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I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Michael Thomas Tierce entitled "Eggs, Small Beer, and Hardy: The Poetry and Prose of Philip Larkin." I have examined the final copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

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EGGS, SMALL BEER, AND HARDY:
THE POETRY AND PROSE OF PHILIP LARKIN

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Degree
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ABSTRACT

The bleak sense of failure and dissatisfaction that appears to infest Philip Larkin's poetry is caused not only by the twentieth-century writer's usual distrust of God, or nature, or humanity, but it is also the direct result of his recognition of the limitations of art, a recognition that helps to explain his decision in 1982 to stop writing poetry altogether. He did, however, spend forty years producing poems in which he tries to preserve things he has seen, thought, or felt. Since he insists on describing commonplace events and ordinary people and refuses to over-romanticize the realistic sights and occurrences on which he bases his work, it is easy to see why he would reject Yeats and embrace Hardy as his poetic master. However, even though his poems do generally begin with a factual description using specific details, they usually culminate in a closer examination stating the importance of these details in a more universal context. He, therefore, tends to build up to a big finish--oftentimes to a metaphorical flourish.

Larkin not only insists on commonplace subject matter, but he also attempts to return poetry back to "average" or "common" readers. He thinks poetry should and must compete with the local pub and with the television set. He consequently rejects "modernism," blaming Pound and Eliot for making poetry too obscure for the average reader to understand. Since he views "modernism" as being overly cold, sterile, and intellectual, he tries to remake poetry into a vehicle

for emotions capable of giving pleasure to any reader. He, therefore, insists that poetry must deal with human emotions as well as the intellect and tries to make reading poetry a pleasurable experience once again. However, even though he attempts to establish a realistic, empirical, photograph-like effect, many of his poems reflect his awareness that such an art is artificial at best and impossible at worst. Not only does he doubt the intrinsic value of art, but he also ultimately rejects all capital-t Truths. God, nature, art, and love are all questioned and eventually devalued. All an artist can hope to accomplish is an "appropriate falsehood"; Truths are out of the question.

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KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS

<u>AGW</u>	<u>A Girl in Winter</u> . New York: St. Martin's, 1962.
<u>AWJ</u>	<u>All What Jazz: A Record Diary 1961-68</u> . London: Faber, 1970.
<u>HW</u>	<u>High Windows</u> . New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974.
<u>Jill</u>	<u>Jill</u> . New York: St. Martin's, 1964.
<u>LD</u>	<u>The Less Deceived</u> . London: The Marvell Press, 1973.
<u>NS</u>	<u>The North Ship</u> . London: Faber, 1966.
<u>RW</u>	<u>Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982</u> . London: Faber, 1983.
<u>WW</u>	<u>The Whitsun Weddings</u> . London: Faber, 1964.

INTRODUCTION

From the time Philip Larkin's The Less Deceived was published in 1955 until he was interviewed by Paris Review in 1982, the critical issue that seemed to motivate the academic reader to publish on Larkin was whether he disliked or admired Larkin's work. The detractors were led by M. L. Rosenthal, A. Alvarez, and Charles Tomlinson; the admirers by Christopher Ricks, Clive James, and G. S. Fraser. But since Larkin ended a 1982 interview with Robert Phillips of the Paris Review by matter-of-factly saying "it's unlikely I shall write any more poems" (Phillips 72; RW 75), the critical emphasis must shift away from mere personal preferences to a more involved examination of why Philip Larkin at age 60 decided to abandon poetry (or perhaps why it chose to abandon him). Larkin's decision clearly breaks his own definition of "the golden rule of any art":

The golden rule in any art is: once you have made your name, keep in there punching. For the public is not so much endlessly gullible as endlessly hopeful: after twenty years, after forty years even, it still half expects your next book or film or play to reproduce that first fine careless rapture, however clearly you have demonstrated that whatever talent you once possessed has long since degenerated into repetition, platitude or frivolity. (RW 306)

Larkin has apparently gone down for the count; he will no longer "keep in there punching."

Perhaps one explanation for his decision is given in an uncollected sonnet published in 1941 when Larkin was only nineteen (quoted in Johnson 37-38):

"A Writer"

"Interesting, but futile," said his diary,
Where day by day his movements were recorded
And nothing but his loves received inquiry;
He knew, of course, no actions were rewarded,
There were no prizes: though the eye could see
Wide beauty in a motion of a pause,
It need expect no lasting salary
Beyond the bowels' momentary applause.

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

Roughly forty-one years before officially abandoning poetry in 1982, Larkin realized that writing was "interesting but futile," that "no actions were rewarded," and that "there were no prizes." Unlike the persona of Wordsworth's "Resolution and Independence"--"We poets in our youth begin in gladness;/ But thereof come in the end despondency and madness"--even at age nineteen Larkin did not have the comfort of beginning to write poetry "in gladness." In fact, in an interview with John Horder in 1965, Larkin admitted that he "gave up" poetry writing "in 1942 and again in 1946" and that he had not "written a single poem for the last two years" (9).

In a recent review of Larkin's Required Writing, Blake Morrison asserts that Larkin's published interviews "suggest that he is quietly confident of [poetry's] power--but that he has constructed a voice which comes clean about its failings and limitations" ("On Philip Larkin's Prose" 43). And even though Roger Day can matter-of-factly claim that Larkin is "immensely proud" (11) of poetry, Larkin's

own admission that he perhaps has a "subconscious objection to writing" (RW 84) seems to be much more defensible. In his published response to Auden's death, Larkin asserts that "poetry is a fine thing, but the poet--even one of Auden's stature--mustn't give himself airs ('in the end, art is small beer')" ("W. H. Auden [1907-1973]" 479). Larkin appears to be so sympathetic with Auden's claim that "art is small beer" that Michael Hamburger can argue that Larkin has an "anti-poetic complex" and that he rejects the "'poets of the past' . . . who believed in poetry" (262). To Larkin poetry is "nothing but the bowler hat and the eight-fifteen" (Horder 9); that is, it is like any other nine-to-five job. And there is little doubt that Larkin considers himself to be only an "adequate" employee. His hope for the future of poetry is that "a really big talent will arise that will make the business of reading poetry exciting once more" ("The State of Poetry--A Symposium" 60), a poetic talent comparable to Louis Armstrong, who Larkin claims "will be remembered as much as an agent for replacing one culture with another as an individual artist" (RW 315). Larkin not only accepts that he is not such a talent, but he also apparently fails to find one among his contemporaries: "only the blank book, the manuscript book, may be the book we shall give the future" (RW 86). So perhaps he stopped writing because he could no longer accept his inability to fill the pages of this book; or perhaps as C. B. Cox suggested in 1979 Larkin's poetic ability is merely "a spent force" ("Recent Poetry" 296); or perhaps a "central dread of satisfaction" (Thurley 145) became too overpowering. Obviously no definitive answer has yet been given, but a

close examination of his poetry and prose can certainly add many fresh insights.

Even though Larkin claimed that he "never had 'ideas' about poetry" (RW 76; Phillips 72) and that he always found "it hard to give any abstract views on poetry" (RW 79; Enright, Poets of the 1950's 77), and even though Bruce Martin can refer to Larkin's "sparse commentary on poetry" (25), it is clear from the recent publication of Required Writing (1983) that Larkin's interviews and reviews adequately fill up an entire volume. And if we include the reviews in All What Jazz?--"a good part of the secret of what Larkin really thinks about art is distributed through the pages of All What Jazz?" (James, At the Pillars of Hercules 65)--then he has roughly two volumes of literary criticism. Although the reader always has to "take what Larkin says in interviews with a pinch of salt" (Timms, "'Church Going' Revisited" 14), Larkin's published commentary on art supplies numerous handles for getting a better grip on his poetry. In fact, since Larkin attacks the poets of the past for saying one thing and doing another and claims that he tries to avoid this "false relation between art and life" (Hamilton, "Four Conversations" 75), it is essential to know what Larkin says about art. His published comments therefore become quite important, but it is the poetry itself which will ultimately supply the clues to explain Larkin's insistence in 1982 that anything else he says "about writing poems is bound to be retrospective" (RW 58; Phillips 46).

But before Larkin's reader can begin to "study" his poetry, he must deal with the fact that "Larkin is very much 'Against

Interpretation,' in Susan Sontag's phrase, and considers it nonsense for a critic to claim to know a poem's meaning more accurately than its author" (Timms, Philip Larkin 65). In an interview with the London Times, Larkin asserted that he hates "the idea . . . that poetry is to be studied rather than enjoyed, that poetry-reading is a duty of the intellectual and all that" (Anonymous, "Speaking of Writing XIII" 16). He has also made numerous other derogatory comments about academic criticism: "the production and enjoyment of English literature" will continue even if academic teaching virtually ceases ("Crit and Lit" 55); "Writing reviews, or holding seminars . . . is secondary activity, unimportant at best, meretricious at worst" (Anonymous interview with Larkin on the rear sleeve of Philip Larkin Reads The Less Deceived); "twentieth-century criticism has been motivated by a desire to demonstrate that what looks simple is in fact complicated" (RW 247; "The Changing Face of Andrew Marvell" 151); "we can say that modern criticism thrives on the difficult-- either on explaining the difficult or explaining that what seemed straight-forward is in fact difficult" (RW 168; "Wanted: Good Hardy Critic" 174); we must distinguish "lovers of poetry" from "dessicated PhD-fodder" ("Open Your Betjemans" 726); "There is nothing like writing poems for realizing how low the level of critical understanding is; maybe the average reader can understand what I say, but the above-average often can't" (Hamilton, "Four Conversations" 76); "I'm not a theorist, I'm not a critic, I'm not an academic" (Thwaite, "A Great Parade" 474).

Larkin's two collected poems that deal explicitly with academics--"Naturally the Foundation will Bear Your Expenses" and "Posterity"--offer very bleak views of the critical profession. The speaker in the former--referred to by Larkin as "a shit" (Haffenden, Viewpoints 126)--is so caught up in delivering a paper that he resents being held up by the Armistice Day service, which he refers to as "solemn-sinister wreath rubbish" (WW 13). In the latter Larkin imagines his biographer, Jake Balokowsky, to be a tenure-seeker extremely bored because his subject is "one of those old-type natural fouled-up guys" (HW 27). Both of these two portraits are quite satirical. The following lines from "Larkin About"--an anonymous poem published 26 May 1984 in The Economist--offer a summary of Larkin's often-publicized attitude toward academics:

Or some eng. lit. professor (lazy brute),
 Who lives off Mrs. Thatcher's shilling,
 Then turns and bites the hand
 That feeds and nurtures him. (107)

Not only does Larkin himself seemingly reject the necessity of academic criticism, but even some of his academic critics do too: "this kind of ponderous analysis, with Larkin, strikes one as being boring and even offensive, since he is a poet whose meaning is never unclear" (Wain, "Engagement or Withdrawal" 168); "Larkin needs no prolegomena, no exegesis: there is no necessary bibliography, no suggested reading, except the poems themselves" (Thwaite, "The Poetry of Philip Larkin" 37); "the man in the bowler hat on the 8:15 . . . would have no difficulty with him" (Cook 322). Even Larkin has

insisted that "there's not much to say about [his] work. When you've read a poem that's it; it's all quite clear what it means" (RW 53-54; Miriam Gross 35).

If all these comments were true, then we certainly would not need a new study of Larkin's poetry. All of our questions would be answered with just a simple reading of the poems. But they are not true, and the questions--especially why Larkin abandoned poetry--persist. As Lolette Kuby asserted in her introduction to An Uncommon Poet for the Common Man, the reader must "translate the poems from the language of poetry to the language of explication" (14). Even Larkin himself offers some less critical views of academia: "if literature is a good thing, the exegesis and analysis can only determine its goodness, and lead to fresh and deeper ways of enjoying it" (RW 89; "Subsidies and Side Effects" 183); criticism can make a "contribution to the intellectual life of a community" ("Permissions" 1405); "the quality of Marvell's verse is such that the reader cannot believe that it relates only to a garden, or a pastoral conceit about a girl and her pet; there must be something else, and the reader--the academic reader--is determined to find it" (RW 249; "The Changing Face of Andrew Marvell" 152-153). Larkin himself therefore recognizes the validity of an academic, critical "reading." In "The Pleasure Principle" Larkin argues that poetry consists of three stages: the writer becomes obsessed with an emotional concept, he uses a verbal device to try to reproduce it, and a reader is made to experience the same emotion (RW 80; "The Pleasure Principle" 28).

Elaborating on this third stage, he asserts that "if there is no third stage, no successful reading, the poem can hardly be said to exist in a practical sense at all" (RW 80; "The Pleasure Principle" 28). Even though Larkin may not have in mind a Brooksonian explication, he does seem to insist on a unified, organized "reading" of his poetry. Therefore, this study will attempt to get at the heart of Larkin's "theory" of art by closely examining his poetic texts.

The obvious goal of a unified reading is to see if the bulk of the poetry develops a consistent theme. Numerous possibilities have been suggested: "'The Music of Time' could serve as a title for all Larkin's post-1946 poetry" (Thwaite, "The Poetry of Philip Larkin" 46); "death is rarely far beneath the surface of any poem by Larkin" (Petch 92); "'Mr. Bleaney'--a perfect piece--really adumbrates the great theme of all Larkin's work: failure" (Thurley 147);

it is this underlying concern [to expose our illusions and evasions so that we may stand naked but honest, "less deceived" by ourselves before the reality of life and death] which provides the constancy of the relatively small number of themes in Larkin's poetry: the passage of time, memory and the past, the illusory vision of man . . . and old age and death. (King 6)

The most promising of all of these in terms of examining Larkin's rejection of poetry is his overriding sense of failure. However, even though this point has been acknowledged by almost every critic who addresses himself to Larkin, no one has yet to illustrate how this preoccupation with failure is directly related to his view of art and poetry. His theme is failure because he is convinced that

his art must inevitably fail. Perhaps the most important point that can be raised about "Church Going" is that it is not about poetry. In this, his most frequently anthologized poem, Larkin asks what will replace the "seriousness" once held "unspilt" by the Church. Though such modern poets as Eliot and Stevens argue that the poet will replace the priest, Larkin is too unsure of art to make such a claim. His persona is not Stevens' "necessary angel" who will use modern poetry "to construct a new stage" in order "to find what will suffice" ("Of Modern Poetry"). Larkin's art might be able to reproduce "wide beauty in a motion of a pause" ("A Writer"), but as Auden admits in his elegy for Yeats, Larkin knows that his poetry also "makes nothing happen." He honestly admits that he "never tried to make poetry do things" (RW 74; Phillips 70).

A positive side to this proposed argument is that no one has yet studied Larkin's poetry in terms of the comments it makes about poetry itself. In fact, Larkin's critics have apparently accepted David Timms' assertion that Larkin's work is effective because it is not about poetry. According to Timms, "the only occasion that Larkin mentions the fact that he is a poet in the whole of his mature work" is in "Reasons for Attendance" (Philip Larkin 87); he therefore concludes that "poetry is [Larkin's] medium, not his subject" (Philip Larkin 20). Not only does Timms insist that Larkin avoids the subject of poetry, but he also labels any writer that uses it to be immature:

More significant, the mature poet does not write about his art, as the young one does. Frequent reference to the fact that the speaker of a poem is a poet is very characteristic of a young and self-conscious writer--but the trials of a poet as a poet are less interesting to us, perhaps, than the trials of a poet as a man. (Philip Larkin 33)

Timms' sweeping generalization incredibly reduces such poems as Browning's "Fra Lippo Lippi," Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium," and Stevens' "Of Modern Poetry" to be the works of young, immature writers. Not only does Timms insist that Larkin avoids the "rather narcissistic tendency to write poems about writing poetry" (Philip Larkin 17), but Colin Falck also serves up the generalization that "none" of the poems in The Whitsun Weddings presents the poet as a poet ("Philip Larkin" 407), and Roger Bowen argues that Larkin "has little time for poems 'about poetry'" ("Poet in Transition" 91).

In spite of these misleading claims, Robert Conquest's "Introduction" to New Lines admirably argues for the validity of using poetry to examine the poetic process:

Post-war poetry has often been criticised for dealing too much with language, and with the poetic process itself, as though these were in some way illegitimate subjects. This seems rather a superficial misconception: the nature of art and of the whole problem of communication has in recent years been seen to be at the centre of philosophy and of human life, and perhaps no subject is potentially more fruitful--so long, indeed, as any tendency to write about syntactic and semantic problems in isolation from their significance and content is avoided. (xvi)

Conquest's claim certainly opens the door to the possibility that serious poetry can consciously deal with art. However, even if Larkin's poetry does not "consciously" address itself to the writing

process, the possibility still exists that this topic could linger unconsciously beneath the surface. After all, one thing that Derrida and the deconstructionists have shown is the unavoidable "possibility of 'lateral reference' in language, which permits a text, against the conscious will of the author, to 'disseminate' meanings that are not consciously intended" (Ryan 23-24). So even though Larkin may consciously be describing the anguish of a raped girl (see "Deceptions" LD 37), he may also be playing unconsciously with the writing experience, especially since he consistently implies that his poems, like the rapist, also "burst into fulfillment's desolate attic" (LD 37). In fact, the critical tendency to find apparently "unconscious" similarities everywhere is evidenced by Northrop Frye's insistence that all literature depicts a loss of innocence and by Wayne Booth's argument that all literature is ironic. A third as yet unheralded possibility is that all literature is a treatise on literature itself: fiction is about fiction making and poetry is about poetry making. And this possibility is especially evident in Larkin's poetry, particularly since the common denominator underlying his work is his insistence on the limitations of art.

In the 1975 "Books of the Year" column in the London Observer, Larkin referred to Evelyn Waugh and W. H. Auden in terms of "the inevitable ossification of two major writers" (19). And since he has published only three poems since 1975, he perhaps came to the same conclusion about himself. The speaker of Edward Thomas' poem "The Glory" asks, "Or must I be content with discontent/ As larks and swallows are perhaps with wings?" Even though Larkin clearly has a

poet's "wings," he must have finally reached a point where he no longer could be "content with discontent," where he could no longer verbalize his discontentment through poetry. The first line of the last stanza of "High Windows" (HW 17)--"Rather than words comes the thought of high windows"--suggests that perhaps the words stopped coming for Larkin, that perhaps he suffered the same fate as the persona of Yeats' "The Circus Animals' Desertion":

I sought a theme and sought for it in vain,
 I sought it daily for six weeks or so.
 Maybe at last, being but a broken man,
 I must be satisfied with my heart, although
 Winter and summer till old age began
 My circus animals were all on show,
 Those stilted boys, that burnished chariot,
 Lion and woman and the Lord knows what.

In an interview as early as 1966, Larkin asserted that his chief difficulty is "thinking of something to write about" (Holland 46). And even though he displayed enough "circus animals" to fill four short volumes, they apparently finally left the "show" for good. And finding out why they deserted him is essential to understanding fully the poetry of Philip Larkin.

This study will consequently attempt to clarify Larkin's general attitude toward art and poetry. The argument here is that the bleak sense of failure and dissatisfaction that appears to infest his writings is not caused just by a distrust of nature, or God, or humanity; it is also partly the direct result of his recognition of the limitations of art, including poetry. By examining his poems

and his comments on poetry, I hope to illustrate his conception of the writing process (including his motivation, his influences, his subject matter, and his method of composition), his intended effect on the reader (including his conception of the audience, his rejection of modernism, his argument that poetry is an emotional business, and his insistence on "the pleasure principle"), and finally his sense of inevitable failure (including the limitations of empiricism, the failure of Truths, and the necessity of having another job). Perhaps the best place to begin trying to understand why Larkin rejected poetry is to examine his original motivation to become a writer.

CHAPTER I

VERBAL PICKLING--THE MOTIVE TO WRITE

Why, then, did Philip Larkin begin writing? His own answer is that

you write because you have to. If you rationalize it, it seems as if you've seen this sight, felt this feeling, had this vision, and have got to find a combination of words that will preserve it by setting it off in other people. (RW 58; Phillips 47)

But surely many others have experienced strong feelings and even visions but have not been motivated enough to write poems about them. There must have been another cause, something else to prompt fifteen-year-old Philip Larkin (see RW 62; Phillips 53) to begin writing poetry and prose. Perhaps the answer lies in the poem "Send No Money," a work which even Colin Falck admits is "explicitly about the poet qua poet" ("Philip Larkin" 407). In the first stanza Larkin's persona admits that he is/was not like other people:

Standing under the fobbed
Impendent belly of Time
Tell me the truth, I said,
Teach me the way things go.
All the other lads there
Were itching to have a bash,
But I thought wanting unfair;
It and finding out clash. (WW 43)

The speaker thus chose the pursuit of truth as his life's goal, a possibility which suggests a conscious decision. However, the final

stanza implies that maybe Hardy's "hap" is at work, that maybe "dicing Time" had as readily strewn "bashes" about his pilgrimage as truth seeking:

Half life is over now,
And I meet full face on dark mornings
The bestial visor, bent in
By the blows of what happened to happen. (WW 43)

The young seeker in the first stanza thought he was making a conscious choice; in reality his decision was "what happened to happen."

The last four lines of "Dockery and Son" make the same point:

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 only the end of age. (WW 38)

This speaker also finds half his life over, and he too suggests that a Hardy-like something else has made his decision for him. Even though Larkin prefaces a reading of the poem by insisting that it is not about regret ("Philip Larkin Reads and Comments on The Whitsun Weddings"), Bruce Martin still argues that the speaker blames fate in order to rationalize his decision not to marry and have children, a rationalization "suggestive more of personal disappointment and sour grapes than objectivity" (44). Lolette Kuby also maintains that the poem illustrates "the need of the human being to construct excuses and pretenses in order to cope with the difference between what is and what is wished" (102). But given the overall tone of the poem, I find it impossible to believe that this speaker wishes for a wife

and a child. Like Robin at the end of A Girl in Winter, he too would probably admit that "obviously it's the only worth-while thing, a career and getting a family, increasing and multiplying, whatever that means. But when you don't feel it--" (AGW 247). That pause is virtually pregnant for both Robin and Larkin's persona. They do not "feel" or have the same "innate assumptions" (WW 38) as everyone else. And they obviously did not consciously choose these assumptions. Even though the moon may be "unhindered" (WW 37),

the railway lines . . . make a diagram of the respective careers of Dockery and the poet. They joined, briefly, at the university, and since then they have continuously diverged. The lines are set--they cannot decide to rejoin. (Timms, Philip Larkin 101)

They could not choose the lines they travelled because they (the lines) were already set by something beyond their control. Those who argue that the speaker assumes he made the wrong choice forget that there was apparently no choice involved. They also take for granted that Dockery is an example of a man who went out and got what he wanted. But as Robert Conquest humorously implies, perhaps Dockery's son was also fathered by chance:

[Larkin] has long since become used to condensations of or commentaries on his poems in limerick form. I can't remember the one on "Dockery and Son"--I'm not even sure it was in limerick form--but at any rate it was a four- or five-line verse giving Dockery's reply, to the effect that he had no intention of being "added to," but was merely the victim of a faulty contraceptive. (Larkin at Sixty 34-35)

Perhaps the speaker was never married and went on pursuing Truth and writing poems because he used a better brand of condom during his university days.

Not only do these two poems suggest that chance played a role in Larkin's "decision" to become a poet, but he has also made it clear that he just happened to become a librarian too.

In autumn 1943 the Ministry of Labor wrote to ask what I was doing. I could have answered that, having finished with the university and English literature, I was living at home writing a novel, but I rightly judged the inquiry to be a warning that I had better start doing something. Picking up the day's Birmingham Post (the paper we took in those days), I soon discovered an advertisement by a small urban district council for a librarian. (RW 30; "Single-handed and Untrained" 531)

Even though he knew nothing "about the operation of a lending library" (RW 30; "Single-handed and Untrained" 531), a seemingly all-powerful "something" led him to chance upon this advertisement, to apply for the job, and to accept it--a decision which he admits "seems to have determined the course of his life" (Anonymous, "Four Young Poets--I: Philip Larkin" 933). He is still a librarian to this day; however, if the advertisement had been for a teacher, he might have spent forty years explaining poems rather than writing them.

This notion of stumbling into one's profession is also suggested by Kingsley Amis' novel Lucky Jim. This comparison is apropos because Amis not only dedicated the novel to Larkin, but he also originally intended it to be Philip Larkin's story (Larkin at Sixty 29). For example, Jim Dixon's last name was chosen because

Larkin lived on Dixon Drive. The following description of how Dixon became a medievalist fits Larkin's "career choice" splendidly:

No, the reason why I'm a medievalist, as you call it, is that the medieval papers were a soft option in the Leicester course, so I specialized in them. Then when I applied for a job here, I naturally made a big point of that, because it looked better to seem interested in something specific. It's why I got the job instead of that clever boy from Oxford who mucked himself up at the interview by chewing the fat about modern theories of interpretation. But I never guessed I'd be landed with all the medieval stuff and nothing but medieval stuff. (33)

Jim Dixon apparently became a medievalist out of chance; Larkin apparently became a librarian and a poet out of chance.

Not only did the iron rails of determinism drive Larkin to poetry, but when he accepted it as being necessary to his existence, he also discovered that he still could not consciously control his poetic output. He asserts that "writing a poem is still not an act of the will" (RW 84). His poem "Waiting for Breakfast"--which Anthony Thwaite calls "an address to the Muse" ("The Poetry of Philip Larkin" 43)--demonstrates how he must wait for his poetic inspiration to come to him:

But, tender visiting,
Fallow as a deer or an unforced field,
How would you have me? Towards your grace
My promises meet and lock and race like rivers,
But only when you choose. Are you jealous of her?
Will you refuse to come till I have sent
Her terribly away, importantly live
Part invalid, part baby, part saint? (NS 48)

As James Naremore points out, the speaker longs to maintain this sense of inspiration, "yet he knows that the passion will not stay,

since it is quite beyond his control and comes only when it chooses" (335). In fact, the speaker is so intent on maintaining this feeling that he is willing to give up the woman he has just spent the night with. Like the speaker of Yeats' "Words," perhaps he too feels that the only way he can master his craft is to replace the real girl with the muse. And if one takes "Dockery and Son" to be a companion piece, it becomes clear that the speaker did apparently send her "terribly away," but as Yeats asks at the end of his poem, if such a substitution had not occurred, "who can say/ What would have shaken from the sieve?" He too "might have thrown poor words away/ And been content to live." Not only did Larkin not necessarily choose to be a poet, but he also cannot manipulate his poetic inspiration. No matter how many sacrifices he makes, he still has to wait for poetry to visit him.

