluation of the axiom that 'good fences make good neighbours' — the poet, interpreting his determination for independence as 'my liberty' and 'my will's fulfilment', yet reflects, in the *envoi*, that to want 'a world where no such road will run / From you to me', is 'my ailment'. None the less, in the moving pastoral, 'At Grass', which closes the collection, retirement from life is beautifully celebrated in the guise of the old racehorses' freedom from the constraints of their public careers. Larkin does not utterly repudiate their busy past — he captures its *élan*:

The starting-gates, the crowds and cries.

13 Slang for being infatuated.



He appreciates another English ritual and its trappings:

Faint afternoons  
Of Cups and Stakes and Handicaps,  
Whereby their names were artificed  
To inlay faded, classic Junes.

Indeed, he would say of Derby Day, as he does of Show Saturday — ‘let it always be there’.<sup>14</sup> But with the madding crowd behind them, the horses have been reconciled to something even more compelling than the strident demands of community. They affirm their true identity in the peaceful solitude of ‘unmolesting meadows’:

Almanacked, their names live; they  
Have slipped their names, and stand at ease,  
Or gallop for what must be joy,  
And not a fieldglass sees them home,  
Or curious stop-watch prophesies:  
Only the groom, and the groom’s boy,  
With bridles in the evening come.

The antithetical demeanour of *The Less Deceived* has its consummation in ‘Church Going’, justly regarded as the finest poem in the collection, where Larkin’s personal scepticism and his regretful perception of the social dissolution of the modern age are contrasted with his account of the unnerving magnetism exerted on him by even the meanest church building and his praise of its now neglected solemnizations of the momentous occasions in the cycle of human life — ‘marriage, and birth / And death, and thoughts of these’. Replete with the characteristics of Larkin’s artistry, the poem is perhaps most admirable for his superb control of its development, from prosaic observation to resonant utterance, from his puzzlement at his reluctant but habitual visitations to a sententious affirmation at the conclusion. He would preserve the churches’ ancient witness amidst advancing ‘suburb scrub’.

Yet Peter Levi has prudently omitted ‘Church Going’ from the small selection of Larkin’s poetry included in his recent anthology of religious verse,<sup>15</sup> while Helen Gardner, defining the genre less broadly, excludes Larkin entirely from hers.<sup>16</sup> In a Christian poem,

14 ‘Show Saturday’, *High Windows*, p. 39.

15 *The Penguin Book of English Christian Verse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984). For his selection from Larkin, Mr Levi has chosen ‘The Explosion’, ‘Days’ and ‘Water’.

16 *The Faber Book of Religious Verse* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972).

we would require the notes of an orthodoxy, an experience of transcendence, or at least a professedly Christian author. But the 'accoutred frowsty barn' is not Larkin's Little Gidding. From the outset, he dismisses the sanctuary:

some brass and stuff  
Up at the holy end.

Although he is drawn into the building and its ambience, meticulously recording the details of his movements —

Hatless, I take off  
My cycle-clips in awkward reverence,  
Move forward, run my hand around the font . . . .  
Mounting the lectern, I peruse a few  
Hectoring large-scale verses, and pronounce  
'Here endeth' much more loudly than I'd meant

— he does not advance beyond the chancel. Larkin unpretentiously resists the spiritualizing of the event, closing the anecdote bathetically:

Back at the door  
I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence,  
Reflect the place was not worth stopping for.

So the dilemma presents itself — 'Yet stop I did: in fact I often do' — and the poet's explanation will satisfy neither the rigorous believer nor the dogmatic atheist. A conservative's reverence for old church buildings and an agnostic's affirmation of the terrestrial wisdom they represent express a humanistic faith in personal sentiment and moral imperatives:

It pleases me to stand in silence here;  
A serious house on serious earth it is,  
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,  
Are recognised and robed as destinies.  
And that much never can be obsolete,  
Since someone will forever be surprising  
A hunger in himself to be more serious,  
And gravitating with it to this ground,  
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,  
If only that so many dead lie round.

The winning honesty of Larkin's individualistic self-portrayal and the *gravitas* of his vision of the human condition, realized with distinctive and accomplished artistry, combine, in a work such as

this, to secure his permanent status as a major poet.