A third element of chance is that "whatever makes a poem successful is [also] not an act of the will" (RW 84). Undoubtedly the inspiration must many times fail to produce an acceptable poem. In "Success Story," an uncollected poem very similar to "Send No Money," the speaker has definitely met with failure:

To fail (transitive and intransitive)
I find to mean be missing, disappoint,
Or not succeed in the attainment of
(As in the case, f. to do what I want);
They trace it from the Latin to deceive . . .

Yes. But it wasn't that I played unfair:
 Under fourteen, I sent in six words
 My Chief Ambition to the Editor
 With the signed promise about afterwards--
I undertake rigidly to forswear

The diet of this world, all rich game
And fat forbidding fruit, go by the board
Until--But that until has never come,
 And I am starving where I always did.
 Time to fall to, I fancy: long past time.

Rather than indulging in worldly "fat forbidding fruit," the speaker seems to have wasted his time trying to achieve his "ambition" to become a writer. Even the speaker of "Send No Money" realizes that he too has wasted his youth "Tracing the trite untransferable/Truss-advertisement, truth" (WW 43). Here the promise of Truth becomes a cheap advertisement--a lie not unlike the poster in "Sunny Prestatyn" (WW 35) or the billboard in "Essential Beauty" (WW 42). As Lolette Kuby points out, it is the advertisers that say "send no money" because "satisfaction is guaranteed" (69). Unfortunately, the poetic pursuit of truth does not supply the expected satisfaction, a realization which helps to explain Larkin's decision to abandon poetry.

The promises mentioned in the previously-quoted stanza from "Waiting for Breakfast" are echoed by the promises described in "Next, Please":

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

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

Yet still they leave us holding wretched stalks
 Of disappointment, for, though nothing balks
 Each big approach, leaning with brasswork prinked,
 Each rope distinct,

Flagged, and the figurehead with golden tits
 Arching our way, it never anchors; it's
 No sooner present than it turns to past.
 Right to the last

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

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. (LD 20)

The "until" of "Success Story" is replaced here by "Till then." Like everyone else the speaker has spent his time waiting for his proverbial ship to come in. The "sparkling armada of promises" that never anchors can effectively be associated with the promises embodied by each of Larkin's poems. In fact, throughout his poetry Larkin tends to associate ships with metaphorical or poetic travel and trains with realistic or literal travel. In a British radio broadcast celebrating his fiftieth birthday, Larkin said that "it's hard not to look back and wonder why one hasn't done more, or forward and wonder what, if anything, one will do in the future. I seem to have spent my life waiting for poems to turn up" (Anonymous, "Out of the Air" 209). He has spent his life waiting and watching, but he has been left "holding wretched stalks/ Of disappointment." The last stanza clearly entails an image of death, but it does not have to be just the speaker's lamentation over his own inevitable death. The last metaphorical ship carries "silence," perhaps implying the silence or death of his poetic attempts.

So Larkin did not choose poetry; it chose him. He also cannot control his poetic inspiration; it visits when it pleases. Why then did he even bother to answer poetry's call forty years ago? Because as he admits, once an idea for a poem comes, "it's more difficult not to write than to write" (Holland 46). He asserts that "you write a poem because it's something you've got to get done" (Haffenden, Viewpoints 122). Therefore, writing poetry was necessary because it supplied him with a personal release. In the Paris Review interview he claims that poetry has "always been a personal, almost physical release or solution to a complex pressure of needs--wanting to create, to justify, to praise, to explain, to externalize, depending on the circumstances" (RW 76; Phillips 72). A poem that illustrates this idea is "Forget What Did":

Stopping the diary
Was a stun to memory,
Was a blank starting,

One no longer cicatrized
By such words, such actions
As bleakened waking.

I wanted them over,
Hurried to burial
And looked back on

Like the wars and winters
Missing behind the windows
Of an opaque childhood.

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

Celestial recurrences,
The day the flowers come,
And when the birds go. (HW 16)

Keeping the diary was apparently a way for him to unload or free his memory from the actions of his life. He hurriedly relived these events by burying them in the pages of his diary. So "Stopping the diary/ Was a stun to memory"; he no longer had this personal method of release. Larkin himself says that this poem is "about a time when I stopped keeping a diary because I couldn't bear to record what was going on. I kept a diary for a long time, more as a kind of great grumble-book than anything else" (Haffenden, Viewpoints 127). Even though he prefaces a reading of "Days" by saying that "as a poem it just seems to have happened without any personal cause" (see the 1984 Faber recording), the bulk of his poetry is clearly very personal and supplies him with an outlet not unlike "a kind of great grumble-book." In fact, despite his early desire to be a novelist, he soon realized that "novels are about other people and poetry is about yourself" (Hamilton, "Four Conversations" 75). So even though he "thought novels were a richer form of literature than poetry" (Anonymous, "A Conversation with Philip Larkin" 9) and tried desperately for five years to write a third novel, he soon discovered that he "didn't know enough about other people" (RW 49; Miriam Gross 35) to continue as a novelist. Like Amis' Jim Dixon, Larkin must have concluded that he too "knew absolutely nothing whatsoever about other people or their lives" (Lucky Jim 123). After all, how could a man who made contact with his milkman "by means of a yellow plastic clock which stipulates the number of pints required" (Oakes 65) possibly continue writing novels about other people's lives? Once more Larkin must conclude that he "didn't choose poetry; poetry chose" him (RW 62; Phillips 53).

He apparently embraced poetry because it supplied him with a much-needed emotional and intellectual release, an outlet for his personal needs and desires.

Unlike most other people, Larkin apparently sought relief from inside rather than outside sources. He did not attend the proverbial "Bash" or settle down with a wife and children. The following description of Katherine from A Girl in Winter seems to be equally applicable to Larkin:

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 to go on living she would have to get the strength for it solely out of herself. (AGW 184)

Like the speaker in Yeats' "The Choice," he too was faced with "perfection of the life, or of the work." A poem that illustrates his decision to embrace the second is "Reasons for Attendance":

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. 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.
What calls me is that lifted, rough-tongued bell
(Art, if you like) whose individual sound
Insists I too am individual.
It speaks; I hear; others may hear as well,

But not for me, nor I for them; and so
 With happiness. Therefore I stay outside,
 Believing this; and they maul to and fro,
 Believing that; and both are satisfied,
 If no one has misjudged himself. Or lied. (LD 18)

Like Larkin, who admitted that he feels "the need to be on the periphery of things" (RW 55; Miriam Gross 35), the speaker here is clearly on the outside looking in. Though "the trumpet's voice" causes him to pause momentarily, he is ultimately called by Art. He has cast his lot with poetry making, and he stands outside the party of life viewing its participants. The fact that he rejects the ordinary or the expected is suggested by Larkin's use of half rhyme. The rhyme scheme of each stanza appears to be ABABB, but only stanza four contains true rhymes. Like Wilfred Owen's "Arms and the Boy," the use of half rhymes here suggests that there is something unnatural about the poet's rejection of the dance and sex. It should be noted that the paperback edition available to America ends line eleven with "individual bell," but it should be "individual sound" (see Johnson 92).

Three other poems that depict the artist as being an outsider are "The Whitsun Weddings," "Show Saturday," and "Spring"--works from each of his three "mature" collections of verse. In the first the poet shares a train ride with a series of wedding parties on Whitsun Sunday. At first he does not really notice them and simply goes "on reading" (WW 21). He soon, however, realizes that he is being made privy to something vitally human and important. Larkin says of the experience that led to the writing of the poem that "you couldn't be

on that train without feeling the young lives all starting off, and that just for a moment you were touching them" (Haffenden, Viewpoints 125). Despite Larkin's claim that he was affected "just for a moment," Bruce Martin argues that the affection the speaker feels transforms him from an outsider into an insider (61); however, the penultimate stanza clearly implies that the speaker's experience of the event is still far removed from the participants':

--An Odeon went past, a cooling tower
And someone running up to bowl--and none
Thought of the others they would never meet
Or how their lives would all contain this hour.
I thought of London spread out in the sun,
Its postal districts packed like squares of wheat. . . .
(WW 23)

The juxtaposition of the phrases "none thought" and "I thought" makes it clear that he has not been transformed into one of the crowd. He still cannot understand the event the way they do; he has to transform it into a simile, or even more than that into a whole poem. Neil Powell asserts that the member of the wedding parties whom Larkin "inwardly identifies" with is the "uncle shouting smut" (95). But the speaker is clearly not an uncle or even a close friend; he is an onlooker, an outsider briefly stirred by the transpiring events.

The speaker of "Show Saturday" is in the same position. After brilliantly describing an autumn fair in specific details that make it clear he was present, the speaker concludes by insisting on the importance of such social rituals:

Let it stay hidden there like strength, below
 Sale-bills and swindling; something people do,
 Not noticing how time's rolling smithy-smoke
 Shadows much greater gestures; something they share
 That breaks ancestrally each year into
 Regenerate union. Let it always be there. (HW 39)

The key phrases are the parallel "something people do" and "something they share." The pronoun they and the impersonal people apparently eliminate the speaker from active participation. He is the reporter, the observer, the eye of the camera--he recognizes the importance of the event, but he is still outside the "regenerate union." The speaker of "Spring" finds himself in a very similar situation:

Green-shadowed people sit, or walk in rings,
 Their children finger the awakened grass,
 Calmly a cloud stands, calmly a bird sings,
 And, flashing like a dangled looking-glass,
 Sun lights the balls that bounce, the dogs that bark,
 The branch-arrested mist of leaf, and me,
 Threading my pursed-up way across the park,
 An indigestible sterility.

Spring, of all seasons most gratuitous,
 Is fold of untaught flower, is race of water,
 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.
 (LD 36)

Here everything is green, awakened, or flashing--but the speaker is "an indigestible sterility." He may have a "mountain-clear" understanding of the significance of spring, but he is not one of the vibrant "green-shadowed people." Being out of the shadows allows him to see things more clearly, but it also makes him an outsider "threading [his] pursed-up way across the park."

The artist figure Larkin depicts in his poems is not like everyone else; he is apparently not a common man. But he also avoids the stereotyped view of the artist that Larkin is keenly aware of:

There are always people who, on the pretext of having to do with art, choose to live in a way that strikes the rest of society as reprehensible. But every so often they get a militant fit, and come rampaging out of the Quartier vilifying and castigating like nobody's business, making it clear that since the artist is the only man cosmically in step it's okay for him to commit adultery, leave the washing-up, and generally epater the contemptible dupes of the social Mammon who make up the rest of the world. (RW 117; "Carnival in Venice" 630)

In fact, though he is outside the mainstream of social interaction, Larkin's artist/speaker still appears to be quite ordinary. A. Alvarez even observes that Larkin's typical speaker "is not a strange creature inspired; on the contrary, he is just like the man next door--in fact, he probably is the man next door" (The New Poetry 25). A poem that illustrates this point is "Mr. Bleaney":

"This was Mr. Bleaney's room. He stayed
The whole time he was in the Bodies, till
They moved him." Flowered curtains, thin and frayed,
Fall to within five inches of the sill.

Whose window shows a strip of building land,
Tussocky, littered. "Mr. Bleaney took
My bit of garden properly in hand."
Bed, upright chair, sixty-watt bulb, no hook

Behind the door, no room for books or bags--
"I'll take it." So it happens that I lie
Where Mr. Bleaney lay, and stub my fags
On the same saucer-souvenir, and try

Stuffing my ears with cotton-wool, to drown
The jabbering set he egged her on to buy.
I know his habits--what time he came down,
His preference of sauce to gravy, why

He kept on plugging at the four aways--
 Likewise their yearly frame: the Frinton folk
 Who put him up for summer holidays,
 And Christmas at his sister's house in Stoke.

But if he stood and watched the frigid wind
 Tousling the clouds, lay on the fusty bed
 Telling himself that this was home, and grinned,
 And shivered, without shaking off the dread

That how we live measures our own nature,
 And at his age having no more to show
 Than one hired box should make him pretty sure
 He warranted no better, I don't know. (WW 10)

Here the speaker, the poet, inhabits "Mr. Bleaney's room." In the reading on the 1984 Faber recording the phrase "I'll take it" clearly implies the speaker's impotent resignation. He may recognize the emptiness of Mr. Bleaney's life, but his realization is "no great consolation" (Brownjohn, Philip Larkin 17). In fact, as Bruce Martin points out, Bleaney had relationships with "the Frinton folk" and the landlady (who bought him a television set) and "probably mattered as much to these other people as they mattered to him" (59). Despite the trivial details that seemed to fill his life, Bleaney was apparently loved and needed, a reward not available to the speaker, whose only consolation is his "mountain-clear vision" or understanding of his and Mr. Bleaney's situations. But even this so-called consolation falls way short; after all, everything he knows about Bleaney involves surface details--he knows about his TV, his souvenir saucer, and his habits, but he does not know what he thought. The last three words--"I don't know"--literally pound home the speaker's plight. Though he cannot think like Mr. Bleaney, he still has to

survive in his world. And his superior vision offers very little solace. When turned into poetry, however, it does supply him with a much-needed release, probably the same release that Bleaney got from talking to the landlady, watching TV, and making holiday visits to his sister's.

A second motivation for writing illustrated by his poetry is that it allowed him to create his own private worlds. As Northrop Frye points out, the imagination allows us "to produce, out of the society we have to live in, a vision of the society we want to live in" (The Educated Imagination 140). Larkin himself has said that "every poem must be its own sole freshly created universe" (RW 79; Enright, Poets of the 1950's 77) and that he learned very early "the power to create and sustain private worlds" ("Not the Place's Fault" 109) from a childhood playmate who organized imaginary rugby games. The poet may inhabit Mr. Bleaney's world, but he can lie on his bed and imaginatively reproduce his own private world:

"Ugly Sister"

I will climb thirty steps to my room,
Lie on my bed;
Let the music, the violin, cornet and drum
Drowse from my head.

Since I was not bewitched in adolescence
And brought to love,
I will attend to the trees and their gracious silence,
To winds that move. (NS 31)

Though the speaker here may be an "ugly sister" who was not "bewitched" by love or invited to dances (she is apparently so lonely that she

has counted the number of steps leading up to her room), she can still imaginatively escape to a world of "trees and their gracious silence." And even though the speaker of "Dockery and Son" may not have borne a child, he still can use his imagination to reproduce poetic offspring:

Dockery, now:
 Only nineteen, he must have taken stock
 Of what he wanted, and been capable
 Of . . . No, that's not the difference: rather, how
 Convinced he was he should be added to!
 Why did he think adding meant increase?
 To me it was dilution. Where do these
 Innate assumptions come from? (WW 37-38)

The average man makes his contribution through "increase"--he fathers a child. The poet makes his contribution through "dilution"--he writes poetry. He gives a piece of himself (or dilutes himself) in every poem he writes.

Perhaps the clearest example of the power of the imagination to create private worlds is John Kemp's invention of Jill in the novel by the same name. The horror of hearing Elizabeth refer to him as a stuffed worm is overshadowed by his creation of Jill, which alters everything "as if he had ignorantly twisted his tongue round a magic formula and was watching the world change before his eyes" (Jill 119). The poem "Maiden Name" also touches on the power of language to create a private world:

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

Now it's a phrase applicable to no one,
 Lying just where you left it, scattered through
 Old lists, old programmes, a school prize or two,
 Packets of letters tied with tartan ribbon--
 Then is it scentless, weightless, strengthless, wholly
 Untruthful? Try whispering it slowly,
 No, it means you. Or, since you're past and gone,

It means what we feel now about you then:
 How beautiful you were, and near, and young,
 So vivid, you might still be there among
 Those first few days, unfingermarked again.
 So your old name shelters our faithfulness,
 Instead of losing shape and meaning less
 With your depreciating luggage laden. (LD 23)

The woman described here is no longer identified by her maiden name, but it still defines or holds the time when she was beautiful, near, and young. Through the "magic of names" (see Larkin's "Worksheets of 'At Grass'" 93), the speaker is able to hold or freeze her as if in a photograph--an "unfingermarked" photograph at that. Bruce Martin argues that

his praise of her youthful beauty and of her maiden name as a means of preserving the meaning of that beauty reveals a persuasive disappointment. Attempting to conceal this disappointment, he insults what is by flattering what was. . . . [T]he maiden name appears a ridiculous, even pathetic means of alleviating that disappointment. (75)

Martin links this poem with the marriage of one of the speaker's former girl friends. In a trite and petty way he may be partially

right, but Larkin's ultimate complaint here seems to be with the inevitable loss of beauty. He thus tries to use his poetry--his words and names--to preserve this beauty. Granted it is an artistic conceit, but it still allows him to keep his vision of her alive. The two words that make up her maiden name have the power to create magically a private world to house her beauty permanently.

Poem XXX from The North Ship is an early, cruder version of "Maiden Name":

So through that upripe day you bore your head,
And the day was plucked and tasted bitter,
As if still cold among the leaves. Instead,
It was your severed image that grew sweeter,
That floated, wing-stiff, focused in the sun
Along uncertainty and gales of shame
Blown out before I slept. Now you are one
I dare not think alive: only a name
That chimes occasionally, as a belief
Long since embedded in the static past.

Summer broke and drained. Now we are safe.
The days lose confidence, and can be faced
Indoors. This is your last, meticulous hour,
Cut, gummed; pastime of a provincial winter. (NS 43)

Even though the day or reality may taste bitter, the "severed image" of her is much "sweeter." She may be only a name, but that word keeps her "embedded in the static past." He is able to taste the sweetness of his memory of her because the image her name produces transforms her into a mental photograph that can be "cut, gummed," and placed in an album of memories to be enjoyed on a winter's day. She can thus survive in this imagined private world produced by language, especially by the "magic of names" and naming.

And this brings up Larkin's most quoted comment about his motivation for writing:

I write poems to preserve things I have seen/thought/felt
(if I may so indicate a composite and complex experience)
both for myself and for others, though I feel that my prime
responsibility is to the experience itself, which I am trying
to keep from oblivion for its own sake. Why I should do this
I have no idea, but I think the impulse to preserve lies at
the bottom of all art. (RW 79; Enright, Poets of the 1950's 77)

Given this theoretical basis, it is no wonder that Larkin praises John Betjeman for being "Leica-sharp in detail" (RW 130; "The Blending of Betjeman" 913) and Anne Ridler for always writing "directly from experience" ("Mrs. Ridler and Miss Millay" 4) and that Ioan Aurel Preda describes Larkin as having a "strictly empiricist . . . approach to the universe" (529).

It is also very clear that Larkin's statement was not just an offhand remark. He made numerous similar comments throughout the years he was producing poetry. For example, in 1956 he said

when writing a poem, . . . I am trying to construct a verbal device which will, upon reading, render up the emotion I originally experienced. A poem is rather like a slot machine into which the reader inserts the penny of his attention.
(Anonymous, "Four Young Poets--I: Philip Larkin" 933)

In 1957 he broke down the writing process into three stages:

the first is when a man becomes obsessed with an emotional concept to such a degree that he is compelled to do something about it. What he does is the second stage, namely, construct a verbal device that will reproduce this emotional concept in anyone who cares to read it, anywhere, any time. The third stage is the recurrent situation of people in different times and places setting off the device and

re-creating in themselves what the poet felt when he wrote it. (RW 80; "The Pleasure Principle" 28)

In 1964 he offered the following definition of a poem: "Some years ago 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" (RW 83). Again in 1964 he expanded on this definition:

I write about experiences, often quite simple, everyday experiences which somehow acquire some sort of special meaning for me, and I write poems about them to preserve them. You see, I want to express the experience in a poem so that it remains preserved, unchanging; and I then hope that other people will come upon this experience, pickled as it were in verse, and it will mean something to them, sound some chord in their own recollection, perhaps, or show them something familiar in a new light. But what I want readers to carry away from the poem in their minds is not the poem, but the experience; I want them to live something through the poem, without necessarily being conscious of the poem as a poem. (Anonymous, "Speaking of Writing XIII: Philip Larkin" 16)

In 1971 he praised John Betjeman for having "an astonishing memory and an outstanding gift for phrasing, not of the smart epigrammatic sort, but that which conjures a picture to fix whatever it is in the hearer's mind forever" (RW 206). In an interview with Miriam Gross in 1979, he said he was pleased to publish a poem because he considered that "a part of it: you want it to be seen and read, you're trying to preserve something. Not for yourself, but for the people who haven't seen it or heard it or experienced it" (RW 52; Gross 35). And then finally in the Paris Review interview in 1982, he once more restated his purpose for writing: "By which I mean that I write, or

wrote, . . . using words and syntax . . . to describe recognizable experiences as memorably as possible" (RW 75; Phillips 71).

Because these quotations make it certain that Larkin tried, at least theoretically, to maintain these principles, it makes sense that "Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album" would begin The Less Deceived, generally accepted as Larkin's first collection of "mature" verse. Larkin asserted that he took "great care" in ordering the poems in his collections (Haffenden, Viewpoints 122), and this poem serves as his chosen manifesto for the purpose of artistic creation. Even though J. D. Hainsworth calls it "light verse" that "carries no great weight of serious meaning" (153), David Lodge more accurately asserts that it is Larkin's "'Musée des Beaux Arts,' taking not Flemish painting but snapshots as the exemplary art form" (216). The first stanza depicts the speaker hungrily devouring photographic images of a former love:

At last you yielded up the album, which,
Once open, sent me distracted. All your ages
Matt and glossy on the thick pages!
Too much confectionery, too rich:
I choke on such nutritious images. (LD 13)

Simon Petch accurately points out that "the rhymes . . . anticipate the entire movement of the speaker's consciousness, reducing 'ages' to 'images' on 'pages'" (52). And what produces this "verbal pickling" (RW 83) is his insistence on "realistic" art--on poetic descriptions that approach photography:

But o, photography! as no art is,
 Faithful and disappointing! that records
 Dull days as dull, and hold-it smiles as frauds,
 And will not censor blemishes
 Like washing-lines, and Hall's-Distemper boards,

But shows the cat as disinclined, and shades
 A chin as doubled when it is, what grace
 Your candour thus confers upon her face!
 How overwhelmingly persuades
 That this is a real girl in a real place,

In every sense empirically true! (LD 13)

Even though Larkin admits that photography is the only art that can be "in every sense empirically true," he still implies that he will use his poetry to try to capture "a real girl in a real place." He goes on to imply that such a creation is a type of theft--taking a piece of an action or a person and imprisoning it in a permanent context:

To wonder if you'd spot the theft
 Of this one of you bathing; to condense,

In short, a past that no one now can share,
 No matter whose your future; calm and dry,
 It holds you like a heaven, and you lie
 Unvariably lovely there,
 Smaller and clearer as the years go by. (LD 14)

To capture her in a photograph or poem and keep her "unvariably lovely there" is to cheat time, is to use the imagination to recapture what time is in the process of taking or has already taken.

So Larkin tries to use his poetry to preserve the realistic experiences he has seen and thought and felt. Speaking of Rupert Brooke's stay in Samoa, Larkin said that

Brooke could none the less see that his Eden could not endure: "I want to go out and study [the native girls], and cinematograph them before they're lost." When, reluctantly, he came back, he brought jars of coconut oil to rub himself with and so prolong the illusion. (RW 178-179; "The Apollo Bit" 799)

Larkin too tried to use his photograph-like poetry to maintain an Eden, to hold experience "like a heaven" (LD 14). But because he finally rejected poetry writing, he must have concluded that his "photo poems" were merely "jars of coconut oil" incapable of prolonging the illusion of reproducing the emotions generated by realistic occurrences. However, rather than continuing to illustrate Larkin's recognition of the inevitable failure of empirical art (a subject returned to in Chapter VII), it seems more appropriate at this point to discuss the other writers who helped to shape Larkin's work.

CHAPTER II

YEATS AND HARDY--THE LITERARY INFLUENCES

Much of the criticism on Larkin deals with his literary predecessors. Part of the reason is that Larkin himself has said that he finds several abandoned poetic selves in his first volume of poetry:

the ex-schoolboy, for whom Auden was the only alternative to "old-fashioned" poetry; the undergraduate, whose work a friend affably characterized as "Dylan Thomas, but you've a sentimentality all your own"; and the immediate post-Oxford self, isolated in Shropshire with a complete Yeats stolen from the local girl's school. The search for a style was merely one aspect of a general immaturity. (NS 8; RW 28)

In the Paris Review interview he also says imitation in a young writer is "just a way of learning the job" (RW 64; Phillips 55). Despite his rejection of literary allusions as being unnecessary, Larkin still managed "quite easefully to echo and transform a storehouse of notes and images from the poetry of the English past" (Whalen, "Lawrence and Larkin" 106). In fact, much of his work written before The Less Deceived bears the influence of numerous writers. For example, the title "Sad Steps"--though it was first published in High Windows it was written in 1946 (Naremore 333)--is taken from Sydney's Astrophel and Stella: "With how sad steps, O moon, thou/ Climb'st the skies" (quoted in Kuby 171). And poem XX of The North Ship--one of Larkin's personal favorites (Haffenden, Viewpoints 117)--

develops a theme very similar to John Donne's cavalier view of love.

Talking in fits and starts
 As friends, as they will be
 Who have let passion die within their hearts.
 Now, watching the red east expand,
 I wonder love can already have set
 In dreams, when we've not met
 More times than I can number on one hand. (NS 38)

Here Larkin's speaker realizes that the sunrise comes bringing changes. The woman of the poem is reduced to the role of a friend; their passion died out (or set) before they even had five meetings. The speaker of Donne's "Womans Constancy" makes a very similar observation. He suspects that even though the woman has loved him only "one whole day," she will still invent some ruse for ending the relationship. He ends by saying

Vaine lunatique, against these scapes I could
 Dispute, and conquer, if I would,
 Which I abstaine to doe,
 For by to morrow, I may thinke so too.

In Donne's much more polished version, the male speaker also admits that he too will "let passion die within their hearts," but after only one meeting instead of three or four.

Poem XII of The North Ship also seems to be a conscious revision of Wordsworth's "The Solitary Reaper."

The train runs on through wilderness
 Of cities. Still the hammered miles
 Diversify behind her face.
 And all humanity of interest
 Before her angled beauty falls,
 As whorling notes are pressed

In a bird's throat, issuing meaningless
Through written skies; a voice
Watering a stony place. (NS 24)

Larkin's speaker overhears a "Polish airgirl" whose foreign voice, like a bird's song, is meaningless yet enchanting. Her beauty, therefore, draws humanity, especially him, and her words manage to water "a stony place." Even though John McIntyre argues that "no human encounter occurs" (315) on this train ride, it is clear that the speaker is quite affected by his experience. Because the girl the speaker encounters in Wordsworth's poem speaks Gaelic, he too finds her words meaningless. He has to ask "will no one tell me what she sings?" He also compares her singing to a bird's song and suggests that it is like an oasis in an Arabian desert (it waters a sandy place). Like Larkin's train passenger, he is also quite affected by her song:

Whate'er the theme, the maiden sang
As if her song could have no ending;
I saw her singing at her work,
And o'er the sickle bending--
I listened, motionless and still;
And, as I mounted up the hill,
The music in my heart I bore
Long after it was heard no more.

Larkin's speaker bears the Polish airgirl's song in his heart just as Wordsworth's speaker bears the "solitary Highland lass's" song in his. Both poems appear to celebrate the potential of humanity.

A third "revision" involves Larkin's poem I of The North Ship and Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium."

Gull, grass and girl
 In air, earth and bed
 Join the long whirl
 Of all the resurrected,
 Gather up and hurl
 Far out beyond the dead
 What life they can control--
 All runs back to the whole.
A drum taps; a wintry drum.

Let the wheel spin out,
 Till all created things
 With shout and answering shout
 Cast off rememberings;
 Let it all come about
 Till centuries of springs
 And all their buried men
 Stand on earth again.
A drum taps; a wintry drum. (NS 11-12)

These two stanzas of Larkin's share many similarities with the first two stanzas of Yeats' poem:

That is no country for old men. The young
 In one another's arms, birds in trees
 --Those dying generations--at their song,
 The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
 Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
 Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
 Caught in that sensual music all neglect
 Monuments of unageing intellect.

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
 A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
 Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
 For every tatter in its mortal dress,
 Nor is there singing school but studying
 Monuments of its own magnificance;
 And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
 To the holy city of Byzantium.

Not only does each poem contain four eight-line stanzas (excluding Larkin's one-line chorus), but Larkin also borrows Yeats' rhyme scheme. Two phrases from Larkin's poem are also exact models of

lines from Yeats' work. "Gull, grass and girl" echoes Yeats' "fish, flesh, and fowl" (right down to the alliteration), and "shout and answering shout" echoes Yeats' "sing, and louder sing." Such phrases as "The long whirl," "let the wheel spin out," and "back to the whole" sound very similar to Yeats' repeated use of wheel or "gyre" images. Larkin's added chorus suggests "the dreariness of reality which obtrudes into romantic illusion" (Philip Gardner 89). Even though he seems to be consciously using Yeats' poem as a model, he still cannot totally accept Yeats' romantic golden bird.

The quotation with which this chapter opens associated Larkin with Dylan Thomas, a rather unexpected comparison. But "Oils," poem X of XX Poems and a companion to "Dry Point," clearly reflects a Thomas influence:

Sun. Tree. Beginning. God in a thicket. Crown.
 Never-abdicating constellation. Blood.
 Barn-clutch of Life. Trigger of the future.
 Magic weed the doctor shakes in a dance.

Here Larkin uses Thomas' technique of piling one image on top of another as if he were groping for the right one. Compare the first few lines of section seven of Thomas' "Altarwise by Owl-Light":

Now stamp the Lord's Prayer on a grain of rice,
 A Bible-leaved of all the written woods
 Strip to this tree: a rocking alphabet,
 Genesis in the root, the scarecrow word,
 And one light's language in the book of trees.

Even though Thomas' work is much more polished and sophisticated, Larkin certainly seems to be borrowing his technique.

A reader familiar with the bulk of Larkin's collected poetry might be a bit hesitant to name Thomas as one of his influences, but he will be even more surprised to find out that in 1943 (this date is given in Motion, Philip Larkin 73) Larkin wrote an English version of Baudelaire's "Femmes Damnées." Because Larkin's poem is virtually unknown, it is beneficial to quote it in full:

The fire is ash: the early morning sun
 Outlines the patterns on the curtains, drawn
 The night before. The milk's been on the step,
 The Guardian in the letter-box, since dawn.

Upstairs, the beds have not been touched, and thence
 Builders' estates and the main road are seen,
 With labourers, petrol-pumps, a Green Line 'bus,
 And plots of cabbage set in between.

But the living-room is ruby: there upon
 Cushions from Harrods, strewn in tumbled heaps
 Around the floor, smelling of smoke and wine,
 Rosemary sits. Her hands are clasped. She weeps.

She stares about her: round the decent walls
 (The ribbon lost, her pale gold hair falls down)
 Sees books and photos: "Dance"; "The Rhythmic Life";
 Miss Rachel Wilson in a cap and gown.

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.

The first and fourth stanzas of Baudelaire's poem should prove that Larkin consciously used it as a model.

Beneath the lamplight pale and languid gleaming
 Lay, upon pillows drenched with fragrancy,
 Hippolyta, of those fond kisses dreaming
 That had unveiled her youthful purity.

Stretched at her feet, serene and full of joy,
 Lay Daphne, with her brooding eyes alight,
 As a strong animal waits to destroy
 The prey that has already felt its bite.

Not only do both works describe a female lamenting her lesbian love affair, but stanza five of Larkin's poem and stanza four of Baudelaire's are almost identical. Because there are obvious differences in technique--Larkin, for example, depends on such specific details as the milk bottle, the newspaper, and the unmade bed to establish a realistic locale, whereas Baudelaire uses phrases like "languid gleaming," "drenched with fragrancy," and "drowsy sensuousness" to establish a more shadowy texture--it is clear that Larkin has not fully embraced Baudelaire's symbolist method just as he could not fully embrace Yeats' overly romantic themes. Speaking of the poem in 1978, Larkin said "the piece is evidence that I once read at least one 'foreign poem,' though I can't remember how far, if at all, my verses are based on the original" (this comment is on the Sycamore Broadsheet which reprints this poem). Even though Larkin downplays Baudelaire's or a symbolist's influence, Andrew Motion correctly observes that "the resemblances between these two poems [demolish] the popular belief that Larkin has never read or liked 'foreign poetry'" (Philip Larkin 74). At least when he was a beginning poet still searching for a style, Larkin experimented not only with romanticism but also with French symbolism.

Most critics agree that Larkin's so-called search for a style ended with the success of The Less Deceived, a time when Larkin suddenly found himself grouped with the Movement, a handful of reasonably young British poets given this title by an anonymous review in the Spectator on 1 October 1954:

The Movement, as well as being anti-phoney, is anti-wet; sceptical, robust, ironic, prepared to be as comfortable as possible in a wicked, commercial, threatened world which doesn't look, anyway, as if it's going to be changed much by a couple of handfuls of young English writers. ("In the Movement" 400)

Because the tenets of "Movement" poetry have been fully established (see Robert Conquest's "Introduction" to New Lines) and Larkin's involvement in it has been fully documented (see Blake Morrison's The Movement: British Poetry and Fiction of the 1950's), it is not really necessary to restate these same points. Suffice it to say that though Larkin's "Church Going" is usually hailed as the quintessential "Movement" poem, most critics agree that Larkin transcended the fairly limited vision generally attributed to "Movement" writers (see, for example, Hamilton, "The Making of the Movement" 571). In fact, Larkin himself says that he had "no sense at all" of belonging to a group with definite aims (Hamilton, "Four Conversations" 72). Blake Morrison quotes other so-called "Movement" poets who also deny that they were consciously a part of any movement:

Kingsley Amis has referred to "the phantom movement"; D. J. Enright comments: "I don't think there was a movement back in those days, or if there was I didn't know about it"; Thom Gunn insists that he was "certainly not aware that I

was supposed to be associated with the Movement until 1954, when I first saw the word used of us"; even Robert Conquest has argued that in editing New Lines he "was not trying to assemble a movement." (Morrison, "The Movement: A Reassessment--Part 1" 26)

Given these comments it is almost impossible not to infer that these writers just happened simultaneously to hit on similar strategies. Robert Lowell's claim that "no style or school could have given [Larkin's] words their poignant severity" (68) is echoed by Larkin's own insistence that "when you start writing your own stuff other people's manners won't really do for it" (Hamilton, "Four Conversations" 72). In other words, Larkin's sudden success with The Less Deceived coincides with his sudden discovery of his own style and theme. As I have tried to show, he certainly had his apprentice period when he consciously imitated other writers, but it is now generally accepted that the Movement had little to do with his sudden maturity.

In fact, Larkin makes it clear time and again that the poets he reads are not his contemporaries; he seems to prefer poets that were "popular during the first third of the century" (Jacket Notes to the 1964 Random House edition of The Whitsun Weddings). An examination of Larkin's bookcase will certainly validate this point:

Within reach of my working chair I find reference books on the right, and twelve poets on the left: Hardy, Wordsworth, Christina Rossetti, Hopkins, Sassoon, Edward Thomas, Barnes, Praed, Betjeman, Whitman, Frost and Owen. True, I reach to the right more than to the left, but the twelve are there as exemplars. (RW 86)

Of these twelve only Sassoon and Frost wrote after 1920, and only Betjeman is Larkin's contemporary. In a similar statement he claimed that "the living writers I order before publication are not (with the exception of Betjeman) primarily poets" (Larkin, "Context: Philip Larkin" 31). The poets Larkin reads almost all predate Eliot and Pound and Modernism in general. In fact, Larkin longs for

a renewed speculation about what would have happened to the course of English poetry if Owen, Thomas, Resenberg, Brooke and the rest had not been killed. No doubt poetry, like every other branch of art, was bound to go through a period of Modernismus, and certainly there could have been much worse exemplars than Mr. Eliot, but it would have been interesting to observe the continental impact refracted through stronger native talents than for the most part survived. (Larkin, "Down Among the Dead Men" 912)

So Larkin's chief influences must come from what he calls "pre-Eliot poetry" ("Down Among the Dead Men" 912)--and not from so-called "Movement" poets.

Even though Larkin's mature poetry does not contain poems that seem to be conscious revisions of works by previous poets, it does exhibit individual characteristics very similar to those utilized by some of his favorite pre-Eliot poets. For example, the phrase "depreciating luggage laden" (LD 23) from "Maiden Name" is a twisting of syntax comparable to Hopkins' more famous "dapple-dawn-drawn falcon." As I have already pointed out in Chapter I, Larkin also uses half rhymes in "Reasons for Attendance" to create a similar effect to that produced by Owen's use of half rhyme in "Arms and the Boy." Not only is the theme of "Cut Grass" very similar to one of

Housman's preoccupations--"the transience which characterizes existence" (Leggett, Housman's Land of Lost Content 12)--but the phrase "hedges snowlike strewn" (HW 41) almost has to be a conscious imitation of Housman's "to see the cherry hung with snow."

Even though one could probably find such similarities in any modern poet, Larkin proves his special respect for pre-Eliot poetry in "MCMXIV"--a work which he claims has not "received [its] due meed of praise" (Gibson 102). The first stanza describes the young recruits lining up to enlist in the first world war:

Those long uneven lines
 Standing as patiently
 As if they were stretched outside
 The oval or Villa Park,
 The crowns of hats, the sun
 On moustached archaic faces
 Grinning as if it were all
 An August Bank Holiday lark. . . . (WW 28)

Larkin prefaces his reading of the poem on the 1984 Faber cassette by saying he uses the Roman numeral because he wants "to suggest a date carved on a monument but also because once you've said '1914' everything afterwards is bound to seem an anticlimax." Another factor suggesting that Larkin is attempting to produce a verbal monument is that because "the poem has no main verb, . . . it is as if the time were frozen" (Timms, Philip Larkin 112). As Stephen Spender points out, Larkin prefers to "look back across the confusing political poetry of the 1930's, the despairing affirmations of Eliot, Yeats and Pound, to the Georgians cultivating their gardens" (The Struggle of the Modern 263).

And the countryside not caring:
 The place-names all hazed over
 With flowering grasses, and fields
 Shadowing Domesday lines
 Under wheat's restless silence;
 The differently dressed servants
 With tiny rooms in huge houses,
 The dust behind limousines. . . . (WW 28)

That Larkin is almost obsessed with this period is implied during an interview when he says "the First--Christ, I mean the Second World War" (RW 51; Miriam Gross 35). Even in All What Jazz? Larkin admits that he plays old Benny Goodman records "as a kind of scrapbook for 1913, the golden summer before the crippling barrage descended, after which things were never the same" (AWJ 218). Even though there will "never [be] such innocence again," he tries to recapture it and preserve it in this poem:

Never such innocence,
 Never before or since,
 As changed itself to past
 Without a word--the men
 Leaving the tidy gardens,
 The thousands of marriages
 Lasting a little while longer:
 Never such innocence again. (WW 28)

Even though Eric Homberger accurately asserts that Larkin's "golden summer" exists "only in the nostalgic perspective of the past" because "many children in Edwardian England would have known hunger and real deprivation" and the "common people were certainly much worse off then than now" (78), it is still a magical time, an important point of reference for Larkin and many others of his

generation. The following passage from Kenneth Allsop is a marvelous prose version of Larkin's poem:

It is difficult to prove this sort of statement, but I personally have, and I believe a great many men and women in my age group have, an intense nostalgic longing for the security and innocence that seems to have been present in Britain before the 1914 war. It has become almost a tribal ancestral memory. While being aware that I am romantically glossing it all over into a sunny simplicity, for the period is a montage of striped blazers and parasols in Henley punts . . . and Ernest A. Shepard London squares with autumn firs glinting on the brass fenders in the drawing rooms. I know that there was grinding poverty, and hideous living conditions too, yet I am sure that the Victorians and Edwardians had an inner confidence that we shall never know. (18)

Though Larkin's observations are usually as realistic and demanding as Homberger's comment, he still embraces Allsop's "romantic glossing"--everything after 1914, including the poetry, is forever tainted in Larkin's eyes.

Larkin's "MCMXIV" is clearly about the lifestyle of a whole country at a particular period of time, but it also goes hand in hand with his rejection of almost all poetry after Pound and Eliot. Blake Morrison speculates that "the 'moustached archaic faces' [mentioned in Larkin's poem] are those not just of anonymous volunteers, but of Hardy, Owen, and others" (The Movement 202). In fact, Morrison's speculative association of this poem with art is too engrossing to paraphrase:

To read "MCMXIV" as a poem about poetic as well as a social tradition might seem implausible, but there is an extremely good reason for doing so. This is the tendency, common in the Movement generation, to think of 1914 as the date at which an indigenous tradition in poetry ended, and at which

the Modernist tradition began. . . . It helped to produce the theory that because of the Great War a central tradition in English poetry had been discontinued. The yearning for stability in "MCMXIV"--"established names," "tidy gardens"--is more than nostalgia for a secure social order: it is nostalgia for the "tidy" and "established" forms of pre-Modernist English poetry. And the "long uneven lines" are not just those of enlisting soldiers; they are (one might rather 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. (The Movement 202)

Larkin then has both a social and a literary longing for pre-1914 England. And his chief influences should be sought here--not in the Fifties poetry of the Movement.

In fact, "Sympathy in White Major" (first published in 1967) suggests that Larkin consciously tried to resurrect the works of some of these pre-Modern writers:

While other people wore like clothes
The human beings in their days
I set myself to bring to those
Who thought I could the lost displays;
It didn't work for them or me,
But all concerned were nearer thus
(Or so we thought) to all the fuss
That if we'd missed it separately. (HW 11)

While everyone else wore the same type of clothes (perhaps also wrote the same type of poetry as his contemporaries), the speaker tried to bring back "the lost displays" (perhaps to rediscover pre-1914 poets). In an interview with Anthony Thwaite following the publication of The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse, Larkin implies that he used this volume to try once more to bring back "the lost displays":

I had in my mind that there might have been what I'll call, for want of a better phrase, an English tradition coming from the 19th century with people like Hardy, which was interrupted partly by the Great War, when many English poets were killed off, and partly by the really tremendous influence of Yeats, whom I think of as Celtic, and Eliot, whom I think of as American. And I wondered whether, if one looked for them, there hadn't been some quite good poems which had become unfashionable, which had never been dug up again and looked at. (Thwaite, "A Great Parade of Single Poems" 472)

One such poem he "dug up" is "Rouen 1915" by May Wedderburn Cannan--a work which Larkin finds "enchanting" (Thwaite, "A Great Parade of Single Poems" 472). Stanzas seven and eight of this poem are quite similar to Larkin's own "MCMXIV":

Can you recall the parcels that we made them for the railroad,
Crammed and bulging parcels held together by their string,
And the voices of the sergeants who called the Drafts together,
And the agony and splendour when they stood to save the King?

Can you forget their passing, the cheering and the waving,
The little group of people at the doorway of the shed,
The sudden awful silence when the last train swung to darkness,
And the lonely desolation, and the mocking stars o'erhead?

Larkin's answers to her questions are "yes" he can remember and "no" he cannot forget. He tries to recall this time by using its poets as his chief influences.

Even though I have labored to demonstrate that before The Less Deceived Larkin's influences were quite varied and that he certainly learned more from pre-1914 poets than from his contemporaries, everyone, including Larkin, will undoubtedly agree that the two most influential poets in his life were and probably still are Yeats and Hardy. Larkin recognizes "the predominance of Yeats" in

The North Ship and says that he spent three years, roughly 1943-1946, "trying to write like Yeats," whose influence became as "pervasive as garlic" (RW 29; NS 9). He later elaborated on his point: "He is like garlic: one touch of Yeats and the whole thing stinks of it" (Anonymous, "A Conversation with Philip Larkin" 6). The negative connotation implied here is apropos because Larkin did eventually claim to reject Yeats' influence. But as was already pointed out earlier in this chapter, poem I of The North Ship is similar to Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium." Another allusion to Yeats' poem appears in poem XX of The North Ship. Larkin's "a sack of meal upon two sticks" (NS 32) is too close to Yeats' "a tattered coat upon a stick" to be accidental. The first stanza of Larkin's "Skin" is also quite similar to Yeats' insistence that the soul must "clap its hands and sing, and louder sing/ For every tatter in its mortal dress":

Obedient daily dress,
 You cannot always keep
 That unfakable young surface.
 You must learn your lines--
 Anger, amusement, sleep. . . . (LD 43)

It is evident then that early in his career Larkin learned his "lines" from Yeats.

Though Larkin may have originally sided with Yeats, as he wrote more poetry, and his own experiences made him more and more susceptible to the colder, more realistic landscape of Hardy's poetry, he soon realized that Yeats supplied him with "too much moonlight and self-pity" (NS 37). He finally came to Hardy and found

that "never has sun more boldly paced the sky" (NS 37), lighting up the surroundings and making Larkin's empirical observations much easier. Many other poems in The North Ship depict Larkin's gradual movement away from Yeats. For example, in poem VII he rejects Yeats' "gold cymbals" (a fairly obvious pun on symbols) because they are too "unearthly"; the things of the earth are "never so brilliant" (NS 18) as Yeats' romantic vision suggests. The youthful speaker of poem IX fulfills Irving Howe's description of the modern hero who "often begins with the expectation of changing the world" (36); he wants to become "an instrument sharply stringed/ For all things to strike music as they please" (NS 21). He climbs high on a hill to unfurl his romantic blood and to blow his imaginative horn. The first stanza consists of one long expansive sentence, suggesting the speaker's being carried away with his emotion. But the second stanza begins with a question that undercuts his romantic desires: "How to recall such music, when the street/ Darkens?" (NS 21). Despite his desire to ride "white horses," he encounters

Only hurrying and troubled faces,
The walking of girl's vulnerable feet,
The heart in its own endless silence kneeling. (NS 21)

As Larkin says in his "introduction" to Jill, during his post-war study at Oxford, he and his fellow students realized that even "at an age when self-importance would have been normal, events cut us ruthlessly down to size" (Jill 12; RW 18). His youthful romantic outlook led him to Yeats, but his realistic involvement with post-war

culture made him intensely aware of the harsher side of life. He thus had to learn to

Pour away that youth
That overflows the heart
Into hair and mouth;
Take the grave's part,
Tell the bone's truth.

Throw away that youth
That jewel in the head
That bronze in the breath;
Walk with the dead
For fear of death. (NS 42)

He must use his poetry to "speak the bone's truth"; he cannot use it to try to bronze over or bejewel reality, which Larkin insists is exactly what Yeats demanded:

As long as I was looking at the world out of the eyes of Yeats, vague melancholy was all right, inspiration and clouds were all right; the real world was all right providing you made it pretty clear that it was a symbol. But Yeats really prevented me from writing poems about the things I could see, and which I should have been writing about, much dingier and less glamorous things. Yeats presumably couldn't write about a mucked-up seaside poster on a railway station; but as soon as you begin to see your own subject, then the style is nothing. You find your style. The influence of another poet is not primarily on the choice of words but on the choice of subject. (Anonymous, "A Conversation with Philip Larkin" 7-8)

So Larkin turned away from Yeats and his "principle of artificiality" (Larkin, "Poetry at Present" 4); he instead sought his style and subject elsewhere.

And what he found was the poetry of Thomas Hardy, which supplied him with a principle of realism.

When reaction [against Yeats] came, it was undramatic, complete and permanent. In early 1946 I had some new digs in which the bedroom faced east, so that the sun woke me inconveniently early. I used to read. 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 Starchey'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 read "Thoughts of Phena At News of Her Death." (NS 10; RW 29-30)

Perhaps Larkin's explanation sounds so contrived because it begs the question of what Hardy's poetry was doing by his bedside to begin with. So it is necessary for John Press to elaborate on Larkin's movement away from Yeats:

Although we need not doubt that Hardy played a decisive part in liberating Larkin from the dangerous enchantment of Yeats, other factors were at work. The move from a cloistered war-time Oxford to the drabness of a small provincial town must have led him to cast a chilly eye on the myth-ridden world of Yeats. Without prying into a private life that Larkin has resolutely kept private, we may guess that his experience of the world and his involvement with other people compelled him to abandon the neo-Yeatsian universe of his Oxford days. ("The Poetry of Philip Larkin" 134)

So Larkin turned to a new mentor; he now "looked to Hardy rather than Yeats as [his] new ideal" (Johnson 29). And his explanation for his choice of Hardy tells us much about Larkin's own poetry:

When I came to Hardy it was with the sense of relief that I didn't have to try and jack myself up to a concept of poetry that lay outside my own life--this was perhaps what I thought Yeats was trying to make me do. One could simply release back into one's own life and write from it. Hardy taught one to feel rather than to write--of course one has to use one's own language and one's own jargon and one's own situations--and he taught one as well to have confidence in what one

felt. I have come, I think, to admire him even more now than I did then. (RW 175-176; "Philip Larkin Praises the Poetry of Thomas Hardy" 111)

After reading Yeats, Eliot, Thomas, and Auden, one may feel the same coming to Larkin's poetry. It too is not something a reader has to jack himself up to.

Even though Larkin stresses Hardy's influence on him, it is very hard to take a Larkin poem and illustrate Hardy-like techniques or themes. In fact, Simon Petch insists that

Hardy was more important to Larkin as a kindred poetic spirit than as a formal master. . . . [F]or the most part the significance of Hardy to Larkin was a matter of giving him confidence in himself and his personal feelings as subject-matter for poetry. (6-7)

One of Larkin's few allusions to Hardy is in "Going, Going." Larkin's poem laments the gradual selling and development of all of the English countryside:

That before I snuff it, the whole
Boiling will be bricked in
Except for the tourist parts--
First slum of Europe: a role
It won't be so hard to win,
With a cast of crooks and tarts. (HW 22)

The title "Going, Going" not only suggests "Church Going," but it also seems to echo the last stanza of Hardy's "A Sheep Fair":

Time has trailed lengthily since met
At Pummery Fair
Those panting thousands in their wet
And woolly wear:
And every flock long since has bled,

And all the dripping buyers have sped,
 And the hoarse auctioneer is dead,
 Who "Going--going!" so often said,
 As he consigned to doom each meek, mewed band
 At Pummery Fair.

Perhaps Larkin's title also refers to a type of auctioneer who consigns the English countryside to the sheep shears of developers whom Larkin condemns as "a cast of crooks and tarts." But even this "allusion" is tentative at best.

Perhaps Hardy's strongest influence on Larkin was to move him "into the world of historical contingency, a world of specific places at specific times" (Davie, Thomas Hardy and British Poetry 3). One of the complaints about The North Ship in general is that it contains few, if any, realistic settings (see, for example, Kuby 163). The Less Deceived, on the other hand, is filled with realistic settings and characters. In fact, in "Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album" (an apparent manifesto of Larkin's artistic theories) he demands that art must persuade the reader "that this is a real girl in a real place" (LD 13). The final poem of The North Ship, "Waiting for Breakfast," which was written after the first edition and added "as a coda" to the second edition, "though not noticeably better than the rest, shows the Celtic fever abated and the patient sleeping soundly" (NS 10; RW 30). Yeats' theme of having to choose between a real girl and the muse is repeated in this poem, "but although there is no description of her physical or emotional characteristics, we are convinced that . . . 'this is a real girl in a real place'" (Press, "The Poetry of Philip Larkin" 135). As this poem demonstrates,

after he supposedly gave up Yeats, Larkin's poetry became much more realistic.

Another important influence is suggested by Larkin in an interview with John Horder: "with Hardy it was more the spirit of man, the feeling, which is as definable as the subject-matter and as broad" (9). Poem XXVI shows how pre-Hardy Larkin was not attuned to this idea:

This is the first thing
I have understood:
Time is the echo of an axe
Within a wood. (NS 39)

David Timms calls this poem a "Yeatsian epigram" (Philip Larkin 32). If Larkin had written it after discovering Hardy, it is almost a certainty that he would have been more directly concerned with time's effect on people.