With the poems of *The Whitsun Weddings* — ‘written in or near Hull, Yorkshire, with a succession of Royal Sovereign 2B pencils during the years 1955 to 1963’<sup>17</sup> — Larkin attains the pinnacle of his achievement. They contain the lines which — as he has said himself<sup>18</sup> — most accurately reflect his view of human experience:

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.

(‘Dockery and Son’)

It is a text for the poetry of this collection and of his final book, the erratic *High Windows*, where the intensity of the poet’s disillusionment occasionally vitiates his art.<sup>19</sup> In these poems of middle age, he concentrates on that subject which he found at once the most alienating and the most insistent of his preoccupations — the dominion of death. It is a theme, like so many others, which has its origin in *The North Ship* — in the title poem, indeed, of that first book, where Larkin takes the lilting children’s carol of the three Christmas ships, and, while preserving its rhythmic buoyancy, turns it to a darker, adult purpose. He invests his vessels with the symbolic cargo of mortal and eternal destiny. The first is the ship of happiness, carried westward ‘to a rich country’. The second,

turned toward the east,  
Over the sea, the quaking sea,  
And the wind hunted it like a beast  
To anchor in captivity.

The ship of unhappiness, it remains within the finite and comprehensible domain of human life:

East and West the ships came back  
Happily or unhappily.

But the travels of the north ship, in Donne’s phrase, ‘yield return to none’. It is the ship of death:

the third went wide and far  
Into an unforgiving sea

17 ‘Writing Poems’ (1964), in *Required Writing*, p. [83].

18 In A. N. Wilson, ‘Philip Larkin’, *The Spectator*, 7 December 1985, 24.

19 I would cite the sarcastic ‘Homage to a Government’ and the futile obscenities of ‘The Card-Players’.

Under a fire-spilling star,  
And it was rigged for a long journey.

This chilling maritime imagery is perpetuated in 'Next, Please', in *The Less Deceived*, where Larkin argues that our hopes for the future — the 'sparkling armada of promises' — are a succession of diverting delusions:

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

There is but one certainty in the human story, rendering all our aspirations trivial and absurd:

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

She is the ultimate and unconquerable alien.

In *The Whitsun Weddings* and *High Windows*, Larkin presents the reader with a catalogue of deaths in life and a series of meditations on death itself. His discourse on the disappointments of love and romance (in 'Broadcast', 'Wild Oats' and 'Love Songs in Age') is amplified in two poems where he speaks of the woe that is in marriage. In 'Self's the Man', Larkin paints a satirical picture of domesticity, while, in 'Talking in Bed', an archetypal couple's progression from honesty and love to lies and cruelty is traced with a sad perplexity:

Nothing shows why  
At this unique distance from isolation

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

Failure, for Larkin, is the way of life — a theme introduced subjectively in 'Nursery Tale', in *The North Ship*:

every journey that I make  
Leads me . . .  
To some new ambush, to some fresh mistake

and epitomized and universalised, in *The Whitsun Weddings*, in the

vivid economy of 'As Bad as a Mile':

Watching the shield core  
 Striking the basket, skidding across the floor,  
 Shows less and less of luck, and more and more  
 Of failure spreading back up the arm  
 Earlier and earlier, the unraised arm calm,  
 The apple unbitten in the palm.

Human incapacity, like Original Sin, is an inherent fallibility: the persona of 'The Importance of Elsewhere' is not only 'separate' but 'unworkable'. Then, in 'Sunny Prestatyn', Larkin again directs his critical eye to the indecencies of modern 'civilisation'. And he even expresses his alienation from his own vocations of librarian and poet in the whimsical climax of 'A Study of Reading Habits':

Get stewed:  
 Books are a load of crap.

In *High Windows*, the theme of separation from love is given a sexual interpretation in 'Annus Mirabilis', Larkin's disdain for community is again explored in 'Vers de Société' and his critique of contemporary England has a despairing edge in 'Going, Going':

before I snuff it, the whole  
 Boiling will be bricked in  
 Except for the tourist parts —  
 First slum of Europe . . . .  
 And that will be England gone,  
 The shadows, the meadows, the lanes,  
 The guildhalls, the carved choirs.