Even though Larkin's mature poetry does not directly bear Hardy's touch as his early poetry did Yeats', he still names Hardy as his favorite poet. Referring to himself he asks, "may I trumpet the assurance that one reader at least would not wish Hardy's Collected Poems a single poem shorter, and regards it as many times over the best body of poetic work this century so far has to show?" (RW 174; "Wanted: Good Hardy Critic" 178). What he learned most from this his favorite poet is

all those dicta about poetry: "the poet should touch our hearts by showing his own," "the poet takes note of nothing he cannot feel," "the emotion of all the ages and the thought of his own"--Hardy knew what it was all about. (RW 67; Phillips 60)

A later poem which seems to illustrate Larkin's preference for Hardy over Yeats is "The Large Cool Store":

The large cool store selling cheap clothes
Set out in simple sizes plainly
(Knitwear, Summer Casuals, Hose,
In browns and greys, maroon and navy)
Conjures the weekday world of those

Who leave at dawn low terraced houses
Timed for factory, yard and site.
But past the heaps of shirts and trousers
Spread the stands of Modes for Night:
Machine-embroidered, thin as blouses,

Lemon, sapphire, moss-green, rose
Bri-Nylon Baby-Dolls and Shorties
Flounce in clusters. To suppose
They share that world, to think their sort is
Matched by something in it, shows

How separate and unearthly love is,
Or women are, or what they do,
Or in our young unreal wishes
Seem to be: synthetic, new,
And natureless in ecstasies. (WW 30)

Even though Ian Hamilton calls it "a rather silly little poem about nighties" (A Poetry Chronicle 137), the comparison made here seems to be much more serious. On the one hand, it involves the unreality and apparent impossibility of love shared by many of Larkin's speakers. On the other hand, the first seven lines (the first sentence) suggest how Hardy's plain, practical poetry "conjures the weekday world." It deals with the daytime, with work clothes, and with the sun which lights up or clarifies everyday details (not unlike Hardy's poetry). The last thirteen lines associate Yeats' symbolic poetry with "Modes for Night," with night gowns, and with shadowy moonlight. These

clothes are not only "unearthly," but they seem to transcend "the weekday world"; they certainly do not "share that world." They reflect youthful "unreal wishes" and must remain "synthetic, new,/ And natureless in ecstasies." Larkin will use his poetry to clothe his readers for the everyday concerns of "the weekday world." He will no longer sell Yeats' unnatural, synthetic, unreal wishes.

Even though this poem seems to entail Larkin's rejection of Yeats, most critics agree that almost all of his work still bears Yeats' mark. Simon Petch asserts that "it is possible that Larkin has assimilated more from Yeats than he is aware of and that his dismissal of Yeats . . . as a youthful infatuation should be taken with a grain of salt" (8); Andrew Motion also argues that Larkin has been successful "in welding together two previously antagonistic traditions" (Philip Larkin 20); and Clive James insists that "technically, Larkin's heritage is a combination of Hardy and Yeats--it can't possibly be a substitution of the first by the second" (At the Pillars of Hercules 69). Two poems used to illustrate this combination are "Church Going" and "High Windows." Tery Whalen points out how

the ironic and the more romantic . . . impulses erupt and subside . . . at every turn in the explorative psychological drama of "Church Going," until in the final three stanzas, the two impulses are welded together into the expression of a richer, more unified sensibility. ("Philip Larkin: Detachment or Impersonality?" 22)

He maintains that the poem works because the speaker's Hardy-like ironic pessimism is united with a Yeats-like romantic optimism. In

a similar fashion, Andrew Motion argues that though "High Windows" begins with a "grumbling, ironical, colloquial speech," it shifts to "symbolist intensity" and thus "illustrates Larkin's mastery of poetic tones" (Philip Larkin 81). Larkin's mature verse proves that he is comfortable with ironic pessimism or symbolic optimism.

Larkin's early work is not all William Butler Yeats, and his late work is not all Thomas Hardy. Clive James begins his review of Donald Davie's Thomas Hardy and British Poetry with the drawing reproduced in Figure I (see the next page). This humorous illustration clearly depicts Larkin's situation. Hardy may win the contest as his favorite poet, but he still seems to rush to the side of Yeats. The second stanza of John Mole's poem "At Preservation Hall: For Philip Larkin" successfully captures these two sides of Larkin's poetics:

Wound up, the horns
Nestle in velvet,

Each to its black box
Snapped tight, homeward . . .

Silent curvatures
Whose rest is a golden echo:

Bones, Bones,
Them dry bones disassembled. (117)

Mole depicts Larkin as a horn player who uses a Yeatsian "golden echo" to play a Hardyesque "dry bones." It appears that Larkin learned to "tell the bone's truth" and still manage to maintain "that bronze in the breath" (NS 42).

FIGURE I
THE CHOICE OF YEATS VS. HARDY

Two final poems that appear to illustrate this reconciliation of opposites are "Sad Steps" and "Solar." Since Larkin takes "great care" (Haffenden, Viewpoints 122) in organizing the poems in his collections, the fact that these two works face each other on opposite pages implies that he intended them to be companion pieces. Though they both have been labelled humorous pieces--Robert Seidman calls "Sad Steps" "high-style poetic clowning" (147), and Merle Brown calls "Solar" "the hilarious shenanigans of a verbal artist whipping the silly sun about with metaphorical abandon" (Double Lyric 78)--they still make a serious point about Larkin's involvement with Yeats and Hardy and their so-called "schools" of poetry. After a four o'clock piss, the speaker of "Sad Steps," while "groping back" to bed, has the following meditation on the moon:

The way the moon dashes through clouds that blow
Loosely as cannon-smoke to stand apart
(Stone-coloured light sharpening the roofs below)

High and preposterous and separate--
Lozenge of love! Medallion of art!
O wolves of memory! Immensements! No. . . . (HW 33)

Not only is the moon described as being "high and preposterous and separate," but the images that come to mind--"Lozenge of love," "Medallion of art," and "Immensements"--are all rejected by a firm "No." As Seamus Heaney points out, "truth wins out over beauty" (Larkin at Sixty 133). But in "Solar" the sun is described in symbolic terms. It becomes a suspended profusion of metaphors: a "lion face," a "petalled head of flames," and a "coined" medallion of art (HW 33). The irony of this comparison is that "Sad Steps" was

written in 1946 when Larkin was still supposed to be infatuated with Yeats, and it describes the moon, which Larkin tends to associate with Yeats' shadowy, symbolic poetry. "Solar," on the other hand, was first published in 1966 when Larkin had supposedly already rejected Yeats' influence, and it describes the sun, which Larkin tends to associate with Hardy's insistence on clarity and realism. In "If, My Darling," a poem which offers an excellent illustration of many of Larkin's poetic ideals, he describes his work as an "incessant recital/ Intoned by reality, larded with technical terms,/ Each one double-yolked with meaning and meaning's rebuttal" (LD 42). His work is certainly realistic ("intoned by reality"), but it also has a second "yolk" (including a nice pun on yoke). In fact, almost every poem seems to be "double-yolked" with Yeats (even the yolk image seems to be borrowed from the second stanza of "Among School Children") and Yeats' "rebuttal," whom I presume must be Hardy. Larkin's observation about "the Bond novels" is equally applicable to his own poetry: they "were an adroit blend of realism and extravagance, and both were necessary: the one helped us swallow the other" (RW 266; "The Batman from the Blades" 625).

CHAPTER III

A REAL GIRL IN A REAL PLACE--THE SUBJECT MATTER

Since Larkin maintains that "the influence of another poet is not primarily on the choice of words but on the choice of subject" (Anonymous, "A Conversation with Philip Larkin" 8), it is appropriate to follow a discussion of his literary influences with a study of his chosen subject matter. On the jacket sleeve of the 1964 Random House edition of The Whitsun Weddings, Larkin claimed that "form holds little interest" for him and that "content is everything." He later defined content as "the experience the poem preserves, what it passes on" (RW 69; Phillips 62). So for Larkin poetry must be based on "recognizable experiences" (RW 75; Phillips 71); it must address itself to average, everyday occurrences and emotions, including a "frank recognition" of the harsher side of life (Hardy, "Apology" 526). Larkin praises John Betjeman's ability to make a flat surface glitter (RW 132; "The Blending of Betjeman" 913), Elizabeth Jennings' decision "to work more from things seen and felt" ("Reports on Experience" 6), Richard Wilbur's "acute pieces of description" ("Recent Verse--Some Near Misses" 4), and Peter Redgrove's capacity for spending "so long describing an ordinary thing that in the end it becomes interesting, like something magnified or slowed down to an extreme degree" ("Lice, Fleas, and Gullible Mayflies" 6). Almost all of Larkin's poetry exhibits his insistence on using realistic

subjects, but an uncollected poem, "Fiction and the Reading Public," comments on it directly:

Give me a thrill, says the reader,
Give me a kick;
I don't care how you succeed, or
What subject you pick.
Choose something you know all about
That'll sound like real life:
Your childhood, your dad pegging out,
How you sleep with your wife.

Larkin's poetry must "sound like real life." He seems to prefer "the genuinely earthy article" to a "freshly scrubbed potato" (RW 165; "Freshly Scrubbed Potato" 13).

As long as it is handled in a realistic fashion, virtually any subject is appropriate for poetry. He praises Stevie Smith's ability "to take a pot shot at anything that, poetically, took her fancy" ("Stevie, Good-Bye" 28), he admires Barbara Pym's "unique eye and ear for the small poignancies and comedies of everyday life" ("Reputations Revisited" 66), he claims that Siegfried Sassoon is at his best with "the immediate and colloquial" and "less successful with Eternity, Armageddon, and the Universal" ("Separate Ways" 14), and he praises John Betjeman for making it possible "to write about all sorts of things which seemed sentimental or trivial" (Anonymous, "A Conversation with Philip Larkin" 6). Robert Penn Warren makes a similar comment about Larkin's own verse: "his poetry presents a world that is his special, delicately controlled interpretation of actuality and vision--a feeling for the ominous and immanent in the small" (Jacket notes to the 1964 Random House edition of The Whitsun Weddings).

Simon Petch seconds Warren's observation by asserting that Larkin writes with "compelling perception on . . . apparently mundane subjects" and that he is able "to illuminate so thoughtfully the unthinking 'ordinariness' of so much that we do and feel" (108).

Two of Larkin's poems that illustrate his insistence on "common" subjects and his ability to transform "unpoetic" topics are "Born Yesterday" and "Myxomatosis." In the former Larkin states his wish that Kingsley Amis' daughter Sally may simply turn out "ordinary," may have only "an average of talents" (LD 24). He concludes by saying

In fact, may you be dull--
If that is what a skilled,
Vigilant, flexible,
Unencompassed, enthralled
Catching of happiness is called. (LD 24)

In a letter to Charles Monteith concerning his respect for Barbara Pym's novels, Larkin elaborates on this acceptance of ordinariness:

I feel it is a great shame if ordinary sane novels about ordinary sane people doing ordinary sane things can't find a publisher these days. This is the tradition of Jane Austen and Trollope, and I refuse to believe that no one wants its successors today. Why should I have to choose between spy rubbish, science fiction rubbish, Negro-homosexual rubbish, or dope-taking nervous-break-down rubbish? I like to read about people who have done nothing spectacular, who aren't beautiful and lucky, who try to behave well in the limited field of activity they command, but who can see, in little autumnal moments of vision, that the so-called "big" experiences of life are going to miss them; and I like to read about such things presented not with self pity or despair or romanticism, but with realistic firmness and even humour. (Reprinted in Larkin at Sixty 42-43)

Even though the subject matter of "Myxomatosis" is not very "ordinary," it still supplies a good example of his ability to transform a nonpoetical topic into an effective poem:

Caught in the centre of a soundless field
While hot inexplicable hours go by
What trap is this? Where were its teeth concealed?
You seem to ask.

I make a sharp reply,
Then clean my stick. I'm glad I can't explain
Just in what jaws you were to suppurate:
You may have thought things would come right again
If you could only keep quite still and wait. (LD 31)

Without even specifically mentioning the word rabbit (John 3), Larkin makes the reader feel his agony. Since man purposely used this disease as a method of pest control, the poem can be argued "to involve a confession of man's inhumanity to his fellow creatures" (Page 170). It can also be read as "a symbol of man's vulnerability and the individual's valuelessness in nature's mill" (Kuby 44). However, it is not really necessary to make such grand claims for the poem. In fact, the phrase "I make a sharp reply,/ Then clean my stick" seems to be a description of the poem itself. Larkin's poem is "a sharp reply" to this ugly yet realistic occurrence. Since he does dirty his hands with the real thing, he must clean off his stick, a tool used to examine even the most unpoetic of topics.

Most readers insist on associating a work like "Myxomatosis" with humanity because Larkin believes that his subject matter must deal with human beings. He is concerned with "the questions which have perplexed man almost since his beginning" (Martin 46). Fellow poet Peter Scupham calls Larkin "a wounded surgeon skilled in the

understanding if not the cure of minor cerebral incidents" (174). Even though it sounds much like a left-handed compliment, Scupham's point is still well-taken. As Edna Longley points out, Larkin's major concern seems not to be nature itself but human nature (65). Larkin therefore asserts that

time and again, with Betjeman's best poems, the reader exclaims, but this is about a place! And then the realization follows that the place is presented in terms of human association, without which it would be insignificant. (RW 212)

So Larkin's most famous poem, "Church Going," is not about a building or a concept; "it's a humanist poem, a celebration of the dignity of . . . well, you know what it says" (Haffenden, Viewpoints 124). Even though Larkin's ellipses leave it out, what it says is that "someone will forever be surprising/ A hunger in himself to be more serious" (LD 29). And the poem is about this "someone"--not about concrete structures or religious abstractions--but about people. It is "about going to church, not religion--I tried to suggest this by the title--and the union of the important stages of human life--birth, marriage and death--that going to church represents" (Hamilton, "Four Conversations" 73). A second poem which carries the same effect is "The Building." Virtually every reader must notice that the building is never named as a hospital. The implication is that the building itself is secondary; it is the "humans" that come "here to confess that something has gone wrong" (HW 24) or the "crowds" that come "each evening . . . with wasteful, weak, propitiatory

flowers" (HW 26) who matter. Larkin's complaint about Charlie Parker's jazz is quite apropos:

these are features of the wild, bubbling freedom that characterises him, and that some say earned him his nickname. But freedom from what? As one listens to Parker spiralling away "out of this world," as the phrase goes, one can only answer "humanity," and that is a fatal thing for an artist, or an art, to be separated from. (AWJ 96)

Larkin's emphasis is rarely away from humanity itself.

Because Larkin seems to share Wordsworth's demand that a poet "choose incidents and situations from common life" (see the "Preface" to the 1802 edition of Lyrical Ballads), he has been accused of being "a classic example of the provincial poet" (Press, Rule and Energy 98). A. Alvarez claims he inhabits "a suburban hermitage" (Beyond All this Fiddle 86) or "a deliberately provincial, suburban world" ("Stuff Your Pension" 41). And according to Jim Hunter, his suburbia is not all yard furniture and swimming pools: "his subject matter is faceless urban civilization and a faceless middle-class world" (13). Frederick Grubb, on the other hand, offers a much more positive definition of Larkin's provincialism:

A dirty word to the mass media, the provincial is the trust in roots, the refusal to be gulled, the reservation of respect and enthusiasm before the glamorous and the seductive, which characterizes the man who is determined to start from the minimal, the known, the dependable in his own thought and experience. (A Vision of Reality 227)

What keeps coming back to mind time and again is Larkin's insistence on discovering "a real girl in a real place" (LD 13). His poetry is truly provincial; it is about average people living in average places

having average experiences. But his poems are not just superficial photographs of pool-side barbecues or of railway posters defiled with obscenities. In a review of Anthony Powell's Music of Time, Larkin argues that

imagination must, of course, select and arrange reality, but it must be for imaginative ends: all too often the role of imagination in this sequence is to funny up events and people whose only significance . . . is that Mr. Powell has experienced them. (RW 223; "Mr. Powell's Mural" 244)

Any artistic depiction of realistic occurrences must be "for imaginative ends." In fact, in the preface to his reading of "The Whitsun Weddings" on the 1984 Faber recording, Larkin implies that poetry always alters the realistic details it embodies:

But remembering the genesis of a poem is always a tricky business. For years I believed that I wrote "The Whitsun Weddings" over about three months in the summer of 1957 after going down to London to see some friends who had just got married. But when I came to look it up, I found that although I had begun it in 1957, I'd dropped it off to three pages and didn't pick it up again until March 1958, finishing it in the following October. Not only that, but a diary I kept at the time makes it clear that the actual journey took place in 1955, not at Whitsun, and so far from going on to London to see friends, I got off the train at Grantham and took a bus to the Midlands to see my family. Poetry is a strange thing.

Poetry or the poetic imagination is a strange thing. It takes events from reality and transforms them into imaginative pieces of art. Like Wallace Stevens' "man with the blue guitar," Larkin also tries to play "a tune upon the blue guitar/ Of things exactly as they are," but he too realizes that "things as they are/ Are changed upon the

blue guitar." Reality is always Larkin's springboard, but his imagination does try to manipulate or restructure it. So his description of Hull in the poem "Here" does not stop at "Cheap suits, red kitchen-ware, sharp shoes, iced lollies,/ Electric mixers, toasters, washers, driers" (WW 9); he also transcends these "provincial" items and journeys to "the unfenced existence" where "ends the land suddenly beyond a beach," to a locale "facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach" (WW 9). He cannot touch this locale in the way that he does the "electric mixer," but he certainly knows that it exists.

But in spite of his insistence on transforming reality with the imagination, he still argues that "poetry is an affair of sanity, of seeing things as they are" (RW 197; "Big Victims" 368). He praises Cannonball Adderley's jazz for having "the rare virtue of sounding neither screwball or neurotic" (AWJ 51), a characteristic he also praises in the poetry of Vernon Watkins, whose "eye reports sanely on creation" ("Texts and Symbols" 11). In an essay aptly entitled "The Sanity of Lawrence," Larkin offers the following bit of praise:

We sometimes forget that behind the ecstasies and the exhortations was a man who scrubbed floors and darned his own socks and was not a bad cook. And we should remember such things, because they demonstrate that at the heart of his writing lay a sane and healthy spirit. (671)

Larkin recognized the importance of both "ecstasies" and "scrubbing floors," of both William Butler Yeats and Thomas Hardy, of both the imagination and reality.

And this recognition allowed him to bring to the reader a few examples of how "hidden weeds flower" (WW 9). His poetry may describe

so-called provincial "weeds," but his imagination can transform them into "flowers" right before the reader's eyes. Two of Larkin's uncollected poems, "Modesties" and "Plymouth," make much the same point. In the first he observes that

Weeds are not supposed to grow,
But by degrees
Some achieve a flower, although
No one sees.

"No one sees" them unless, of course, he reads Larkin's poetry. In the second poem he says "let my hands find such symbols, that can be/ Unnoticed in the casual light of day" (quoted in Morrison, "The Movement: A Reassessment--Part 1" 27). He not only longed to use his "symbols" to display these elements that would otherwise remain casually "unnoticed," but he also tried to use his The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse to display "unknown" poems that he saw "as unexpected flowers along an only-too-well-trodden path" (RW 73; Phillips 68). Almost everything in Larkin's work has been seen or thought by all of us, but he manages to give it meaning, to show it to us in a different, clearer light.

So Larkin's chosen subject matter is the sights and sounds of everyday existence. And from his point of view, the common denominator that underlies all these common human experiences is sadness. He is firmly convinced that "most people are unhappy" (RW 47; Miriam Gross 35) and that life is "a tragedy to those who feel" (Haffenden, Viewpoints 119). And what intensifies this feeling even more is that suffering is especially important to an artist: "separating the man

who suffers from the man who creates is all right--we separate the petrol from the engine--but the dependence of the second on the first is complete" ("Context: Philip Larkin" 32). Suffering then is the gasoline that operates Larkin's poetry machine. Larkin also makes the same observation about other poets. He asserts that "unhappiness was the key" to Housman's poetry (RW 265; "Love Poetry" 22), that Stevie Smith's poems "speak with the authority of sadness" (RW 158; "Frivolous and Vulnerable" 418), and that the "imaginative note [Hardy] strikes most plangently . . . is the sometimes gentle, sometimes ironic, sometimes bitter but always passive apprehension of suffering" (RW 172; "Wanted: Good Hardy Critic" 178).

I have previously discussed how the youthful speaker of poem IX of The North Ship at first desires to become "an instrument sharply stringed/ For all things to strike music as they please" (NS 21). But rather than producing enjoyable music filled with "meadows" and "white horses" (NS 21), the speaker feels only "an ancient sadness" and sees only "troubled faces" (NS 21). In short, like Larkin himself, he learns that "the really happy moments of . . . life . . . aren't really subjects for poetry" (Haffenden, Viewpoints 119). They are somehow always proven empty or shallow or false. But life's unhappy moments, on the other hand, almost always lend themselves to poetic treatment. It is "unhappiness which provokes a poem. Being happy doesn't provoke a poem" (RW 47; Miriam Gross 35). And a possible explanation for this observation is given in "Deceptions" (which ironically seems to elaborate on "the walking of girl's vulnerable feet" [NS 21] heard by the speaker of poem IX):

Slums, years, have buried you. I would not dare
 Console you if I could. What can be said,
 Except that suffering is exact, but where
 Desire takes charge, readings will grow erratic?
 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. (LD 37)

The raped girl he describes is now dead and buried, but he tries to comfort her by insisting that she was "the less deceived" because "suffering is exact;" it is a "true" emotion. The rapist's desire (for some sort of fulfillment, it is presumed), on the other hand, is inevitably "erratic." For Larkin, suffering, not happiness, is the mainspring of human existence. He, therefore, longs "to write one song . . ./ As sad as the sad wind/ That walks around [his] bed" (NS 29).

Accompanying his insistence on sadness is a preference for seriousness. Even though he says "I like to think of myself as quite funny, and I hope this comes through in my writing" (RW 47; Miriam Gross 35), and he praises Cyril Connolly for "his sense of the blackly depressing coupled with his sense of the comic" ("Inner Horizons" 21), he still seems to be more poetically attuned to "the long, inescapable, important periods when [life] is serious" rather than "the short, escapable, unimportant periods when [it] is funny" (RW 134; "Missing Chairs" 440). And with this fact in mind it is little wonder that "Church Going" hinges on the importance of seriousness. After calling the church he visits "a serious house on serious earth," the speaker finds hope by asserting that "someone will forever be surprizing/ A hunger in himself to be more serious" (LD 29). And it is this

seriousness (perhaps Larkin's own recognition of the suffering and unhappiness underlying human existence) which will somehow recapture the human values recently "dispersed" (LD 29) by the gradual loss of religious faith.

But not all readers will openly embrace Larkin's insistence on sadness. As he points out in "If, My Darling," to look at life "face to face" might "knock [his] darling off her unpriceable pivot" (LD 42). Even some of his critics argue that he "can never celebrate . . . life" (Anonymous, "Review of The Whitsun Weddings," Virginia Quarterly Review, xvi) and that "his achievement has been the creation of imaginative bareness, a penetrating confession of poverty" (Bedient, Eight Contemporary Poets 72). Because of his "poetry of lowered sights and patiently diminished expectations" (Davie, Thomas Hardy and British Poetry 71), Larkin "can no longer do anything to bring our dreams into relation with reality. The ideal for Larkin has become inaccessible. . . . There are no epiphanies" (Falck, "Philip Larkin" 410; "Essential Beauty" 10). As Henri Coulette puts it, "somewhere things may be better, a seer would know, but Larkin doesn't" (440). These critics supply convincing arguments that Larkin is not a "seer" and that he rejects the possibility of "epiphanies"; however, there is, as always with Larkin, another side to the issue. For example, Edward Neill maintains that Larkin "knows the hunger for 'transcendence' that is the permanent impulse to myth" (88), Terry Whalen insists that "Larkin keeps imaginatively alive [the] conviction . . . that when all is threatened and much is gone, mystery still persists and unity can sometimes preside" ("Lawrence and Larkin:

The Suggestion of an Affinity" 119), and John Bayley recognizes the "epiphanic intermissions" in his poems in general (653). So on the one hand Larkin refuses to use his imagination to transform reality, but on the other hand he always fosters a hunger to transcend. This brings us right back to Yeats and Hardy.

Perhaps Larkin would be easier to pigeonhole if he did not insist on total originality. He asserts that "one reason for writing, of course, is that no one's written what you want to read" (RW 76; Phillips 72). He has to find his own subjects and treat them with his own methods. He is often, as Colin Falck asserts, a "poet who has committed himself to an external-descriptive view of language and the avoidance of metaphor" ("Essential Beauty" 9). He tends to eschew "the debilitating theory that poetry must be metaphorical" (Conquest, New Lines xii), but he also quite often gives way to metaphor. He intends, for example, for "The Whitsun Weddings" to be read with "a level, even a plodding descriptive note, until the mysterious last lines, when the poem should suddenly 'lift off the ground'" (Thwaite, "The Poetry of Philip Larkin" 48). David Lodge asserts that the "mythical, magical and archaic resonances" in the last few lines impress the reader because they are unexpected (218):

There we were aimed. And as we raced across
 Bright knots of rail
 Past standing Pullmans, walls of blackened moss
 Came close, and it was nearly done, this frail
 Travelling coincidence; and what it held
 Stood ready to be loosed with all the power
 That being changed can give. 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. (WW 23)

Here Larkin clearly turns his imagination loose, but his critics cannot agree on the effectiveness of his display. David Holbrook says that the final image "is not good enough" (164) because "a generalized sentimental 'poetic' emotion is expressed" (165). Stanley Cook even claims to "feel embarrassed" (322) for Larkin because his image is too romantic. Merle Brown, on the other hand, calls it a "grand metaphorical display" reflecting Larkin's "magnificently broad vision" (Double Lyric 92), and Andrew Motion says the poem culminates in a "transcendent imaginative fulfilment" (Philip Larkin 78).