However, the dominant subject of his poetry in these last two collections is that theme which most disturbs Larkin's readers. Our century, as Cecil Bald has observed, wants to 'turn away its face from the facts of death and to remove from everyday life all the constant reminders of its omnipresence'.<sup>20</sup> Larkin, on the contrary, although sharing this revulsion, faces the final reality of life with that honesty and sanity that are the hallmarks of his verse. For him, as he writes in 'Nothing To Be Said', 'life is slow dying'.

In the inevitability of 'Ambulances' and the puzzled pathos of 'Ignorance', in the waking nightmare of the nursing home in 'The Old Fools', with its heart-stopping conclusion, and in a dozen other poems, Larkin explores death's mystery and its cruelty. The theme

20 *John Donne: A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 527.

is given its broadest exposition in 'The Building', in *High Windows*, where our avoidance of the subject is captured in the anonymity of the poem's title, the subsequent definition of 'this place' in terms of what it is not — a hotel, an airport terminal — and the circumlocutory references to mortality as an 'error of a serious sort', 'the only coin / This place accepts'. Of course, the building is a hospital — but its vastness, in Larkin's presentation, makes it dominate the human landscape: it is 'higher than the handsomest hotel'. Through the massive accumulation of rooms, 'and rooms past those, / And more rooms yet', patients, in Dantean imagery, climb to 'their appointed levels' to become the bed-ridden citizenry of a mock-Heaven:

The unseen congregations whose white rows  
Lie set apart above.

The demeaning circumstances of the end of life — 'someone's wheeled past, in washed-to-rags ward clothes' — the unexpected brutality of its interruption of life's business:

See the time,  
Half-past eleven on a working day,  
And these picked out of it . . .

its loneliness and hopelessness:

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

but, most of all, its universality — 'women, men; / Old, young' — are systematically recorded. In the last stanza, what has been described must now be named:

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

The hospital, representing 'a struggle to transcend / The thought of dying', cannot ultimately prevent the fatal process:

unless its powers  
Outbuild cathedrals nothing contravenes  
The coming dark, though crowds each evening try  
With wasteful, weak, propitiatory flowers.

'The Building' indicates the essential dilemma in Larkin's thought. Although alienated from life, he regarded death and its corollary with horror: 'I dread endless extinction'.<sup>21</sup> Admiring the work of Stevie Smith, and sharing her critical worldview, he could not identify with her ecstatic death-wish, her glad solution to life's afflictions. She embraced Death as her lover. The refrain 'Come Death' rings through her strange poetry: there are two poems with that title and in 'Dido's Farewell to Aeneas' she cries —

Come Death, you know you must come when you're called  
Although you're a god. And this way, and this way, I call you.<sup>22</sup>

But from Larkin's thoughts of the oblivion of eternity, he returned, almost with relief, to life:

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.

('The Building')

This is not a rapturous vision. But who has not experienced the attraction of the mundane and the random when engulfed by the peculiarities of sadness and the indomitability of fate? Larkin, confirmed in isolation, pays tribute to the allure of ordinary communal activity; obsessed with death, he expresses a desire to maintain the continuity of life. These tensions are explored in the title poem of *The Whitsun Weddings*, where the poet, through a geographical conceit, traces his journey from the edge of eternity to the very heart of human existence. He presents ideas of himself, *en route*, as an observer, at once detached from the adventure of life and captivated by it, and as a poet — the inspired recorder of humanity and its occasions. From the disappointments of lovelessness and his dread of the absolute alienation of death, Larkin returned with a reluctant gratitude to life, resolving the ambiguity in art.

'The Whitsun Weddings' should be read in conjunction and in contrast with 'Here', in the same volume, where the poet introduces

21 'An Interview with the *Observer*', *op. cit.*, p. 55. But see 'Wants', in *The Less Deceived*.

22 In *Collected Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 330. See Larkin's essay, 'Frivolous and Vulnerable' (1962), in *Required Writing*, pp. [153]-8.

the trope of travel through England as a metaphor of his disengagement. Larkin's willed deviation from the mainstream is strikingly portrayed in the verve of its opening phrase —

Swerving east . . .

— which is soon recalled and further particularised:

swerving to solitude.

The first of the three destinations of 'Here' is 'a large town' — unnamed, but almost certainly Hull, near England's north-east coast, where Larkin spent most of his adult life:

As for Hull, I like it because it's so far from everywhere else. On the way to nowhere, as somebody put it. It is in the middle of this lonely country, and beyond the lonely country there's only the sea. I like that.