Whether one applauds or censures this final image, what seems to matter most is its presence. Larkin is not just an eye-of-the-camera realist, nor is he just an epiphany-seeking symbolist. He is a poet who demands rigid sincerity; he is neither romantic for the sake of romanticism nor empirical for the sake of empiricism. What he demands most is honesty of expression, the "humble ravishing sincerity" he finds in the recordings of Billie Holiday (AWJ 93).

Even though Larkin will occasionally allow himself a metaphorical flight, he still refuses to overromanticize his selected subjects. Even his treatment of jazz--which is clearly his least objective and most romantic subject--does not surrender to the enticing impulse to overromanticize. For example, in "For Sydney Bechet" he undercuts his assertion that Bechet's music strikes him "like an enormous yes" by referring to this feeling as "an appropriate falsehood" (WW 16). It may be "appropriate," and it may even say "yes," but the overall effect is still a "falsehood." It is not a capital-t Truth that is going to transport him to an unquestioned romantic vision. As

dictated by Kingsley Amis in his poem "Against Romanticism," Larkin gladly rejects the rage for prophetic "grand meanings" and usually limits his subject matter to "visions that we need," or more specifically, that he needs, visions such as the "appropriate falsehoods" found in Sydney Bechet's cornet or the final image in "The Whitsun Weddings." But this romantic need is certainly not constant. He rejects "happiness in the sense of a continuous emotional orgasm" (RW 66; Phillips 58) and asserts that "nobody wants to live on the heights forever" (Anonymous, "Speaking of Writing XIII: Philip Larkin" 16). Not only does he refuse to write overly romantic poems, but he also chides his critics for apparently insisting that he do so:

One thing [sic] I do feel a slight restiveness about is being typed as someone who has carved out for himself a uniquely dreary life, growing older, having to work, and not getting things he wants and so on--is this so different from everyone else? I'd like to know how all these romantic reviewers spend their time--do they kill a lot of dragons, for instance? If other people do have wonderful lives, then I'm glad for them, but I can't help feeling that my miseries are over-done a bit by the critics. (Hamilton, "Four Conversations" 73)

Since his subject matter focuses on everyday life, and since he feels certain that everyday existence is not continuously romantic, he refuses to use his poetry to fight imaginary, metaphorical dragons.

Perhaps the classic Philip Larkin anti-romanticism poem is "I Remember, I Remember":

By now I've got the whole place clearly charted.
Our garden, first: where I did not invent
Blinding theologies of flowers and fruits,
And wasn't spoken to by an old hat.
And here we have the splendid family

I never ran to when I got depressed,
 The boys all biceps and the girls all chest,
 Their comic Ford, their farm where I could be
 "Really myself." I'll show you, come to that,
 The bracken where I never trembling sat,

Determined to go through with it; where she
 Lay back, and "all became a burning mist."
 And, in those offices, my doggerel
 Was not set up in blunt ten-point, nor read
 By a distinguished cousin of the mayor,

Who didn't call and tell my father There
 Before us, had we the gift to see ahead--
 "You look as if you wished the place in Hell,"
 My friend said, "judging from your face." "Oh well,
 I suppose it's not the place's fault," I said.

"Nothing, like something, happens anywhere." (LD 38-39)

Here Larkin clearly rejects the romantic insistence that poets can "evoke without comment the naïvetés of childhood" (Conquest, New Lines xiv). Larkin calls the poem "a satire on novels like Sons and Lovers--the kind of wonderful childhoods that people seem to have" (Anonymous, "A Conversation with Philip Larkin" 8). Blake Morrison asserts that Larkin rejects the "view of childhood and children encouraged by the great Romantic poets" and uses the poem to undercut "the expansiveness of [a poem like] 'Fern Hill'" in order to create "a 'less deceived' sensibility, one that recognizes childhood, or certain childhoods, to be uneventful and even boring" (The Movement 152). Compared to the following stanza from Thomas Hood's poem by the same name, Larkin's anti-romantic stance should be absolutely clear:

I remember, I remember
Where I was used to swing,
And thought the air must rush as fresh
To swallows on the wing:
My spirit flew in feathers then,
That is so heavy now,
And summer pools could hardly cool
The fever on my brow!

One can rest assured that Larkin's childhood spirit did not fly in feathers and can conclude that his mature poetic spirit rarely does the same. His poetic eye is usually held captive by the details and events of everyday life and the emotions of average human beings.

CHAPTER IV

THE MEDITATIVE EXPERIENCE--THE METHOD OF COMPOSITION

Since Larkin's subject matter deals almost exclusively with reproducing surface details, that is, since he insists on depicting what is visible to the human eye, he has to exercise some control "over the maddened surface of things" (Jill 243). And his method for doing so is to use concrete details and recognizable language. He would vigorously reject the advice given in Mallarme's "All the Soul Indrawn . . .":

So the choir of songs
Flies it to your lip
Exclude if you begin
The real as being base

Its too sharp sense will overscawl
Your vague literature.

Mallarmé's preference for vagueness instead of sharpness is totally opposite to Larkin. He must pack his work with specific concrete details that do "overscawl" vague, symbolic, poetic notions just as Titch Thomas' drawings overscawl the romantic travel poster described by Larkin in "Sunny Prestatyn":

Come to Sunny Prestatyn
Laughed the girl on the poster,
Kneeling up on the sand
In tautened white satin.
Behind her, a hunk of coast, a
Hotel with palms
Seemed to expand from her thighs and
Spread breast-lifting arms.

She was slapped up one day in March.
 A couple of weeks, and her face
 Was snaggle-toothed and boss-eyed;
 Huge tits and a fissured crotch
 Were scored well in, and the space
 Between her legs held scrawls
 That set her fairly astride
 A tuberous cock and balls

Autographed Titch Thomas. (WW 35)

As in William Carlos Williams' poem "Portrait of a Lady," realistic details always seem to keep Larkin from extended flights of vagary. The questioner in Williams' poem who demands specific details by asking "which sky?" and "which shore?" is very similar to Titch Thomas or Philip Larkin. Even though John Kemp invents an imaginary sister named Jill, when he sees Gillian, he encounters his imagination made flesh:

It was not a question of thinking: that girl is something like Jill. There was nothing casual in the resemblance: it was so exact that for a second his mind could not remember who it was, this over-familiar face. And he was too bewildered to think as the realization came upon him. (Jill 156)

Like the speaker of "Portrait of a Lady" who begins with a metaphorical statement ("your thighs are appletrees") and ends with a literal statement ("I said petals from an appletree"), Kemp also sees his unreal Jill turn into a very real Gillian. So as was discussed at length in the last chapter, Larkin's base is the surface of reality, and his method of composition is to use specific details to recreate this surface.

Poems such as "To the Sea" and "Show Saturday" illustrate his ability to use his tongue as an eye, that is, to make his reader see

exactly what he has seen. The first begins with the following description of a childhood visit to a seaside resort:

To step over the low wall that divides
 Road from concrete walk above the shore
 Brings sharply back something known long before--
 The minature gaiety of seashores.
 Everything crowds under the low horizon:
 Steep beach, blue water, towels, red bathing caps,
 The small hushed waves' repeated fresh collapse
 Up the warm yellow sand, and further off
 A white steamer stuck in the afternoon-- (HW 9)

Much like E. B. White in his essay "Once More to the Lake," he then turns his attention to his response to this event now that he has grown up:

Strange to it now, I watch the cloudless scene:
 The same clear water over smoothed pebbles,
 The distant bathers' weak protesting trebles
 Down at its edge, and then the cheap cigars,
 The chocolate-papers, tea-leaves, and, between

The rocks, the rusting soup-tins, till the first
 Few families start the trek back to the cars. (HW 9)

It is a "cloudless scene," and the water is "clear." There is no metaphorical vagueness or cloudiness in his description; everything is highlighted by his use of detail. The same is true for "Show Saturday," where the speaker appears to adopt Walt Whitman's cataloguing technique of bombarding the reader with one descriptive phrase after another:

The long high tent of growing and making, wired-off
 Wood tables past which crowds shuffle, eyeing the scrubbed space
 Extrusions of earth: blanch leeks like church candles, six pods of
 Broad beans (one split open), dark shining-leafed cabbages--rows

Of single supreme versions, followed (on laced
Paper mats) by dairy and kitchen; four brown eggs, four white eggs,
Four plain scones, four dropped scones, pure excellences that enclose
A recession of skills. (HW 37-38)

Not only does the poem exhibit "a wonderful accumulation of concrete detail" (Brownjohn, Philip Larkin 22), but the sprawling lines also recall Whitman, whom Larkin calls one of his twelve exemplars (RW 86).

The speakers of "To the Sea" and "Show Saturday" come across as inventory takers. They describe (or perhaps list) all the details that their eyes chance upon. The accumulation of detail creates an effect not unlike that of a Brueghel painting. In fact, Larkin's "white steamer stuck in the afternoon" (HW 9) seems to echo the "expensive delicate ship" noted by Auden in "Musee Des Beaux Arts." The second poem in the trilogy "Livings," however, uses description in a slightly different way. Clive James asserts that because this poem "is a case of over-refinement leading to obscurity," it represents how "Larkin can on occasion be a difficult poet" ("Wolves of Memory" 68). And the poem does certainly read like "over-refined" metaphors. However, many critics try to textualize its so-called metaphors by associating the speaker, apparently a lonely lighthouse keeper, with a poet. For example, Alan Brownjohn argues that the speaker embodies "the poet's precarious vantage-point" (Philip Larkin 19), Terry Whalen calls him "the light keeper-poet" ("Lawrence and Larkin: The Suggestion of an Affinity" 109), and Simon Petch refers to him as a "god-like self-contained outsider" (104). The lighthouse keeper then appears to be another one of Larkin's artist figures who stand at "high windows" viewing and describing their surroundings.

But even though his description seems much more metaphorical than is usually expected, a closer inspection suggests that it is just as realistic as "To the Sea" and "Show Saturday." For example, the first two stanzas give a literal depiction of how the incoming morning tide "explodes" against the rocks at the base of the tower:

Seventy feet down
 The sea explodes upwards,
 Relapsing, to slaver
 Off landing-stage steps--
 Running suds, rejoice!

Rocks writhe back to sight.
 Mussels, limpets,
 Husband their tenacity
 In the freezing slither--
 Creatures, I cherish you! (HW 14)

When the tide relapses or ebbs, the covered rocks once more become visible. The third and fourth stanzas describe how the afternoon clouds gradually darken just before a night snowstorm:

By day, sky builds
 Grape-dark over the salt
 Unsown stirring fields.
 Radio rubs its legs,
 Telling me of elsewhere:

Barometers falling,
 Ports wind-shuttered,
 Fleets pent like hounds,
 Fires in humped inns
 Kippering sea-pictures-- (HW 14)

As the "grape-dark" clouds build and the barometric pressure falls, fleets become pent up in ports and sailors seek the fires of seaside inns. The last two stanzas describe the speaker's activities during the snowfall:

Keep it all off!
 By night, snow swerves
 (O loose moth world)
 Through the stare travelling
 Leather-black waters.

Guarded by brilliance
 I set plate and spoon,
 And after, divining-cards.
 Lit shelved liners
 Grope like mad worlds westward. (HW 14-15)

The night looks like a mass of white moths, and the sea becomes black and unilluminated under the darkened skies. Guarded from the outside by the "brilliance" of the light from the lighthouse, the speaker eats dinner and amuses himself with "divining-cards"--yet remains aware of the "liners" groping westward. There is no detail in the poem that cannot be literally accounted for, but unlike his descriptive listing or his cataloguing technique, here Larkin depends on a more impressionistic--yet equally realistic--method of development.

So Larkin's usual technique is to produce literal pictures of realistic experiences, and the paint he uses most often is the highly-colored idiom of the common speaker. When asked why he uses "a lot of idioms and very common phrases," Larkin's response was "they occur naturally" (RW 71; Phillips 65)--just as they would in a typical conversation. He says that William Barnes "chose to write in dialect, in short, because it was inextricably bound up, emotionally, with the subjects that moved him to write" (RW 150-151; "The Poetry of William Barnes" 257). And speaking of Andrew Marvell he says that the "characters and events of which he writes are not preserved in the amber of poetry, or even rhetoric . . .; they are roughly handled

in coffee-house vernacular" (RW 250; "The Changing Face of Andrew Marvell" 154). Not only are these two points equally applicable to Larkin, but he even says that poets should use "a cruder, more strongly marked mode of expression" ("Abstract Vision" 4) than what is generally expected of a poet, in short, to "speak what you think now in hard words," to use Emerson's phrase. And Larkin does. He begins "This Be the Verse" with the line "They fuck you up your moms and dads" (HW 30), and "Sad Steps" begins "Groping back to bed after a piss" (HW 32). But perhaps the line most often quoted in this context is "get stewed;/ Books are a load of crap" (WW 31). So Larkin does occasionally speak the rude truth in "hard words," but he almost always utilizes the idiomatic expressions that occur "naturally" in everyday conversation.

Larkin thus insists on using common language to describe common events. But he makes it clear that this is not as simple a process as it sounds. He cannot just sit down and write a poem. He asserts that the actual specific subject matter of an individual poem is "not primarily a conscious choice at all" ("The Writer in His Age" 47). In fact, he says that "usually the idea of a poem comes with a line or two" (RW 71; Phillips 65) and that the poet must wait for these "flashes" ("Context" 32), which can sometimes be few and far between. In 1964 Larkin admitted to Ian Hamilton that he had not "written a poem for eighteen months" (Hamilton, "Four Conversations" 74). Speaking of the way he writes poems he says that

it varies a great deal. A poem can come quickly. You just write it all out and then the next evening you alter a word or two and it's done. Another time it will take longer, perhaps months. What is always true is that the idea for a poem and a bit of it, a snatch or a line--it needn't be the opening line--come simultaneously. In my experience one never sits down and says I will now write a poem about this or that, in the abstract. (RW 52; Miriam Gross 35)

One can generally conclude that it probably takes Larkin "months" because he admits that he "did write slowly" (RW 75; Phillips 72) and that he wrote "an average of about four poems a year, of which one [was] no good, and so it [took him] 10 years to put together a volume of 30 poems" (Anonymous, "Speaking of Writing XIII: Philip Larkin" 16). He not only wrote slowly, but like A. E. Housman, Larkin also had to wait for "a line or two of verse, sometimes a whole stanza at once, accompanied, not preceded, by a vague notion of the poem which they were destined to form a part of" to flow into his mind (Housman, Selected Prose 194). As Larkin describes this process in Jill, it seems almost magical:

John was content to be ignored, for he was astonished both at his lies and at their effect. And they had affected him no less than Christopher: he was excited, filled with tentative little lyrical thoughts, like the mutterings of an orchestra before the overture of an opera. He was not surprised at himself for telling lies, but for telling them so easily: it almost seemed that they had been made up long before it occurred to him to utter them, and the mystery of this kept him silent for a while, wondering that lies could be made up in a dark corner of the mind long before the occasion that called them out arrived. How long had they lain there? (Jill 119)

So these so-called lies or poetic fictions--Northrop Frye reminds us that "the word poet itself means liar in some languages" (The

Educated Imagination 63)--seem to lie dormant until they suddenly "bubble up" (to use another Housman term) from an unknown source. An example of this process is that the meter of "The Explosion" comes from "Hiawatha." Larkin prefaces his reading of this poem on the 1984 Faber cassette by saying "when it was published people said how daring I'd been . . . , but honestly this had never occurred to me. As so often, the first few lines came all of a piece, and the rest had to match them." So Larkin's apparent method of composition is to wait for "flashes" and then to flesh them out, usually very slowly, with specific and descriptive details.

But there is another stage to this process; many of his poems seem to conform to the threefold structure of the seventeenth-century meditation. Louis Martz explains how during the meditation the memory first calls to mind the specific details of an event in Christ's life (composition); then the understanding attempts to apprehend the importance of these details (analysis); and finally the will offers up a prayer in celebration of this new understanding (colloquy) (Martz, "Introduction" 13). Even though Larkin's poems are not religious, he seems to adopt this threefold process as a fundamental organizing principle. In fact, Martz claims that Larkin's poems are the only recent poetry "that works successfully in this tradition" of being "witty, analytic, metaphysical, and meditative" ("Recent Poetry: The Substance of Change" 609). Mary Ford also points out how Larkin's poetry "becomes a secularized version of the seventeenth-century religious meditative experience" (324). The key

word is secularized. Larkin takes average, everyday experiences and uses the following strategy to develop them:

I tend to lead the reader in by the hand very gently, saying this is the initial experience or object, and now you see that it makes me think of this, that and the other, and work up to a big finish--I mean, that's the sort of pattern.
(Quoted in Morrison, The Movement 125)

I have already discussed how "The Whitsun Weddings" is intended to build up to a "big finish," but another poem that illustrates this process is "To the Sea." The first twenty-two lines of it give a detailed description of going to a seaside resort as a child. Then the next seven lines consist of an attempt to see the experience more clearly--it is "a cloudless scene" containing "clear water"--by examining what it means to him now as an adult. Then the final seven lines offer the "big finish"; the speaker states the importance of the event by giving it universal significance:

The white steamer has gone. Like breathed-on glass
The sunlight has turned milky. If the worst
Of flawless weather is our falling short,
It may be that through habit these do best,
Coming to water clumsily undressed
Yearly; teaching their children by a sort
Of clowning; helping the old, too, as they ought. (HW 10)

As George Hartley points out, Larkin's "great strength is in working from the particular to the universal" ("No Right of Entry" 106). In these last few lines the "cloudless" clarity of his photographic-like initial description turns "milky" "like breathed-on glass." The specific details illuminated by the "sunlight" are replaced by the "milky" (almost vague) insistence on "teaching their children"

through social rituals. So Larkin's memory recounts the details of his childhood visits to the sea (composition); then his understanding elaborates on its significance to him now (analysis); and finally he offers up a "prayer" for the necessity of secularized, social rituals (colloquy).

Many other critics elaborate on his use of this "meditative" method. For example, Terry Whalen observes that in many Larkin poems "the physical world is the necessary locus of a contemplative exploration" ("Philip Larkin: Detachment or Impersonality?" 25) and that "an impression of the world is a stimulating base of the work, but there is also a process of thought regarding the impression which he also conveys" ("Philip Larkin's Imagist Bias" 33). Noel John also recognizes that "it is Larkin's final lines that are frequently powerful and always satisfying" (9); that is, he consciously uses his craftsmanship to build up to a final "powerful" point. In this same context Christopher Ricks alludes to the following passage from one of John Donne's sermons:

And therefore it is easy to observe, that in all metrical compositions, of which kind the Book of Psalms is, the force of the whole piece, is for the most part left to the shutting up; the whole frame of the poem is a bearing out of a piece of gold, but the last clause is of the impression of the stamp, and that is it that makes it current. (See Henry Alford ed., The Works of John Donne, Vol. 2, 480. This passage is alluded to in Ricks' "A True Poet," but he does not give the exact source.)

Larkin's assertion that "there are strong second act curtains in poems as well as in plays" (Hamilton, "Four Conversations" 74) seems to reiterate Donne's point. Larkin's poetry does generally seem to

build to a strong--often metaphorical--finish. But one of his readers accuses him of appearing "to pull the rug out from under [them] in a last stanza, or a last line" (Shaw 104) and rejects his so-called "nervous, overdetermined climaxes" (Shaw 107). Another one claims that "shock," not planned logical development, "is the technique that Larkin uses" (Thwaite and Silkin 11). But despite these few objections, Larkin does tend to follow consciously this threefold process of composition.

Two other poems that illustrate this method are "Church Going" and "High Windows." Anthony Thwaite's explanation of the movement of the first is much too good to paraphrase:

The poem grows because it begins with this situation, which is presented in pretty flat colloquial matter-of-fact terms. You are given all the evidence I think you need, but not too much, and then the thing is plotted through rather in the ways that some of Yeats' finest poems are plotted through, so that, growing from the situation presented in rather banal terms, you move to something in the end which is heightened, "poetic," and altogether a more symphonic statement than the very plain, single instrument sort-of-thing that was given at the beginning. (Thwaite and Silkin 11)

So this natural process then leads to an uplifting conclusion. A similar effect occurs in "High Windows." The first sentence uses colloquial idioms to describe the speaker's awareness of "a couple of kids":

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

Everyone old has dreamed of all their lives--
 Bonds and gestures pushed to one side
 Like an outdated combine harvester,
 And everyone young going down the long slide

To happiness, endlessly. (HW 17)

Then in the next two sentences he begins to "wonder" about or to analyze the significance of what he has seen and described:

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

About hell and that, or having to hide
What you think of the priest. He
And his lot will all go down the long slide
Like free bloody birds. (HW 17)

And finally in the last sentence, he transforms the particulars of the first few lines into a universal trek into modern--almost existential--nothingness (Weiss, "The Flight of Modernism" 41):

And immediately

Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:
 The sun-comprehending glass,
 And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows
 Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless. (HW 17)

Rather than more descriptive words comes a meditative thought. It may be more bleak than hopeful, but the poem still culminates in this final metaphorical flight into "the deep blue air" of nothingness.

So Larkin's method of composition then is to begin with a photograph-like, empirical description and build up to a more elevated flourish--to a big finish, so to speak. But one final aspect of this

process still needs to be emphasized; that is, he almost always adopts a persona. Robert Pinsky maintains that

the use of a borrowed voice or alter-identify, as speaker or central character partly distinct from the poet, constitutes one of the most widely noted, perhaps over-emphasized, critically chewed, and fundamental aspects of modernism. (14)

And though Larkin is usually highly critical of "modernism," he is certainly modern in this instance. In fact, Philip Hogan Kelly's dissertation illustrates how most of the poems utilize a persona and how "each volume [of poetry] insofar as it is a structured composition also develops a persona" (DAI, 39 [1978], 1590A). So it is little wonder that Robin's sister Jane in A Girl in Winter would make the following claim:

I think it would be fascinating to write to somebody who didn't know you, who'd never seen you, even, and who didn't even live in the same country. You could tell them anything, and it wouldn't matter: you could make out you were all sorts of things you weren't, and they wouldn't know any different. Or you could tell them the truth, and see how they took it. I suppose it would be rather like confessing to a priest. (AGW 148)

The idea of "confessing to a priest" suggests not just private statements but also honesty, a notion which Larkin repeats by saying "Oscar Wilde said, 'Give a man a mask and he'll tell you the truth,' (I think it was Wilde, it may have been Yeats)" (Anonymous, "A Conversation with Philip Larkin" 10). Wearing a mask or adopting a persona is very important to Larkin. In fact, one thing he remembers telling Kingsley Amis about his novel I Want It Now is

let's have more "faces"--you know, his Edith Sitwell face, and so on. The wonderful thing was that Kingsley could "do" all those faces himself--"Sex Life in Ancient Rome" and so on. Someone once took photographs of them all. I wish I had a set. (RW 59; Phillips 48-49)

That Larkin adopts his own "faces" cannot be denied. The speaker of "Wedding Wind" is a woman discussing her wedding night, and the three speakers of "Livings" are a seed salesman from 1929, an isolated lighthouse keeper, and a Restoration dandy (George Hartley, Larkin At Sixty 95). And most critics generally agree on the personality of the "typical" Larkin persona. Eric Homberger calls him "the saddest heart in the post-war supermarket" (74), John Press argues that "he observes defeat everywhere" (Rule and Energy 100), Bruce Martin insists that he "is always a pathetic figure" (59), and M. L. Rosenthal says that "the speaker confesses to uncontrollable meanness of spirit and proclaims the misery of his private life" (The New Poets 217). But perhaps the most thorough analysis of Larkin's "typical" persona is offered by Martin Scofield:

And here we encounter the limited, often gloomy figure who for many people seems to sum up Larkin: the bed-sitter occupant ("Mr. Bleaney"), excluded from sex and love ("Reasons for Attendance"), clinging to his job for fear of the demands of greater freedom ("Toads"), anti-intellectual because books throw too strong a light on his own limitations ("A Study of Reading Habits"), drawn to making awkward visits to churches but unable to believe in them ("Church Going"). (380)

As these quotations suggest, most critics judge Larkin's persona to be someone so dissatisfied that he has to grumble. However, to use a phrase Larkin applies to Barbara Pym, his poems also reflect "a steady background of rueful yet courageous acceptance of things"

(Larkin At Sixty 43). Larkin praises John Betjeman for being "an acceptor, not a rejecter, of the life of the time and the people who live in it" ("Betjeman En Bloc" 17). And the anonymous reviewer who gave the Movement its name also asserts that these poets were "prepared to be as comfortable as possible in a wicked, commercial, threatened world which doesn't look, anyway, as if it's going to be changed much by a couple of handfuls of young English writers" ("In the Movement" 400). So perhaps Larkin's persona is a belly-aching, dissatisfied pessimist without the imagination to improve his lot. Or perhaps he is an honest observer who cannot simply gloss over what he sees. Or perhaps there is no "typical" Larkin persona. Maybe he dons one mask after another. As always with Larkin there can be no final, definitive answer. But Larkin's "typical" method of composition is to adopt a persona who begins with a literal description of the specific details of some experience and concludes by elaborating on its importance in more universal terms. For example, "Waiting for Breakfast" begins with a speaker looking down from "high windows" and offering a literal description of an "empty hotel yard" (NS 48). However, because of his newly discovered poetic imagination, he rejects this sense of emptiness as a "misjudgment." But in the last stanza he moves away from the realistic setting of the hotel yard and offers instead a generalized account of the problem of poetic inspiration. This poem thus illustrates his typical pattern; his method is to describe, then to evaluate, and finally to generalize.