Here, he could remain in England and yet be on its periphery:

I love all the Americans getting on to the train at King's Cross and thinking they're going to come and bother me, and then looking at the connections and deciding they'll go to Newcastle and bother Basil Bunting instead. Makes it harder for people to get at you.<sup>23</sup>

The desolate environs of Hull are the second 'Here' of the poem, where the solitude he had so blissfully sought is now experienced less romantically:

out beyond its mortgaged half-built edges  
Fast-shadowed wheat-fields, running high as hedges,  
Isolate villages, where removed lives  
Loneliness clarifies.

The poem closes at the furthest remove from life, beyond these land-locked domains and 'a beach / Of shapes and shingle', in sight of the endless sea, symbolic of an unattainable immortality where words fail:

Here is unfenced existence:  
Facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach.

In 'The Whitsun Weddings', the process of 'Here' is reversed. Larkin is now discovered, at the season of Whitsun, journeying southward to London. At first, he is his characteristically

23 'An Interview with the *Observer*', *op. cit.*, p. 54.



autonomous self. From the interior of the speeding train, 'three-quarters-empty', he records the appearances of the separate external world:

Wide farms went by, short-shadowed cattle, and  
 Canals with floatings of industrial froth;  
 A hothouse flashed uniquely: hedges dipped  
 And rose: and now and then a smell of grass  
 Displaced the reek of buttoned carriage-cloth  
 Until the next town, new and nondescript,  
 Approached with acres of dismantled cars.

These scenes are devoid of humankind. But Larkin's separateness is to be circumscribed. Noticing only distant vistas, then preoccupied with his reading, he is unaware that he is being drawn into the rites of life, until the celebratory sounds from the platforms at each station begin to demand his attention:

At first, I didn't notice what a noise  
 The weddings made  
 Each station that we stopped at.

His disengagement arrested, he now attends more closely, evaluating the scene critically but indulgently:

Struck, I leant  
 More promptly out next time, more curiously,  
 And saw it all again in different terms:  
 The fathers with broad belts under their suits  
 And seamy foreheads; mothers loud and fat;  
 An uncle shouting smut.

His particularity of observation and his evaluative analysis secure his proximity to the event and his involvement in it. And at the heart of the poem, in the next stanza — as 'fresh couples' climb aboard and fill his carriage — Larkin's key word, the affirming ejaculation, 'Yes', consummates his marriage to the occasion he describes and assesses. This is *his* Whitsun Wedding. The 'I' of the opening stanzas has become the 'we' of a shared experience:

We hurried towards London, shuffling gouts of steam.

Yet the exhilaration of the occasion is short-lived. The afternoon of the journey's climax declines into the evening of its end. Larkin ponders his fortuitous meeting with the couples and the accidents of their unions in marriage. Both represent a 'frail travelling coincidence'. Ominously, he wonders about the future:

What it held  
 Stood ready to be loosed with all the power  
 That being changed can give.

The indefiniteness of this speculation is itself negative. For marriages at least begin with the prospect of happiness. And it remains unresolved in the last lines, with their appropriately sexual reference, as Larkin closes in a puzzlingly paradoxical simile:

We slowed again,  
 And as the tightened brakes took hold, there swelled  
 A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower  
 Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.

Arrows may wound and kill, and rainfall is the natural accompaniment of melancholy. But a summer shower is benign and rainwater is also productive of fertility. From Larkin's perspective, the effect of the 'dozen marriages' is uncertain. But his Whitsun wedding has produced the progeny of a poem. 'Struck' by the event, he too has been 'changed' by it. Its 'power' in his life becomes the poetry in which he preserves it. In this way, we see that the remote Christian origins of Whitsun are immediately relevant to this work. For the celebration of Pentecost is the affirmation of verbal inspiration. 'The Whitsun Weddings' is a poem about poetry, where Larkin affirms the importance for his creativity of the settings and the events of ordinary human experience, the subjectivity of his moral vision of them and his happiness in bringing his ideas and emotions to artistic birth:

[Q.] Do you feel terribly pleased when you've written [a poem]?  
 [A.] Yes, as if I've laid an egg, and even more pleased when I see it published. Because I do think that's a part of it: you want it to be seen and read, you're trying to preserve something.<sup>24</sup>

### III

Philip Larkin died in 1985. Although he averred that it is 'very sensible not to let people know what you're like',<sup>25</sup> his acquaintances are keen to reassure us that the man was very different from his poetic persona. The poet who wrote

Man hands on misery to man.  
 It deepens like a coastal shelf.

24 'An Interview with the *Observer*', *op. cit.*, p. 52.

25 'An Interview with the *Observer*', *op. cit.*, p. 54.

Get out as quickly as you can,  
And don't have any kids yourself

(‘This Be The Verse’)

was — we are surprised to learn — a kind and often jolly fellow. There is a photograph of him laughing uproariously with (or, possibly, at) Sir John Betjeman.<sup>26</sup> A. N. Wilson, wanting to close his obituary notice of this solitary and pessimistic writer in an affectionate and positive way, draws on Larkin’s description of the life of Major Warren Lewis:

a bygone bachelor world — sticks in the vanished hall stand, lodgings, walking tours, pubs, discomfort — women as nuisances — books, irritation. And of course tremendous inarticulate love.<sup>27</sup>

That milieu certainly calls to mind the world of several of Larkin’s poems — ‘Mr Bleaney’, for example. But ‘tremendous inarticulate love’? It is a soothing epitaph, and Mr Wilson, hoping that it might be so, represents a tendency amongst commentators on Larkin’s work to attempt to ameliorate the bitterness of the poetry by reference to the allegedly agreeable personality of its author. Such a procedure is as unhelpful to the appreciation of Larkin’s message and of his medium as is the similarly distorting revaluation, currently in vogue, of Stevie Smith’s writing, which, ‘although often dwelling on death’, it is contended, ‘reveals an irrepressible love of life’.<sup>28</sup> There are poets who are less than enthusiastic about human existence, just as there are readers who are prepared to contemplate the poetry of unhappiness without a critic’s unfounded reassurance that its authors were, *au fond*, life-affirmers. Larkin’s poems speak to us, as ‘Miss Smith’s’ spoke to him, with ‘the authority of sadness’.<sup>29</sup> In any case, an ‘inarticulate’ Larkin is as impossible to credit as a wordless Wordsworth.

The closing line of ‘An Arundel Tomb’, in *The Whitsun Weddings*, is one of Larkin’s best known:

What will survive of us is love.

Wrenched from context — as it often is — it appears to dilute the lovelessness we find elsewhere in his work. But the line has to be

26 *Larkin at Sixty*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), facing p. 92.

27 Wilson, *art. cit.*, 24.

28 Anonymous blurb on *Collected Poems*.

29 ‘Frivolous and Vulnerable’, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

read within the stanza's syntactic structure and in relation to the theme of the whole poem. For in the penultimate line, the sentiment is disproved in advance when Larkin calls it an 'almost instinct' that is 'almost true'. A miss, he believed, was as bad as a mile. And his wry conclusion issues from the preceding argument.

To expose the disjunction between art and life, the poet contemplates one of the Arundel tombs in Chichester Cathedral, especially noting the joined hands of the stone figures of the earl and his lady which surmount it. He imagines that the fourteenth-century couple had requested this touching memorial to commemorate their love and to please their friends. But, he speculates, they would no more have expected their marital faithfulness to have survived the centuries than the sculptured presentation of it:

Time has transfigured them into  
Untruth. The stone fidelity  
They hardly meant has come to be  
Their final blazon.

This Arundel tomb, and Larkin's poem, contrast the mortality of life and its affections with the immortality of art and its processes.

The poet, in fact, is more justified in his antithesis than he knew. Not only did the couple never intend such an eternal conjunction, they did not even request a deathbed linking in their own age. Buried in separate tombs, their effigies were carved apart. It was not until 1844 that the sculptor, Richardson, married their images in a fit of Victorian sentiment. The result, as W. Graham has wittily pointed out — in 'An Arundel Tomb Restored' — confirms what Larkin, in his subtler poem, could only imply:

What will survive of us is art.<sup>30</sup>

It is an affirmation with which all appreciative readers of Larkin's poetry will readily agree.

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30 In *Phoenix*, 'Philip Larkin Issue', Nos 11/12, 1973/4, 137.