CHAPTER V

THE CUT-PRICE CROWD--MODERNISM AND THE AVERAGE READER

The starting point for understanding the effect Larkin tries to achieve is to examine his conception of his audience. He insists over and over that he is not contemptuous of his readers. In fact, since he argues that without a "successful reading" a poem "can hardly be said to exist at all" (RW 80; "The Pleasure Principle" 28), he recognizes that a poet--or any artist--is totally dependent on a sympathetic audience. He maintains that "there are only three legitimate things anyone can do with poetry: write it, read it, or publish it" (Jacket Notes to "Philip Larkin Reads The Less Deceived"), and he asserts that "I write when I feel strongly, and want to tell people" (D. A. N. Jones 11). So there must be an audience--someone for him to tell things to. Unfortunately, he is painfully aware that "in the last 75 years or so," the tension between the artist and his audience "has slackened or even perished" (AWJ 11). And this problem is caused not simply by the audience's indifference to art. Larkin has a "general realization that the neglect of poetry to-day is not entirely the fault of the reading public" (Anonymous, "Four Young Poets--1: Philip Larkin" 933). He blames the influx of modernism for making poetry too obscure for the average reader, for eliminating the enjoyment and pleasure from poetry reading. Perhaps the poem that best illustrates Larkin's recognition of a "lost audience" is

"Talking in Bed." On one level this poem is clearly about the inability of two people--either lovers or a married couple--to communicate with each other while lying in bed:

Talking in bed ought to be easiest,
Lying together there goes back so far,
An emblem of two people being honest. (WW 29)

Communicating "honest" feelings to someone under intimate conditions should be essentially easy. By the same token, addressing a reader--say having him read one's poems in bed--should also be easy. But for various reasons, this form of communication has become almost impossible, and "more and more time passes silently" (WW 29):

It becomes still more difficult to find
Words at once true and kind
Or not untrue and not unkind. (WW 29)

It apparently became more and more difficult for Larkin to find words to hold an audience as if he had "thrown a temporary net around" it (Jill 119). He therefore misses the "successful reading" which he labels as the necessary third stage of poetic creation (RW 80; "The Pleasure Principle" 28).

But even though he seems not to have an audience, he is equally confident that it is possible to find one. He asserts that "the public for poetry is larger than we think, and waiting to be found if we look in the right places" (Anonymous, "Speaking of Writing XIII: Philip Larkin" 16). And according to Clive James, it is Larkin who has tried to rebuild "the ruined bridge between poetry and the general reading public" (Larkin At Sixty 108). Larkin's

insistence that "readability to a large extent is credibility" (RW 95) helps to explain his desire to give poetry "back to the middle-brow public" (Anonymous, "Four Young Poets--1: Philip Larkin" 933). When asked for whom he writes, Larkin's response was "everybody," or more specifically, "anybody who will listen" (RW 59; Phillips 47). He asserts that his practice has always been to write "fairly simply in the language of ordinary people, using the accepted sense of words and using the accepted grammatical constructions" (Raymond Gardner 12). Lolette Kuby can therefore make the following conclusion about Larkin's view of his audience:

At bottom his nonconformism is a return to communicative poetry: there is someone talking and the assumption of someone listening and understanding. It implies faith both that there is an audience and that the audience shares a common tongue viable enough to communicate the full range of experience. (42)

Though this description is a bit idealized, it does establish that Larkin insists on a close attachment between himself and his reader. He consequently tries to appeal sincerely "to the common emotional denominator of his readers" (Martin 26).

But he is aware that he has to earn the audience's attention--to literally earn its money. He praises Shakespeare because crude versions of his plays were successfully performed in Germany "throughout his lifetime" (RW 91; "Subsidies and Side Effects" 183):

I find it enormously exciting to think of Shakespeare's plays making their unofficial way under these conditions, in mutilated form, in a different language, with no grant from any Arts Council, no course of lectures at a local university to

say how good they were, no personal appearance of their author on television, in fact with nothing to recommend them but their own power to interest and amuse. It seems to reassert the fundamental nexus between poet and audience, which is something he has to struggle for in the same way that he struggles with his medium of words; indeed, it is from these two simultaneous struggles--that are in reality two halves of the same struggle--that the work of art is born. The basic danger in subsidizing poetry is that it does away with this struggle: the poet is paid to write, and the audience is paid to listen. Something vital goes out of their relation, and I am afraid that something vital goes out of poetry too. (RW 92; "Subsidies and Side Effects" 183)

Larkin thus rejects subsidizing poetry in general because it frees a poet from having to earn an audience's respect on his own merits.

He goes on to remind us not to forget

those seventeenth-century German playgoers enjoying Shakespeare's plays without knowing who they were by, putting down their own money, and perhaps asking for it back if they were bored, because this does seem to me the healthiest relation than can exist between artist and audience. (RW 92; "Subsidies and Side Effects" 183)

The poet must therefore earn the reader's attention. If Mr. Bleaney prefers the television set to poetry reading, then the poet must somehow win him back. In fact, Larkin says that he hopes "a really big talent will arise that will make the business of reading poetry exciting once more" ("The State of Poetry--A Symposium" 60). The key word is business; to Larkin the whole interchange between writing and reading poetry is a business, and if the reader does not like what he reads, he does not have to pay for it.

Poetry then must consequently compete with other forms of entertainment. Just being art is no longer enough; the poet now has

to "keep the child from its television set and the old man from his pub" (Anonymous, "Four Young Poets--1: Philip Larkin" 933). Larkin claims that "popularity is the only criterion for poetry" (D. A. N. Jones 11). Reducing poetry to a marketable commodity obviously sets up Larkin to be attacked for belittling the inherent necessity of art. Charles Tomlinson, for example, asserts he "has a provincial laziness of mind adopted as a public attitude" ("Poetry Today" 458). And Larkin's ideas do seem at times to drift dangerously close to a give-the-reader-what-it-wants mentality. In fact, his fiction implies that uppermost in his mind while writing was to use words to entrap a reader. In Jill Kemp "felt that unless he flung nets of words over Christopher he might escape, borne off by another unaccountable whim" (62), and in A Girl in Winter Katherine is "asked to believe that the nets she had contrived so cunningly to capture Robin had succeeded down to the last syllable in snaring Jane" (150). As these two quotations suggest, the writer must do whatever it takes to snare a reader--he must use his art to hold his audience.

Unfortunately though, Larkin is keenly aware that poetry no longer keeps young people from being "borne off by another unaccountable whim":

Few things have given me more pleasure in life than listening to jazz. I don't claim to be original in this: for the generations that came to adolescence between the wars jazz was that unique private excitement that youth seems to demand. In another age it might have been drink or drugs, religion or poetry. Whatever it happens to be, parents are suspicious of it and it has a bad reputation. I can tell adolescents don't feel like this about jazz today. (AWJ 1)

And they also certainly "don't feel like this" about poetry either. Though Larkin writes for average people experiencing common emotions, his speaker is an "indigestible sterility" perpetually remaining outside the fertile "green-shadowed" people who celebrate spring (LD 36). He is the older man standing outside the glass window watching "the dancers--all under twenty-five--" who "maul to and fro" inside (LD 18). He has to admit that

Sexual intercourse began
In nineteen sixty-three
(Which was rather late for me)--
Between the end of the Chatterley ban
And the Beatles' first LP. (HW 34)

It is rock-and-roll and sexuality that move young people--not poetry. And despite his conscious desire to win back this group, Larkin apparently judged his efforts to be failures.

One major reason why he had to admit that his attempts to secure an audience were inadequate was that his readers apparently refused to meet him halfway. He argues that "the reader's first encounter with the poem must be a silent, active one, an absorption of spelling and stanza arrangement as much as paraphrasable meaning and corrective historical knowledge" (RW 139; "Master's Voices" 170). The reader must therefore be able and willing to make an effort. And in order to assist the reader as much as possible Larkin chose clarity as one of his guiding principles. He asserts that "perhaps the poetry of abstract vision carries a high failure-rate simply because the reader can come so little of the way to meet it" ("Abstract Vision" 4). So the obvious solution is to avoid literary

abstractions and to concentrate on clarity and concrete experiences. Unfortunately though, as Randall Jarrell points out, "if we were in the habit of reading poets their obscurity would not matter; and, once we are out of the habit, their clarity does not help" (4). Larkin's reader is apparently out of the habit of reading poetry. Mr. Bleaney does not read; there is "no room for books" (WW 10) in his flat. Since Larkin is keenly aware that "what the true artist says from instinct, the true critic will hear by the same instinct" (James, Larkin At Sixty 103), he must have concluded that there is no "true critic" or "true" reader--no one to share his instinctive poetic utterings.

One poem, however, which does illustrate this shared instinct is "Love Songs in Age." The woman described in the poem rediscovers the songs (or pieces of art) that at one time gave her life meaning:

She kept her songs, they took so little space,
 The covers pleased her:
 One bleached from lying in a sunny place,
 One marked in circles by a vase of water,
 One mended, when a tidy fit had seized her,
 And coloured, by her daughter--
 So they had waited, till in widowhood
 She found them, looking for something else, and stood

Relearning how each frank submissive chord
 Had ushered in
 Word after sprawling hyphenated word,
 And the unfailing sense of being young
 Spread out like a spring-woken tree, wherein
 That hidden freshness sung,
 That certainty of time laid up in store
 As when she played them first. But, even more,

The glare of that much-mentioned brilliance, love,
 Broke out, to show
 Its bright incipience sailing above,

Still promising to solve, and satisfy,
 And set unchangeably in order. So
 To pile them back, to cry,
 Was hard, without lamely admitting how
 It had not done so then, and could not now. (WW 12)

As John Reibetanz points out, this poem is one of many in The Whitsun Weddings that show "a deep concern with artistic creation" ("Philip Larkin: The Particular Vision of The Whitsun Weddings" 170). Its chief emphasis, though, involves the intended effect on the audience. At first these rediscovered songs renew "the unfailing sense of being young." They recapture a "hidden freshness . . . laid up in store." But even though the words of the songs promise "to solve, and satisfy," she has to admit that they "had not done so" in her youth and "could not now." So she is forced "to pile them back," to put them away. At one time the shared experience between her and the songs may have been significantly strong, but now it is momentary at best. Larkin apparently concluded that the same is true about poetry in general. Past readers may have felt "each frank submissive chord" of the day's verse, but Larkin's reader now has simply "piled" poetry away, has divorced himself from poetry's effect.

To make things doubly worse for Larkin, the audience he wants to return poetry to is like the "cut-price crowd" (WW 9) described in "Here." This crowd may know about "cheap suits" and "electric mixers" (WW 9), but getting it to read poetry had to be almost impossible from the beginning. As early as 1949 Larkin impugned the "reading habits" of the general public:

"The reading capacity of the general public," wrote Mrs. Q. D. Leavis in Fiction and the Reading Public some ten years ago, "has never been so low at [sic] at the present time," and there is no reason to suppose it has improved. Try guessing, for instance, what per cent of the adult reading public read The News of the World, then look up the answer in Hulton's Reading Survey for 1948. ("Reading Habits" 358)

Eleven years later, when "A Study of Reading Habits" was first published in 1960, Larkin continued to satirize the literary preferences of the average reader:

Don't read much now: the dude
 Who lets the girl down before
 The hero arrives, the chap
 Who's yellow and keeps the store,
 Seem far too familiar. Get stewed:
 Books are a load of crap. (WW 31)

As David Timms points out, the speaker is not Larkin, and his final judgment is not Larkin's:

It is obvious that the books to which the speaker refers of course are not high art, but pulp fiction, in this case Westerns. What the speaker is saying is that as he grows older, life seems to become more and more like a pulp novel Having made that recognition, and feeling that he himself is no more than one of the minor characters in the action, he attempts, rather ineffectually, to blunt the point of this insight by a show of bravado--that last line. If we read the poem as a dramatic monologue, this point becomes clear. It might be added that the speaker is right--the books he refers to are a load of crap, artistically speaking, at least. ("Church Going' Revisited" 20)

From Larkin's point of view the reader described here is wasting his time on "a load of crap." He should be reading Larkin's poems; after all, he is the exact reader that Larkin wants to return poetry to,

the reader he wants so desperately to "hit" with his poems, to make "feel yes" (RW 56; Miriam Gross 35).

Another of Larkin's observations about the "common" reader is that "there is not much pleasure to be got from the truth about things as anyone sees it" ("Context" 32). Again he is in a double bind. He must tell the truth, but he must also give pleasure. But the last two stanzas of "If, My Darling" make it clear that the average reader will find the honest observations that make up his poetry to be very disconcerting:

She'd be stopping her ears against the incessant recital
Intoned by reality, larded with technical terms,
Each one double-yolked with meaning and meaning's rebuttal:

For the skirl of that bulletin unpicks the world like a knot,
And to hear how the past is past and the future neuter
Might knock my darling off her unpriceable pivot. (LD 42)

Though his honest eye "unpicks the world like a knot," few readers will revel in his seemingly bleak pronouncements. In fact, to hear Larkin's "incessant recital/ Intoned by reality" would also probably "knock" any "average" reader off of his "unpriceable pivot," and to conclude frightfully that such "books are a load of crap."

Larkin's description of the "typical" reader of his jazz columns is equally apropos for his "typical" prospective poetry reader:

Sometimes I imagine them, sullen fleshy inarticulate men,
stockbrokers, 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, . . . and cannabis-smoking jeans-and-bearded Stuart-haired sons whose Oriental contempt for "bread" is equalled only by their insatiable demand for it; . . . 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 still may be found. (AWJ 18)

He also tries to use his poems to remind these same readers of the excitement of poetry and to tell them where it still may be found. He praises Louis Armstrong because "he listened to what the audience applauded, and tried to give it to them" (RW 314). But unfortunately, Larkin apparently concluded that he did not even have an audience to applaud his efforts. Some of his critics argue that it is just as well that he did fail to reach his chosen reader. Edward Neill, for example, associates the following line from John Stuart Mill with Larkin's attempt to give poetry back to the common man: "'Better Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied'" (89). But Larkin seems to be more attuned to Stephen Dedalus' assertion that God is a "shout in the street." He tries to reproduce this "shout" in such a way that the average "street" dweller could understand it, that is, of course, if he could just get him to listen.

The problem though is that despite having an impressive following in Britain, Larkin's "intended" audience is not his reader. Though a recent article in The Economist implies that he would be the logical choice to replace John Betjeman as poet laureate (Anonymous, "Scanning the Form" 107), he is still not the poet of the common man.

While trying to establish Larkin's "high popularity," the following excerpt from a 1984 profile in the London Times ironically establishes his limited appeal:

Although he leads a modestly secluded life and does nothing to court the limelight, the high popularity of his latest book [Required Writing] is ample proof of the fact that Larkin is a cult figure.

Mention Hull in any gathering which contains even vaguely literate people and pretty soon someone says the name of Larkin. (A. N. Wilson 10)

Larkin then is about as well known as a poet can be. However, the very fact that he may be a "cult figure" implies that he does not have the following of the average member of the "cut-price crowd." Cult figure is usually taken to mean a person idealized by an exclusive group of people who share an esoteric interest. In a letter to Larkin Barbara Pym observes that "'The Building' is most moving and disturbing--it's a pity that so many people it could apply to will never read it" (278-279). Though the hospital waiting room described in this poem contains "paperbacks . . . / Like an airport lounge" (HW 24), one can rest assured that they are not copies of Larkin's collections of poetry. In an interview with John Haffenden Larkin says of "An Arundel Tomb" that "a friend of his who visited the [actual] tomb in Chichester Cathedral told [him] that the guide said, 'a poem was written about this tomb by Philip Spender'" (Viewpoints 125). Being confused with Stephen Spender would certainly be flattering, but like the visitors to the hospital, this tour guide (who probably takes the 8.15 to work) does not read Philip Larkin's

poetry. And he is the very man whom Larkin tries most to move with his lines.

Another problem that Larkin had to be aware of is that so-called Movement poetry originally had a very limited appeal. Kingsley Amis, for example, asserts that "all the people writing [Movement poetry] were dons, and all the people reviewing it were dons, and all the people who were reading it were dons, and so on. So you've got a kind of donnish poetry" (quoted in Morrison, The Movement 117). The history of Larkin's initial attempt to publish XX Poems supports Amis' assertion. Larkin had only one hundred copies privately printed, and he mailed them to friends and to other "literary" types. Amis' comment and Larkin's attempt "to place" XX Poems led Andrew Motion to conclude that it is

impossible not to charge the Movement poets with something that--as upholders of the English tradition--they sought to stamp out: elitism. This, they felt, was one of the modernists' besetting sins: Eliot's complexity had taken poetry away from a general public and put it in the classroom. Yet the Movement's own tone, class assumptions and specifically English emphasis implied a kind of exclusivity. (Philip Larkin 32)

David Timms makes a similar observation about Movement poets in general:

Their work was first published in limited editions by small private presses, and so was aimed not at the general public, but at the restricted, probably academic audience, which was the only one likely to buy poetry in limited editions. The audience, in fact, was very much like the poets. (Philip Larkin 16)

At least in the fifties when he was first maturing as a poet, though Larkin may have idealized a "common" reader, he apparently realized he had to begin by impressing other literary types, especially the reviewers in English dailies and weeklies.

In 1918 Thomas Hardy complained that "the poet is like one who enters and mounts a platform to give an address as announced. He opens his page, looks around, and finds the hall--empty" (quoted in Florence Hardy 386). In a poem entitled "A Jingle of the Times" Hardy makes the same point:

"I am a poet,
And set in view
Life and its secrets
Old and new."--

--Poets we read not,
Heed not, feed not,
Men now need not
What they do."

The "we" of Hardy's poem is like Larkin's average reader who clearly prefers the pub or the television to poetry reading. In fact, like Hardy, Larkin recognizes that "the cash customers of poetry" have been quick "to move elsewhere" (RW 81; "The Pleasure Principle" 29). The new poetry audience is

a humbler squad, whose aim is not pleasure but self-improvement, and who have uncritically accepted the contention that they cannot appreciate poetry without preliminary investment in the intellectual equipment which, by the merest chance, their tutor happens to have about him. In short, the modern poetic audience when it is not taking in its own washing, is a student audience, pure and simple. (RW 81; "The Pleasure Principle" 29)

Poetry then is in the hands of "whey-faced juiceless creatures in universities" ("Imaginary Museum Piece" 6). Larkin's only readers are students, who read as much for college credit as for pleasure, who make poetry reading more of a skill than an enjoyable experience. And the priests who pander to these novitiates are all, at least in Larkin's eyes, Jake Balokowsky types:

Jake Balokowsky, my biographer,
Has this page microfilmed. Sitting inside
His air-conditioned cell at Kennedy
In jeans and sneakers, he's no call to hide
Some slight impatience with his destiny:
"I'm stuck with this old fart at least a year;

I wanted to teach school in Tel Aviv,
But Myra's folks"--he makes the money sign--
"Insisted I got tenure. When there's kids--"
He shrugs. "It's stinking dead, the research line;
Just let me put this bastard on the skids,
I'll get a couple of semesters leave

To work on Protest Theater." (HW 27)

Not only does Jake's whole existence center around tenure, but he also truly despises his subject matter and feels totally superior to it. Another Larkin poem that questions school teaching in general is "A Life with a Hole in It":

So the shit in the shuttered chateau
Who does his five hundred words
Then parts out the rest of the day
Between bathing and booze and birds
Is far off as ever, but so
Is that spectacled schoolteaching sod
(Six kids, and the wife in pod,
And her parents coming to stay) . . . (97)

To Larkin then all, or certainly most, schoolteachers are bespectacled sods. And this group unfortunately represents the august assemblage whose responsibility it is to teach the student audience to be "moved" by poetry.

The preceding stanza also points out another of Larkin's least favorite literary types, that is, the professional reviewer, "the shit . . . / Who does his five hundred words" a day. Though Larkin has just published his own collection of reviews (Required Writing), he makes it clear that "writing reviews . . . is secondary activity, unimportant at best, meretricious at worst" (Jacket Notes to Philip Larkin Reads The Less Deceived). But in the last stanza of "Fiction and the Reading Public," he acknowledges that his literary reputation lies in the hands of these reviewers:

For I call the tune in this racket:
I pay your screw,
Write reviews and the bull on the jacket--
So stop looking blue
And start serving up your sensations
Before it's too late,
Just please me for two generations--
You'll be "truly great." (86)

It is the review writer who must be pleased. Literature is reduced to a kind of "critical industry" (Hamilton, "Four Conversations" 71) in which most of the reviewers are also poetry writers who give high praise to poets that follow theories similar to theirs and who denounce poets that do not. But again the average reader does not come into consideration; the poet must get the reviewer to praise him

so the teacher will have to teach him in order to keep up with the "times."

Not only does Larkin revile schoolteachers and review writers, but he also attacks professional seminar givers who go from campus to campus giving the same lecture:

Hurrying to catch my Comet
 One dark November day,
 Which soon would snatch me from it
 To the sunshine of Bombay,
 I pondered pages Berkeley
 Not three weeks since had heard,
 Perceiving Chatto darkly
 Through the mirror of the Third.

Crowds, colourless and careworn,
 Had made my taxi late,
 Yet not till I was airborne
 Did I recall the date--
 That day 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?
 --But I outsoar the Thames,
 And dwindle off down Auster
 To greet Professor Lal
 (He once met Morgan Forster),
 My contact and my pal. (WW 13)

The speaker has already flown from Berkeley, California, to London, and now he is on his way to Bombay in order to read the same "pages" again. After the publicity of reading on the BBC Third Program, he hopes to get Chatto and Windus to publish his text. The fact that he calls the historical traditions of England "solemn-sinister/ Wreath rubbish" and claims to "outsoar the Thames" (he even rhymes "games"

and "Thames") clearly implies how far removed he is from the concerns of average people, the "colourless and careworn" crowds who gladly come out to see the Queen, the Minister, and the Guards. He instead is more concerned with showing his familiarity with E. M. Forster, Morgan to those who know him well, and with furthering his own academic career. The reader does not even know the subject of his paper. What matters most is the speaker himself--not literature, not his audience, and certainly not the "cut-price crowd." The fact that Larkin labels him a "shit" (Haffenden, Viewpoints 126) emphasizes his distaste for the "critical industry" that spawns "professionals" like this speaker. If Larkin is a "cult figure," then his followers consist of reviewers, schoolteachers, Jake Balokowskys, and other academic "shits." There is no "average" reader to move or to please.

Perhaps the Larkin poem that best illustrates his sense of having failed to reach his intended audience is "At Grass":

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

Yet fifteen years ago, perhaps
 Two dozen distances sufficed
 To fable them: faint afternoons
 Of Cups and Stakes and Handicaps,
 Whereby their names were artficed
 To inlay faded, classic Junes--

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

Do memories plague their ears like flies?
 They shake their heads. Dusk brims the shadows.
 Summer by summer all stole* away,
 The starting-gates, the crowds and cries--
 All but the 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 prophesis:
 Only the groom, and the groom's boy,
 With bridles in the evening come. (LD 45)

Though the poem is clearly a literal description of once-famous race horses retired to pasture--Larkin says he wrote it after seeing a film about "Brown Jack . . . a famous flat-racer and jumper" (Haffenden, Viewpoints 126)--it can also be extended to refer to other non-equine subjects. For example, Blake Morrison argues that it is about "loss of power," specifically a "nostalgia for a past 'glory that was England'" (The Movement 82). Lolette Kuby associates the two horses with "the domestic tranquility of an old retired couple" (114), and Calvin Bedient simply associates them with the human "relinquishment of labour and identity" (Eight Contemporary Poets 90). In fact, with the exception of Donald Davie, who argues that turning all things of nature into examples of human nature led to the possibility of a "waste land" in which man is totally alienated from his surroundings (Thomas Hardy and British Poetry 68), everyone who comments on this poem humanizes the two horses. But the most interesting possibility is suggested by C. B. Cox and A. E. Dyson. They argue that words

*The paperback edition released in the U.S. misprints "all stone away."

like "fable," "artificed," and "classic" "recall the most important creations of man, even art itself, and make these seem ephemeral" (140-141). So they introduce the possibility of reading the poem in terms of artistic creation.

Once this possibility is opened up, one notices that other words, such as "stop-press columns" and "almanacked," also encourage such a reading. And since Larkin published "the worksheets" of the poem, they can also be brought in as supporting evidence. After all, Larkin himself insists on the significance of an author's manuscripts:

For the scholar, concerned with finding out as much about an author and his work as possible, this is primary source material: this is what he wrote, how he wrote it, what he corrected, what he left. A manuscript will show how much trouble he took, how many drafts were necessary; a cancellation may clarify the meaning, for a writer will often put down the "prose" word while groping for the "poetic" one, or a cancelled expression may throw more light on what was in his mind. . . . ("Operation Manuscript" 14-15)

Not only did Larkin first intend to rhyme "almanacks" with "the cloth of gold has slipped their backs" ("Worksheets of 'At Grass'" 99), a phrase which intimates a book's binding, but the following stanza also establishes the horses' popularity in fashionable "clubs" and in "back-street pubs," a popularity once held by poetry:

In city dining-rooms, in clubs
And barbers'-shops and billiard halls,
Their flippant names were burrs that stuck
To gossip; and in back-street pubs
Their tinted pictures on the walls
Embodied every earthly luck. ("Worksheets to
'At Grass'" 94)

So it is certainly credible to posit that the poem comments on poetry's gradual loss of its audience. A few years ago the poet heard the "cries" of "crowds" who clamored for his exhibitions, but now these crowds have "all stole away." The poet has no audience outside of academia. These two Pegasus-like horses that used to win races before cheering crowds are now left grazing unnoticed in "anonymous" fields. Only the groom (teacher) and the groom's boy (student) are left to handle the horses (poetry). The people who frequent "back-street pubs" are not going to be familiar with Philip Larkin's work. One of Larkin's most famous rejections of modernism, especially by foreign writers, is his asking "who is Jorge Luis Borges?" (RW 60; Phillips 50). Unfortunately though, Larkin must have been aware that the average member of the "cut-price crowd" would also ask "who is Philip Larkin?"

The primary reason Larkin gives for the "average" reader's turning away from poetry is the modern insistence on obscurity. The Larkin poem that comes closest to illustrating his rejection of modernism or pre-1914 art is "MCMXIV," which was discussed in Chapter II. But an even clearer prose statement of Larkin's acclaimed anti-modernist stance occurs in All What Jazz?:

No, I dislike such things not because they are new, but because they are irresponsible exploitations of technique in contradiction 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 nor endure. It will divert us as long as we are prepared to be mystified or outraged, but maintains its hold only by being more mystifying and more outrageous: it has no lasting power. Hence the compulsion on every modernist to

wade deeper and deeper into violence and obscenity: hence the succession of Parker by Rollins and Coltrane, and of Rollins and Coltrane by Coleman, Ayler and Shepp. In a way, it's a relief: if jazz records are to be long one [sic] screech, if painting is to be a blank canvas, if a play is to be two hours of sexual intercourse performed coram populo, then let's get it over, the sooner the better, in the hope that human values will then be free to reassert themselves. (AWJ 17)

Larkin is not just a conservative who despises everything new. He honestly thinks modern artists have shifted their emphasis away from manipulating basic human emotions to a cold, experimental insistence on technical virtuosity--a shift which greatly reduced the possibility of improving the reader or giving him pleasure. Larkin insists on asserting "human values" rather than trying to shock or mystify his readers with technical expertise. His view of art is basically traditional: it should improve and give pleasure, not confuse and outrage.

For the sake of alliteration Larkin uses Parker, Pound and Picasso as his evil triumvirate. But he is well aware that it was Eliot who coined the "fatal phrase" that modern poets "'must be difficult'" (RW 217):

It is not a permanent necessity that poets should be interested in philosophy, or in any other subject. We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning. (Eliot, Selected Essays 248)

Though Eliot's assertion is convincing, perhaps Randall Jarrell's observation that the "poet and public stared at each other with righteous indignation, till the poet said, 'since you won't read me, I'll make sure you can't'" (12) is probably closer to the truth. But whatever the causes of this insistence on obscurity, part of the appeal of Larkin and other so-called Movement writers was their simultaneous recognition that "the stage needed sweeping" (Conquest, New Lines xviii), that they needed to rediscover "a rational structure and comprehensible language" (Conquest, New Lines xv). Larkin therefore admires John Betjeman because throughout his work "can be traced the same insistent pattern, a rejection of modernism" ("Betjeman En Bloc" 14):

The first thing to realise about Betjeman as a writer of verse is that he is a poet for whom the modern poetic revolution has simply not taken place. Insularity and regression rule here as there. For him there is no symbolism, no objective correlative, no T. S. Eliot or Ezra Pound, no reinvestment in myth or casting of language as gesture, no Seven Types or Some Versions, no works of criticism with titles such as Communication as Discipline or Implicit and Explicit Image-Obliquity in Sir Lewis Morris. He addresses himself to his art in the belief that poetry is an emotional business and that rhyme and metre are means of enhancing that emotion.
 . . . (RW 209)

Though it is rather difficult to embrace "insularity and regression" as admirable principles, Larkin insists that Betjeman's emotional, audience-pleasing poems are more valid artistic expressions than Eliot's intellectual, allusion-laced fragments. Like Betjeman, Larkin tries to move the "cut-price crowd," whereas Eliot addresses himself to a "refined sensibility."

Now the obvious objection to Larkin's total rejection of modernism is that he stacks the deck. Blake Morrison points out that what Larkin

has been unable to see is that millions of people do actually enjoy modern painting, modern literature, and modern jazz: they haven't been conned or cajoled; they haven't even had to work hard at appreciation. There are, quite simply, large areas of Modernism in which anyone can take an unaffected pleasure. ("On Philip Larkin's Prose" 44)

Even Randall Jarrell recognizes that "one sort of clearness shows a complete contempt for the reader, just as one sort of obscurity shows a complete respect" (17). But Larkin's point is not to oversimplify or to cheapen human emotions. Though it is far from simplistic, almost any reader could sympathize with the opening of Larkin's "The Old Fools":

What do they think has happened, the old fools,
To make them like this? Do they somehow suppose
It's more grown-up when your mouth hangs open and drools,
And you keep on pissing yourself, and can't remember
Who called this morning? Or that, if they only chose,
They could alter things back to when they danced all night,
Or went to their wedding, or sloped arms some September?
Or do they fancy there's really been no change,
And they've always behaved as if they were crippled or tight,
Or sat through days of thin continuous dreaming
Watching light move? If they don't (and they can't), it's
strange:

Why aren't they screaming? (HW 19)

But how many of these same readers could recognize that Eliot is making much the same point in the following passage from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock":

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
 Am an attendant lord, one that will do
 To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
 Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,
 Deferential, glad to be of use,
 Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
 Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
 At times, indeed, almost ridiculous--
 Almost, at times, the Fool.

It would be absurd to say that one passage is superior to the other. But it would be equally absurd to refuse to acknowledge the merit in each. Perhaps Larkin goes too far in his rejection of modernism, but many others have certainly gone too far in their insistence on obscurity. John Matthias attempts to belittle Larkin's work by labeling it "contemporary" rather than "modern" (23 Modern Poets xiii), but I find this distinction quite healthy. The academic audience can continue to embrace such "moderns" as Pound and Eliot, but both the academic and the non-academic audience can embrace such "contemporaries" as Philip Larkin.

Larkin's biggest complaint about modernism is its insistence on what he labels "literary inbreeding" (RW 126; "What's Become of Wystan?" 104), that is, the overdependence on literary allusions. He claims that one factor that turned him away from Auden's later work was that "literature was replacing experience as material for his verse" (RW 125; "What's Become of Wystan?" 104). Speaking of poetry in general he says "I am always sorry when poets desert their private agonies to rehash others' literature" ("Imaginary Museum Piece" 6), and he emphasizes "the bafflingness of private jokes and allusions" ("No Fun Any More" 4). Not only does he "have no belief in . . .

casual allusions in poems to other poems or poets" (RW 79; D. J. Enright, Poets of the 1950's 78), but he also proudly asserts that he is "not going to fall on [his] face every time someone uses words such as Orpheus or Faust or Judas" (RW 69-70; Phillips 63). In fact, he claims that Eliot's demanding literary allusions lead

to a view of poetry which is almost mechanistic, that every poem must include all previous poems, in the same way that a Ford Zephyr has somewhere in it a Ford T Model--which means that to be any good you've got to have read all previous poems. I can't take this evolutionary view of poetry . . . because first of all you have to be terribly educated, you have to have read everything to know these things, and secondly you've got somehow to work them in to show that you are working them in. But to me the whole of the ancient world, the whole of classical and biblical mythology means very little and I think that using them today not only fills poems full of dead spots but dodges the writer's duty to be original. (Hamilton, "Four Conversations" 71-72)

Larkin even finds allusions, or quotations, to be an "irritating habit of present-day jazz" (AWJ 139):

You know what I mean: the soloist is giving out on some accepted vehicle or other, when all of a sudden he interpolates a phrase or two from something quite different--another tune, a nursery rhyme, a national anthem. Everyone laughs as if he has done something clever, but has he? What should we think of the actor who interpolated a line of "Gunga Din" in "To be or not to be"? That he was guilty of silly bad taste to get a laugh, of course. And that is what I think of, for instance, . . . Charlie Parker playing "Pop Goes the Weasel" in some context which till then had been a serious one. (AWJ 139)

Larkin therefore refuses to be a spokesman for past poets; he will not fill his lines with extraneous literary allusions.

Larkin's second most voiced complaint against modernism is that it commits Hawthorne's "Unpardonable Sin"--it elevates the

intellect over the heart. Using Auden as his prime target, Larkin claims that his later verse is just "silly verbose stew" because his poems seem to be written "by someone no longer capable of strong feeling, or of conveying strong feeling in poetry, or of thinking that it matters whether it is conveyed or not" ("No More Fever" 24). He rejects Auden's verse as being "too verbose to be memorable and too intellectual to be moving" (RW 123; "What's Become of Wystan?" 4). He also bitterly denounces overly-intellectualized art in general:

You've got to work at this: after all, you don't expect to understand anything as important as art straight off, do you? I mean, this is pretty complex stuff: if you want to know how complex, I'm giving a course of 96 lectures at the local college, starting next week, and you'd be more than welcome. The whole thing's on the rates, you won't have to pay. After all, think what asses people have made of themselves in the past by not understanding art--you don't want to be like that, do you? (AWJ 12)

What Larkin prefers to art that demands "a course of 96 lectures" is the work of such poets as Richard Wilbur, "a talent with a central sap of unliterary feeling" ("Recent Verse" 4). His emphasis on feeling does not totally rule out sophistication, but the poet must be "a sophisticate with feeling" (RW 227; "Supreme Sophisticate" 587). His work must, as Robert Conquest points out, appeal to "the whole man, intellect, emotions, senses and all" (New Lines xiv). Larkin quotes Louis Armstrong's complaint about "that modern malice . . . you got no tune to remember and no beat to dance to" (RW 310). And without the dance, without the fever, without the emotion, poetry cannot exist.

A third aspect of modernism that Larkin complains about is its insistence on experimentation for the sake of experimentation. The anonymous review that gave the Movement its name claims that this group of young writers said goodbye to "'experimental writing'" ("In the Movement" 400), and Larkin himself says that "perhaps what [the Movement poets] retain in common is a liking of conventional forms and a distrust of experiment" (Jacket Notes to the 1984 Random House edition of The Whitsun Weddings). But Larkin's clearest complaint about too much experimentation is in All What Jazz?. He asserts that Miles Davis may have produced "a much richer and freer approach to scoring and instrumentation, but a broadening of technical resource is accompanied, as so often, by a narrowing of emotional appeal" (AWJ 118). He also quotes John Hammond's comment about blues musician Benny Carter: "'In monkeying with the structure of the blues, Benny has robbed them of all warmth and feeling'" (AWJ 49). So again Larkin insists that producing feeling is more important than experimentation. However, the discussion in Chapter II of Larkin's varied influences should ensure the reader that Larkin himself could and did experiment with various forms and styles. In fact, his explanation for why he selected the poem "Absences" for an American anthology is a good example of how he would occasionally experiment:

I fancy it sounds like a different, better poet rather than myself. The last line, for instance, sounds like a slightly-unconvincing translation from a French symbolist. I wish I could write like this more often. (Engle and Langland 202-203).

So it is not just experimentation per se that Larkin objects to; it is experimentation that sacrifices feeling and warmth.

Another problem with experimentation is that it can lead to a dangerous game of one-upmanship. Larkin claims that in jazz "the constant pressure to be different and difficult demanded greater and greater technical virtuosity and more and more exaggerated musical non-sequiturs" (AWJ 8). If experimentation is the basis of one's art, then with each electrifying accomplishment it is necessary to increase the voltage because the audience will come to expect more and more shocks. So Larkin apparently feared that modern poetry had gone the route of Renaissance drama--had shorted itself out through an irrational increase of dramatic shock. Speaking of jazz, Larkin says we have "witnessed a capsule history of all the arts--the generation from tribal function, the efflorescence into public and conscious entertainment, and the degeneration into private and subsidized absurdity" (RW 309). For Larkin, then, this insistence on increasing experimentation inevitably led to absurdity and tended to encourage the notion that brilliant artists belong in an asylum. Larkin, for example, attacks Geoffrey Grigson's intimation that Wordsworth's final melancholy "'foretells our need for an asylum'" (quoted in "Poets in a Fine Frenzy" 7):

--oh, come off it, one feels inclined to retort, what about Shakespeare, Chaucer, Keats, Hardy, Milton? Doesn't their absence of a need for an asylum foretell the converse? One would have thought Mr. Grigson would have been the last man to encourage the look-at-me-I'm-round-the-bend school.
("Poets in a Fine Frenzy" 7)

Larkin therefore concludes that "poetry is an affair of sanity, of seeing things as they are" ("Big Victims" 368). He rejects the modern prejudice that "any poet who can produce evidence of medical mental care is automatically ranked higher than one who has stayed sane" ("Big Victims" 368). Again Larkin does not simply dismiss everything new and experimental, but he does insist that

you have to distinguish between things that seemed odd when they were new but are now quite familiar, such as Ibsen and Wagner, and things which seemed crazy when they were new and seem crazy now, like Finnegans Wake and Picasso. (RW 72; Phillips 67)

To Larkin, then, things that are so experimental or crazy that they can never be comfortably assimilated are just simply not acceptable art.

The following passage from All What Jazz? should serve as an effective summary of Larkin's anti-modernist bias:

In consequence the artist has become over-concerned with his material (hence an age of technical experiment), and, in isolation, has busied himself with the two principal themes of modernism, mystification and outrage. Piqued at being neglected, he has painted portraits with both eyes on the same side of the nose, or smoothed a model with paint and rolled her over a blank canvas. He has designed a dwelling house to be built underground. He has written poems resembling the kind of pictures typists make with their machines during coffee break, or a novel in gibberish, or a play in which the characters sit in dustbins. He has made a six-hour film of someone asleep. He has carved human figures with large holes in them. And parallel to this activity ("every idiom has its idiot," as an American novelist has written) there has grown up a kind of critical journalism designed to put it over. The terms and the arguments vary with circumstances, but basically the message is: Don't trust your eyes, or ears, or understanding. They'll tell you this is ridiculous, or ugly, or meaningless. Don't believe them. (AWJ 11-12)

Believe instead that these productions are examples of pure genius. The accepted critical stance is that even though the audience may find this art "ridiculous, or ugly, or meaningless," it is the audience and not the art which is at fault. But, as Larkin points out time and again, the audience can have an impact. It can demand a return to art that uses "words and syntax in the normal way to describe recognizable experiences as memorably as possible" (RW 75; Phillips 71); in short, it can reject Eliot's modernism and embrace Larkin's provincialism. Or it can (and did) totally reject all poetry and turn instead to other less rigorous forms of entertainment.

CHAPTER VI

A SWILL TUB OF FINER FEELINGS--EMOTIONS AND THE PLEASURE PRINCIPLE

As has been suggested throughout this study, the petrol that operates Larkin's poetry vehicle is emotions. The title of the review in which he justifies his rejection of Auden, "No More Fever," suggests that without "fever" or the expression of basic human emotions, poetry simply cannot exist. Cold, intellectual abstractions are not the meat of poetry. In fact, Larkin insists that Hardy, by far his favorite poet, taught him "to feel rather than to write" (RW 175; "Philip Larkin Praises the Poetry of Thomas Hardy" 111). Larkin claims that it was Leslie Stephen "who gave Hardy his poetic credo in a sentence that is really all anyone needs to know about writing poetry":

"The ultimate aim of the poet should be to touch our hearts by showing his own, and not to exhibit his learning, or his fine taste, or his skill in mimicking the notes of his predecessors." (Larkin, "The Puddletown Martyr" 514)

So Larkin would almost surely embrace Wallace Stevens' observation that "one reads poetry with one's nerves" ("Adagia" 167). Poetry has to produce a "fever," and it has to manipulate the reader's "nerves." In fact, Larkin defines "bad" poetry as that which does not skillfully recreate an emotion in a reader. He complains that in the past "bad" poetry was the "kind that tries to move the reader and fails," but

today "bad" poetry "does not even try" to move the reader (RW 80; "The Pleasure Principle" 28). All "good" or effective poetry, then, "is a matter of emotion" (Anonymous, "A Conversation with Philip Larkin" 5). He defines a poem as being "a single emotional spear-point, a concentrated effect that is achieved by leaving everything out but the emotion itself" (RW 95). All aspects of a poem must therefore contribute to this desired emotional effect. Though how much emotion may be as relative as how much garlic, for Larkin it was always the first consideration. In the 1957 P.E.N. Anthology which Larkin helped to edit (his initials appear at the end of the "Introduction") the criterion used for the selection process is summed up in one sentence: "Has it stirred their emotions, amused their minds, rendered their perceptions more alert?" (9). The poem should amuse and improve, but first and foremost it should stir a reader's emotions.

It is little wonder then that Larkin would praise John Betjeman's ability to produce desired emotional effects. He supports Betjeman's belief that "poetry is an emotional business" (RW 209; the same statement is repeated in "Betjeman En Bloc" 15). He also admires him because "he conveys much stronger feeling than most modern poets" (Anonymous, "A Conversation with Philip Larkin" 7). But perhaps his most eloquent praise comes in the following passage:

The poems of Sir John Betjeman, however, complex without being complicated, modern without being modernist, are especially important in that they have adhered loyally to the maxim that it is the poet's business to move the reader's

heart by showing his own, and in doing so have kept open a lifeline for English poetry back to Tennyson and Hardy.
 ("On John Betjeman: A Citation" 17)

Betjeman's success then lies in his ability to move the reader's heart. Both Betjeman and Larkin seem to subscribe to William Faulkner's insistence that "the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself" are the only subjects that "can make good writing" (119). Speaking of Theolonius Monk, Larkin complains "I should like it better if he made me tap my foot sometimes" (AWJ 153). The jazz musician must make his listeners tap their feet, and the poet must make his readers feel his experiences. But whatever the medium, successful art will literally "move" its audience.

Two of Larkin's poems that illustrate his insistence on emotion are "Coming" and its companion "Going." The opening of the first poem has a much vaguer texture than Larkin usually employs:

On longer evenings,
 Light, chill and yellow,
 Bathes the serene
 Foreheads of houses. (LD 17)

In fact, Andrew Motion calls this poem one of Larkin's "purely symbolist moments" (Philip Larkin 14). But despite the Yeats-like shadowy nature of the opening, the thrush described in the next few lines is as Hardy-esque as anything in Larkin's poetry (compare, for example, the last two stanzas of "The Darkling Thrush"):

A thrush sings,
 Laurel-surrounded
 In the deep bare garden,
 Its fresh-peeled voice
 Astonishing the brickwork.
 It will be spring soon,
 It will be spring soon--

The repeated chorus "is supposed to suggest the bird call" (Sleeve Notes to Philip Larkin Reads The Less Deceived), an attempt to produce the desired effect by reproducing the exact experience. So the opening lines are "serene" and "fresh" and anticipate "spring." The final eight lines focus on the reader who is transported during a Keats-like "soft-dying day" by the memory of the "songs of spring":

And I, whose childhood
 Is a forgotten boredom,
 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. (LD 17)

He does not over-romanticize his youth--his childhood was "a forgotten boredom"--but he does experience a reconciliation of sorts leading to laughter and joy. Lolette Kuby claims that this is Larkin's "only poem that expresses 'happiness'" (116). The cause of this happiness is not understanding but feeling, a shared sense of atonement with the thrush and the setting sun, what D. H. Lawrence calls "a pure relationship between ourselves and the living universe about us" (109). Not only are evening, spring, and happiness all "coming," but the speaker even seems to come to a better understanding of his childhood. Even though the poem is one long stanza, it can

easily be broken down into three parts: the first sentence (first four lines), the second sentence and the bird's chorus (next seven lines), and the final sentence (last eight lines). The poem therefore seems to expand as it gradually builds up or "comes" to the final word "happy." And again the cause is not intellectual understanding but pure emotional contentment. The song of the thrush is unintelligible just as the adult conversation cannot be understood by the child. Like the train passenger in poem XII of The North Ship, the speaker of "Coming" is deeply affected by the "meaningless" song of the evening thrush, which is also "a voice/ Watering a stony place" (NS 24).

"Going," on the other hand, describes the loss of everything gained in its obvious companion "Coming." The first stanza also describes a coming evening:

There is an evening coming in
Across the fields, one never seen before,
That lights no lamps. (LD 21)

Here though rather than "light" the image implies darkness (it is unseen, and the lamps are not lit). The second stanza develops the image of a silken quilt, which covers the body but brings no comfort:

Silken it seems at a distance, yet
When it is drawn up over the knees and breast
It brings no comfort. (LD 21)

This silken quilt is not unlike the "sparkling armada of promises" described in "Next, Please" (LD 20). It may seem silken "at a distance," but up close it still leaves the speaker "holding wretched

stalks/ Of disappointment" (LD 20). The final image of the poem is almost an "un-image." The tree, the equivalent of the bird in the preceding poem, has gone:

Where has the tree gone, that locked
Earth to sky? What is under my hands,
That I cannot feel? (LD 21)

In this instance there is no shared feeling with nature. Even though the word feel as it is used here seems to refer to touching or feeling with one's hands, it could also connote feeling in general. What is "going" is the speaker's ability to feel. Hence this poem does not broaden out; it instead shrinks into the final one-line stanza:

"What loads my hands down?" (LD 21). So the poet then depends on emotion to light his lamps and to give him comfort. Without it he is reduced to a series of unanswerable questions, to a sense of being unlocked or separated from his environment, and to an inability to grasp his subject matter.

But again Larkin's poetry is not merely all sentiment or all emotion. He uses the image of knives and forks to explain his stance:

In my experience you've got the emotion side--let's call it the fork side--and you cross it with the knife side, the side that wants to sort it out, chop it up, arrange it, and say either thank you for it or sod the universe for it. You never write a poem out of emotion alone, just as you never write a poem from the knife side, what might be a letter to The Times. I can't explain it: don't want to. (Haffenden, Viewpoints 118)

The emotion side wants to include everything, but the rational side wants to dice and arrange. He makes a similar comment about the

idea and inspiration of a poem:

Another evening I remember him, in response to my question, picking up his knife and fork and saying (this was the gist of it, anyway): "When I wrote poems there were two things crossing on one another--let's call the knife the idea, and the fork the other thing--'inspiration.' They crossed on one another and there was a poem. Now I can get one or the other, but not both together." (Motion, Larkin At Sixty 67)

In this instance the emotional spark that leads to a poem is held down by a fork, while a cutting knife transforms it into an idea.

The last stanza of the second part of "Livings" uses a similar image:

Guarded by brilliance
I set plate and spoon,
And after, divining-cards.
Lit shelved liners
Grove like mad worlds westward. (HW 15)

The lighthouse keeper/poet is guarded by the brilliance of the lighthouse's shining light beam just as Larkin's poetry is guarded by the clarity of his empirically-based observations. Here rather than a knife and fork though Larkin uses a plate and spoon. The emotional inspiration is piled on a plate only to be portioned out into palatable, intellectual ideas by a spoon. The mystery-laced "divining-cards" are also juxtaposed against the "shelved liners." So emotion or mystery alone is not enough. There must be an emotional base, a type of plate, but there also must be some type of "cutting" implement, something to shape the feelings into acceptable, meaningful poetic assertions.

Two of Larkin's poems that illustrate his rational use of emotions are "An Arundel Tomb" and "The Explosion." In the first

Larkin appears to be using the stone effigy of an earl and countess to deify love. The second stanza describes the "sharp tender shock" felt by the reader as Larkin initially tugs at his heartstrings:

Such plainness of the pre-baroque
 Hardly involves the eye, until
 It meets his left hand gauntlet, still
 Clasped empty in the other; and
 One sees, with a sharp tender shock,
 His hand withdrawn, holding her hand. (WW 45)

The possibility of the permanence of love is clearly suggested, a hope surely felt by every reader of the poem at one time or another. But rather than just giving the reader a spoonful of this sweet sentiment, Larkin instead dices it up or examines it with the knife blade of reason:

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. (WW 45)

The word lie in the first line must be a pun. The "faithfulness in effigy" is a lie; the hand-holding is a mere detail produced by the sculptor's chance desire. The last stanza makes this point once again:

Time has transfigured them into
 Untruth. The stone fidelity
 They hardly meant has come to be
 Their final blazon, and to prove
 Our almost-instinct almost true:
 What will survive of us is love. (WW 46)

The words "untruth" and "almost true" make it clear that Larkin is not totally surrendering to the emotion of love. Even the rhyme scheme undercuts the expectation that the poem is gradually building up to a final affirmation of love. Each stanza rhymes ABBCAC, but as Simon Petch points out, in the last stanza "prove" and "love" just "almost" rhyme (84). Larkin is too rational to try to "prove" that "what will survive of us is love." According to Christopher Ricks even the last line illustrates how Larkin understands both classicism and romanticism (Larkin At Sixty 121). If the emphasis in the last line is on survive, then the individuality implied by "us" is transcended by commonality (the classical universal displaces the romantic particular), but if the stress is on us, then the emphasis is on "a particular 'us,' here and now, moved not just personally but individually" (the romantic particular displaces the classical universal) (Larkin At Sixty 121). Like a romantic Larkin fingers the reader's heart, but he is too rational, too classical, to give in completely to any emotional statement. In a poem entitled "An Arundel Tomb Restored," W. Graham changes the last line to "what will survive of us is art" (137). But again Larkin is too much in control to give in to a Shakespearean belief in the ultimate permanence of art ("thy eternal summer shall not fade/ . . . When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st"). The emotions are there for the reader to feast on, but the chef is careful to prepare them in such a way that the reader cannot mindlessly gorge himself.

"The Explosion" is perhaps Larkin's most sentimental-sounding poem. It also appeals to the reader's emotions. Not only is it

based on an industrial folk song (a possibility which could have led to an overly-sentimental statement), but it also follows the meter of "Hiawatha." However, Larkin still does not fully surrender to the emotional possibilities of the effects of a mining disaster on the families of killed miners. After the explosion occurs, the reader immediately finds himself hearing a minister's funeral oration:

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

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

Larger than in life they managed--
 Gold as on a coin, or walking
 Somehow from the sun towards them,

One showing the eggs unbroken. (HW 42)

Though Arthur Oberg refers to the final lines as "a simplicity which is at best sentimental, and at worst, false" (26), a more objective reading shows that Larkin is honestly using words as "plain as lettering in chapels" to examine the basic human desire for eternal afterlife. The fact that "none of the wives saw the miner pick up the eggs doesn't seem to matter" (Bedient, "High Windows" 3); what does matter is that the ending "is a superb thought superbly expressed, which Larkin almost believes in" (James, "Wolves of Memory" 71). The "untruth" of the last stanza of "An Arundel Tomb" is matched here by "unbroken." Even though this "un" prefix seems to be positive, it is clearly mollified by the reader's awareness of Larkin's use of such a prefix time and again to temper his comments.

But perhaps the key softening agent is the phrase "for a second." A seemingly unbelievable vision may occur, but only momentarily. Larkin might occasionally surrender to "unbroken" or unexamined sentimentality, but only "for a second"--the rational knife always accompanies the emotional fork and spoon. It is emotion, however, which supplies the metal and is the mainstay of his poetic creations.

The previously quoted criterion used in the selection process of the 1957 P.E.N. Anthology--"Has it stirred their emotions, amused their minds, rendered their perceptions more alert?" (9)--also establishes Larkin's emphasis on "the pleasure principle." First and foremost with Larkin is always the emotions, but following close behind is an insistence that poetry must "amuse" the reader's mind. Again in 1971 when Larkin edited The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse, he used a very similar principle of selection: "I have acted not so much critically, or even historically, but as someone wanting to bring together poems that will give pleasure to their readers both separately and as a collection" (vi). In an interview in 1982 he once more defended his selection process by saying "I made a readable book. I made twentieth-century poetry sound nice" (RW 73; Phillips 68). Obviously such assertions will be scoffed at by present-day critics who firmly believe that the purpose of criticism is not to make literature "readable" or "nice"; it is to explain its "inner" workings (a bit old-fashioned) or to explain that the "inner" workings cannot be explained. Pleasure does not really enter into the picture. Pain is the cause of literature ("Mad Ireland hurt [Yeats] into poetry"), so apparently pain should therefore be a part

of the overall literary experience, including the critical response. The reader is therefore expected to work hard to understand poetry. But Larkin insists on shifting the emphasis back to "the pleasure principle."

And because "Larkin is so deft at making it appear that his is the cause worth cherishing" (Bromwich 33), it is very difficult not to acknowledge his claim that

the reader, in fact, seems no longer present in the poet's mind as he used to be, as someone who must understand and enjoy the finished product if it is to be a success at all; the assumption now is that no one will read it, and wouldn't understand or enjoy it if they did. (RW 80-81; "The Pleasure Principle" 29)

His purpose is to reject this "assumption" and replace it with a more palatable one. In his essay entitled "The Pleasure Principle" he refers the reader to David Daiches' essay "The 'New Criticism:' Some Qualifications." Perhaps the following passage is one that he had in mind:

Appreciation can be independent of critical theory--a proposition which the new critics do not explicitly deny but a denial of which seems to be implicit in much of their writing. But if we do not concede that it is possible to enjoy art without formal training in criticism and without possessing general ideas about aesthetics, we are flying in the face of experience, setting up a priestly critical profession to mediate between artists and their public, and encouraging the growth of the most barren kind of academism in matters artistic and literary. (Literary Essays 169)

Larkin certainly rejects the idea that a poet should pander to "a priestly critical profession." He instead insists over and over that

"writing poems should be a pleasure" and that "so should reading them, by God" (RW 68; Phillips 61).

He simply refuses to acknowledge the necessity that experiencing poetry must be difficult, that the average reader simply cannot do it alone:

I think this element of enjoyment is vital; I hate the idea that one comes across so often today that poetry is to be studied rather than enjoyed, that poetry-reading is a duty of the intellectual and all that. I believe the poet has to enjoy writing poetry and the reader enjoy reading it, or they are both wasting their time. . . . And I want readers to feel . . . that sometimes--not always; nobody wants to live on the heights for ever--they would enjoy reading poetry more than any available alternative pastime. (Anonymous, "Speaking of Writing XIII" 16)

He not only prefers "all lovers of poetry" to "dessicated PhD fodder" ("Open Your Betjemans" 726), but he also insists that the "highest compliment" he can pay a work of art is that he reads it "from time to time, for pleasure" (RW 66; Phillips 59). Speaking of Richard Stonesifer's biography of W. H. Davies, he says "I had read nearly to page 100 before I remembered I was supposed to be making notes" (RW 164; "Freshly Scrubbed Potato" 13). Reading should not be work; it should be fun. This belief unfortunately sets Larkin up for such snide remarks as "when people talk about things being straightforward, I always wonder why they read poetry and not traffic signs" (Bromwich 32); however, Larkin's cause is not to simplify poetry but to make it compete with other forms of entertainment, to make it a pleasure to read it.

The obvious question is what exactly does Larkin mean by pleasure? Obviously a large number of readers gain enjoyment by "studying" poetry, so it is important to clarify Larkin's definition:

But if the medium is in fact to be rescued from our duties and restored to our pleasures, I can only think that a large-scale revulsion has got to set in against present notions, and that it will have to start with poetry readers asking themselves more frequently whether they do in fact enjoy what they read, and, if not, what the point is of carrying on. And I use "enjoy" in the commonest of senses, the sense in which we leave a radio on or off. (RW 82; "The Pleasure Principle" 30)

When Larkin first made this comment in 1957 the phrase "the sense in which we leave a radio on or off" probably had a slightly different meaning. Today's reader will usually associate the radio with mere background noise, something to listen to while driving a car or doing the dishes. So perhaps the definition should be modernized, the radio changed to stereo or television. After all, Larkin claims that poetry must "keep the child from its television set" (Anonymous, "Four Young Poets--1: Philip Larkin" 933). Another comparison Larkin uses involves going to the theater: "The cash customers of poetry, therefore, who used to put down their money in the sure and certain hope of enjoyment as if at a theatre or concert hall, were quick to move elsewhere. Poetry was no longer a pleasure" (RW 81; "The Pleasure Principle" 29). And with this association in mind, the following passage takes on even more significance:

I count it as one of the great moments of my life when I first realized one could actually walk out of a theatre. I don't mean offensively--but go to a bar at the interval and

not come back. I did it first at Oxford: I was watching Playboy of the Western World and when the bell rang at the interval I asked myself: "Am I enjoying myself? No, I've never watched such stupid balls." So I just had another drink and walked out into the evening sunshine. (RW 55; Miriam Gross 35)

Perhaps a second great moment was when he realized his reader did not have to buy, or even read, his poetry if it did not please him to do so.

As the conclusion to his essay "The Pleasure Principle," Larkin quotes the following assertion from Samuel Butler:

"I should like to like Schumann's music better than I do; I dare say I could make myself like it better if I tried; but I do not like having to try to make myself like things; I like things that make me like them at once and no trying at all." (RW 82; "The Pleasure Principle" 30)

This comment is quite close to Larkin's own assertion that "when I came to Hardy it was with the sense of relief that I didn't have to jack myself up to a concept of poetry that lay outside my own life" (RW 175; "Philip Larkin Praises the Poetry of Thomas Hardy" 111).

Larkin insists that his reader not have to make himself enjoy his poetry or have to "jack himself up" to the intellectual level of his poetry. The whole experience of poetry reading should be as natural and enjoyable as going to a movie or a ballgame--not work but pleasure, something one does to relax after work.

Larkin would like for his readers to embrace his poems in the same way that he has embraced jazz. He claims that "few things have given [him] more pleasure in life than listening to jazz" (AWJ 1).

He even quotes Baudelaire's insistence that "'man can live a week

without bread, but not a day without the righteous jazz'" (AWJ 35). He not only asserts that his "critical principle has been Eddie Condon's 'as it enters the ear, does it come in like broken glass or does it come in like honey?'" (AWJ 17), but he also insists that "the only reason for praising a work is that it pleases, and the only way to develop [a listener's] critical sense is to be more aware of whether he is being pleased or not" (AWJ 172). In an essay entitled "Larkin's Music," Donald Mitchell asserts that the jazz that gives Larkin the most pleasure is that which "makes [him] tap [his] foot, grunt affirmative exhortations, or even get up and caper around the room" (Larkin At Sixty 80), in short, as Larkin says in "For Sydney Bechet," the kind of sound that falls on him "like an enormous yes" (WW 16). And all of these same points are equally applicable to Larkin's poetry. He says

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. (RW 56; Miriam Gross 35)

So the poetry reader or the jazz listener should say "yes," should certainly feel pleasure about the artistic experience he is participating in--whether it be listening to the stereo, watching a film, or reading Philip Larkin's poetry.

The Larkin poem that seems to say "yes" the loudest is "Wedding-Wind." K. M. Sager calls it "the best poem . . . by any living English writer" ("Correspondence" 180). And almost all readers would agree with Colin Falck's observation that it "succeeds

. . . in overcoming the usual despair" ("Philip Larkin" 405) found in Larkin. For example, David Timms labels it a "joyful celebration" (Philip Larkin 88), and Anthony Thwaite judges it to be Larkin's only poem "in which there is a total acceptance of joy" ("The Poetry of Philip Larkin" 44). The first stanza describes the speaker's wedding night:

The wind blew all my wedding-day,
 And my wedding-night was the night of the high wind;
 And a stable door was banging, again and again,
 That he must go and shut it, leaving me
 Stupid in candlelight, hearing rain,
 Seeing my face in a twisted candlestick,
 Yet seeing nothing. When he came back
 He said the horses were restless, and I was sad
 That any man or beast that night should lack
 The happiness I had. (LD 15)

Even though it is impossible not to notice that the "banging, again and again" does not refer to the consumation and that the new bride is left alone to contemplate a candlestick, the stanza still builds up (it consists of two expansive sentences) to a statement of her happiness.

And though the second stanza culminates in a series of questions rather than affirmative statements, it too seems to hinge on her joy:

Now in the day
 All's ravelled under the sun by the wind's blowing.
 He has gone to look at the floods, and I
 Carry a chipped pail to the chicken-run,
 Set it down, and stare. All is the wind
 Hunting through clouds and forests, thrashing
 My apron and the hanging clothes on the line.
 Can it be borne, this bodying-forth by wind

Of joy* my actions turn on, like a thread
 Carrying beads? Shall I be let to sleep
 Now this perpetual morning shares my bed?
 Can even death dry up
 These new delighted lakes, conclude
 Our kneeling as cattle by all-generous waters? (LD 15)

As Lolette Kuby points out, the specific details of the poem seem

to ground her happiness on the simple securities of rural life and together with a corollary strain of religious exaltation suggested by the imagery--the manger-like setting, the string of beds like a rosary, the candles, the kneeling--seem to make it complete and impervious. (74)

However, Kuby goes on to emphasize "the sinister undertone" in the poem--specifically the "'perpetual mornings' of hanging the laundry out, feeding the chickens, etc." (75). In this context the following similar passage from A Girl in Winter adds an even more "sinister" tone:

The morning had an almost-mocking quality of peace. On either side of them stretched the fields, with sometimes a garden coming to the water's edge where a house stood, and once they passed a row of riverside cottages, and a bare-armed woman came out with a pail. She set it down with a clang and stared at them. (AGW 120)

It is possible that the speaker of "Wedding-Wind" will also soon be clanging down her pail because she has experienced only "an almost-mocking quality of" joy, but because of the emphasis on the "delighted lakes" and the "all-generous waters"--in Larkin's poetry it is "always a good sign when there's a lot of water about" (James, "Wolves of

*The paperback edition released in the U.S. reads "of you my actions turn on," but joy is the correct word.

Memory" 70)--it is almost impossible not to read the conclusion in a positive light. In fact, the lines seem to culminate in a final "yes," an acceptance of her married life, including her daily chores. Her monologue also echoes the final lines of Molly Bloom's more famous speech:

I thought well as well him as another and then I asked him
with my eyes to ask again and yes and then he asked me would
I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms
around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my
breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and
yes I said yes I will Yes. (Joyce 783)

Like Molly, Larkin's speaker is a rural "mountain flower" who says "yes" to her new life. Though perhaps only momentarily, "happiness" and "joy" are presently alive and well in her words. "The pleasure principle" is certainly present in her monologue.

A Larkin poem that does not deal directly with pleasure but does offer an excellent example of how reading Larkin can be pleasurable is "Vers de Societe." The appeal of this poem is the honest method with which Larkin treats his subject:

My wife and I have asked a crowd of craps
To come and waste their time and ours: perhaps
You'd care to join us? In a pig's arse, friend.
Day comes to an end.
The gas fire breathes, the trees are darkly swayed.
And so Dear Warlock-Williams: I'm afraid-- (HW 35)

Even though David Timms is correct to label the speaker's initial rejection as "impotent bravado" (Philip Larkin 124), the honesty in the stated desire still rings quite true. And even though Larkin,

and the speaker, and the reader may know that Warlock-Williams and other social "dandies walk on stilts of bone" (Porter, Larkin At Sixty 140), the speaker's final acceptance is also perfectly understandable:

All solitude is selfish. No one now
Believes in the hermit with his gown and dish
Talking to God (who's gone too); the big wish
Is to have people nice to you, which means
Doing it back somehow.
Virtue is social. Are, then, these routines

Playing at goodness, like going to church?
Something that bores us, something we don't do well
(Asking that ass about his fool research)
But try to feel, because, however crudely,
It shows us what should be?
Too subtle, that. Too decent, too. Oh hell,

Only the young can be alone freely.
The time is shorter now for company,
And sitting by a lamp more often brings
Not peace, but other things.
Beyond the light stand failures and remorse
Whispering Dear Warlock-Williams: Why, of course--
(HW 35-36)

The speaker's awareness that "when you make kindness a duty, everybody resents it" (AGW 198) is overshadowed by his recognition that "social mythology in our day is a faint parody of the Christian mythology which preceded it" (Frye, The Modern Century 111). So he goes to the party out of a sense of duty, a quasi-religious, almost superstitious desire to "have people nice to you."

But it is not just his realization that "virtue is social" which causes him to accept the invitation. In fact, he rejects "playing at goodness" as being "too subtle, that. Too decent, too." His decision to join the company in order to avoid staying at home

alone and dwelling on "failure and remorse," on the other hand, seems to be much more honest. Though his decision is just the opposite, he seems to be a type of J. Alfred Prufrock; however, his "confession" is not nearly as disconcerting as Prufrock's, probably because it is stated in terms readily apparent to the average reader. The following lines from "Aubade," a meditation on death, make it clear that social gatherings free the speaker from his preoccupation with death:

Most things may never happen: this one will,
 And realization 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 is no different whined at than withstood. (1491)

Perhaps the preceding speaker accepts Warlock-Williams' offer in order not to be "caught without/ People or drink." The last line of "Aubade," "Postmen like doctors go from house to house," also stresses the importance of social interaction. Larkin reminds the reader that "it isn't postmen, comma, like doctors, comma, but just postmen like doctors. I meant the arrival of the postman in the morning is consoling, healing. . . . It's a bad day . . . when I don't get any post" (A. N. Wilson 10). Social interaction is therefore very necessary to both speakers. So what then is so appealing about "Vers de Societ " (and Larkin's poetry in general) is that he deals with "common" situations (being asked to a dull party) with honest appraisals of his needs and intentions (an occasional demand to escape himself through companionship) in imagery and language that the "average" reader can understand and respond to ("asking that ass

about his fool research"). He gives pleasure by creating a "real" speaker who responds to a realistic situation in a perfectly believable fashion.

The following should serve as a final summary of Larkin's insistence on maintaining "the pleasure principle" in all branches of art:

But 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. . . . And the effect will be felt throughout his work. He will forget that even if he finds what he has to say interesting, others may not. He will concentrate on moral worth or semantic intricacy. Worst of all, his poems will no longer be born of the tension between what he non-verbally feels and what can be got over in common word-usage to someone who hasn't had his experience or education or travel grant, and once the other end of the rope is dropped what results will not be so much obscure or piffling (though it may be both) as an unrealized, "undramatized" slackness, because he will have lost the habit of testing what he writes by this particular standard. Hence, no pleasure. Hence, no poetry. (RW 81-82; "The Pleasure Principle" 29-30)

Again Larkin seems to ignore the fact that the word pleasure is a relative term. Many readers are probably filled with pleasure because they can identify the private jokes in Pound's Cantos. And also insisting on pleasing the "cut-price crowd" by utilizing emotions common to them may justifiably be labeled a "poetry of lowered sights and patiently diminished expectations" (Davie, Thomas Hardy and British Poetry 71). One must conclude, however, that Larkin had no intention of belittling or reducing poetry; in fact, he tried desperately to use emotion and pleasure to increase the value of poetry, maybe not in the eyes of academics, but certainly in the eyes

of "average" readers, those who lack the "refined sensibilities" insisted on by Eliot and the moderns. Today's critics may scoff at the apparent simplicity in Larkin's insistence on emotion and pleasure as his guiding principles, but hopefully tomorrow's readers will turn off the television set and treat themselves to the pleasures that can be gained from digesting the nutritious human emotions available in each of Larkin's four volumes of poetry.

CHAPTER VII

AS BAD AS A MILE--THE LIMITATIONS OF EMPIRICISM

Larkin's desire to use photographic clarity to reproduce emotions in a "cut-price crowd" apparently became, in his estimation, an impossibility. Not only do the prose pieces in Required Writing come clean about his poetry's "failings and limitations" (Morrison, "Philip Larkin's Prose" 43), but poem after poem addresses itself to this sense of failure. In fact, D. J. Enright even suggests that Larkin's lines occasionally imply that "he doesn't altogether trust poetry, not even his own" ("Down Cemetery Road" 142). It is almost as if he is aware that he was doomed to fail right from the beginning:

"As Bad as a Mile"

Watching the shied 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 hand calm,
The apple unbitten in the palm. (WW 32)

As D. J. Enright points out, this poem is "an omen of doom, a sign of original failure" ("Down Cemetery Road" 143). It begins at the end--the apple has been eaten--and it works backward to the "unbitten" apple. The failure is not in the doing--the eating or the throwing--but it occurs before anything happens. Eve fell when she ate the apple; the effect was a direct result of her action. The speaker

fell before he did anything; the effect is apparently a direct result of mere chance. If one associates the general sense of failure described here with Larkin's attempt to produce art, the logical conclusion is that his efforts were doomed from the start, before he bit the apple or before he put pen to paper. So perhaps he somehow intuited that his ideals would never come to fruition.

The poem "Deceptions" suggests that just the desire to produce art must go awry:

Slums, years, have buried you. I would not dare
Console you if I could. What can be said,
Except that suffering is exact, but where
Desire takes charge, readings will grow erratic?
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. (LD 37)

"Suffering is exact"; a felt emotion is always sharp and concise. The speaker can "taste" the raped girl's grief. But when "desire takes charge, readings will grow erratic." The desire to reproduce her grief will lead to "erratic" readings, to misconceived treatments. So the desire to produce art, again before the poem is written or the apple is eaten, will inevitably lead to "fulfilment's desolate attic," to a Pyrrhic victory, to a rapist's forced solace. It will miss the mark "as bad as a mile."

Perhaps the classic Larkin poem about this inevitable sense of failure is "Next, Please":

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

Yet still they leave us holding wretched stalks
 Of disappointment, for though nothing balks
 Each big approach, leaning with brasswork prinked,
 Each rope distinct,

Flagged, and the figurehead with golden tits
 Arching our way, it never anchors; it's
 No sooner present than it turns to past.
 Right to the last

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. . . . (LD 20)

The "sparkling armada of promises" leaves the speaker "holding wretched stalks of disappointment." The opening lines of "Deceptions"--"Even so distant, I can taste the grief,/ Bitter and sharp with stalks, he made you gulp" (LD 37)--makes a similar point. From a distance, thinking about nineteenth-century London or watching the ships slowly near their port, the speakers can still "taste" their "promises." But these expectations of fulfillment lead to "disappointment," to a sense of desolation. The "stalks" bear no flower or fruit. The whole desire to capture successfully a moment in time fails because "it's/ No sooner present than it turns to past." "We are wrong" to think that any of our "promises" will stop "and unload/ All good into our lives." Though this poem is about failure in general, the speaker's sense of futility is symptomatic of Larkin's own sense of poetic failure. He rolled Sisyphus' rock up the hill of artistic creation for forty years, but apparently the strain became

too much. After all, "there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor" (Camus 88). So he could no longer accept the fact that

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. (LD 20)

Unfortunately for his readers, Larkin apparently decided to embrace this silence early, to break his staff and drown his magic book.

In Chapter I, I cited extensive evidence supporting Larkin's claim that he writes poems to preserve some aspect of his experience. "Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album" was also discussed as his stated manifesto of poetic creation. Art should be like photography in the sense that it empirically presents realistic experiences. But even this poem contains seeds of doubt; it exhibits evidence that Larkin knew his theory could not work:

But o, photography! as no art is,
Faithful and disappointing! that records
Dull days as dull, and hold-it smiles as frauds,
And will not censor blemishes
Like washing-lines, and Hall's-Distemper boards,

But shows the cat as disinclined, and shades
A chin as doubled when it is, what grace
Your candour thus confers upon her face!
How overwhelmingly persuades
That this is a real girl in a real place,

In every sense empirically true!
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. (LD 13)

.

In short, a past that no one can share,
 No matter whose your future; calm and dry,
 It holds you like a heaven, and you lie
 Unvariably lovely there,
 Smaller and clearer as the years go by. (LD 14)

Even though he tries to make his art "in every sense empirically true" like a photograph, the effect is both "faithful and disappointing!" The artistic conceit can make a woman "unvariably lovely," but he still "mourns" that it is "just the past." What causes him to feel, what lacerates or contracts his heart, is the fact that what is depicted is "over" or "out of date." It is irretrievable and thus more attractive. It is "a past that no one can share," that no one can touch or taste. Though she is depicted as "a real girl in a real place," she must inevitably remain Keats' "unravished bride of quietness." Though Larkin's speaker may be "a bold lover," he too can find comfort only in the fact that she will remain "unvariably lovely" in a heaven-like world, that is, in a mere photograph.

But as Thomas Hardy points out, "a photograph in words" is an "inartistic species of literary produce" (quoted in Florence Hardy 351), a seemingly perfect yet inedible green cabbage. For this reason Andrew Motion makes the following conclusion about "Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album":

Photography, the poem says, depends for its charm and successes on depicting "real" people in a "real" place, and on being "in every sense empirically true." But it is exactly for these reasons that Larkin will not accord it the status of "art"--which, he implies, depends on allowing the imagination free and potentially transfiguring play. (Philip Larkin 82)

Reality alone then is too dry; it must be nourished by the fertile waters of a poet's imagination. In more specific terms Simon Petch points out that in the picture stolen by the speaker "a 'bathing' girl has become 'dry,' like a flower pressed between the leaves of a book, and the unreality is hammered home by the adjacent rhymes of 'dry' and lie'" (53). And just as water is almost "always a good sign" in Larkin (James, "Wolves of Memory" 70), dryness is almost always a sign of sterility. So to be photographically perfect is a sterile lie.

The last stanza of poem XXX of The North Ship makes a similar point:

Summer broke and drained. Now we are safe.
The days lose confidence, and can be faced
Indoors. This is your last, meticulous hour,
Cut, gummed; pastime of a provincial winter. (NS 43)

Here the description of the girl is reduced to a photograph that is "cut" and "gummed" and placed in a photograph album. Summer is "broke and drained"; the water is gone. Life is reduced to staying indoors passing the hours of a dry cold winter. Like the young beauty in "Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album," the girl described here is reduced to "a belief/ Long since embedded in the static past" (NS 43). In a similar fashion the speaker of "Wild Oats" complains that he missed his opportunity to pluck "a bosomy English rose" (WW 41) and that she has unfortunately been reduced to "two snaps" (WW 41) which he keeps in his wallet, to two "unlucky charms, perhaps" (WW 41). So the photograph then is not enough.

Empiricism has its limitations. In fact, Lolette Kuby concludes that

in Larkin's poetry, even symbols and containers of the ideal--works of art, photographs, phonograph records--are, in a sense, exposed as lies. They are all types of preservers, types of receptacles of the Platonic Ideal which unrealy, protect from change, remove from process, disfigurement, and decay. (104)

Larkin apparently realized that in order to capture "a real girl in a real place," he must show her in a state of flux, of disfigurement, and of decay. A picture of a girl on a railway poster advertising a sunny resort is a lie--until, of course, a Titch Thomas comes along and "humans her up" by making her face "snaggle-toothed and boss-eyed" (WW 35).

The poem "Dry Point" deals with the same theme. Whether it is read as being about "the impossibility of reaching any kind of fulfillment through sexual love" (George Hartley, "No Right of Entry" 107) or about the failure of "man's artistic impulses" and "the poetic process" in general (Hirschberg 5-6), it still depicts a sterile landscape that apparently cannot be transcended. Even though Larkin asserts that the poem is about "how awful sex is" (Haffenden, Viewpoints 118), he also ties together sex and poetry writing:

I remember saying once, I can't understand these chaps who go round American universities explaining how they write poems: it's like going around explaining how you sleep with your wife. (RW 71; Phillips 66)

So like "Deceptions," this poem also involves a sexual and artistic desire that leads to lack of fulfillment:

Endlessly, time-honoured irritant,
 A bubble is restively forming at your tip.
 Burst it as fast as we can--
 It will grow again, until we begin dying.

Silently it inflates, till we're enclosed
 And forced to start the struggle to get out:
 Bestial, intent, real.
 The wet spark comes, the bright-blown walls collapse,

But what sad scapes we cannot turn from then:
 What ashen hills! what salted, shrunken lakes!
 How leaden the ring looks,
 Birmingham magic all discredited,

And how remote that bare and sunscrubbed room,
 Intensely far, that padlocked cube of light
 We neither define nor prove,
 Where you, we dream, obtain no right of entry. (LD 19)

The "time-honoured irritant" can be the need for sex or the desire to produce art. Given the second possibility, which is reinforced by the fact that the poem was originally entitled "Etching," the tip becomes "a fountain pen" and the bubble "a drop of ink" (Hirschberg 5). Though this reading is a bit too literal, it certainly enhances the possibility that the poem entails Larkin's sense of artistic failure. A better explanation is that the "bubble" implies artistic illusions, something that is not "bestial, intent, real." Once this illusion or idealized hope for a work is burst by actually writing a poem, it immediately begins to grow again. Stuart Hirschberg offers the following explanation:

Even as the speaker pleads for release from these forces, he finds himself driven to seek a new unattainable ideal condition where desire itself will "obtain no right of entry." Although he realizes his efforts are doomed to failure, he is still entrapped by the same perpetual need for transcendence, and thus, the "bubble" still continues to form. (6)

Though George Hartley argues that "the wet spark" which continuously bursts these new-forming bubbles "clearly refers to the ejaculation of semen" ("No Right of Entry" 107), it can also be read as the "spark" of artistic creation. Since Larkin's "spark" is almost always "bestial, intent, real," it bursts the "bright-blown walls" of the "bubble-like" illusions of more idealized poetry. Unfortunately, the end result is "ashen hills" and "salted, shrunken lakes," two more images of artistic sterility. Because his poetry is more realistic than symbolic, it leaves the magic ring "leaden" and "discredited."

Perhaps the most ambiguous lines in all of Larkin comprise the final stanza of this poem. However, the fact that the room is "remote," "bare," "far," and "padlocked" clearly implies inaccessibility, perhaps an unobtainable goal. Lolette Kuby calls this room a "Platonic heaven" (46), and George Hartley associates it with "spiritual fulfilment" ("No Right of Entry" 108). The speaker can neither "define nor prove" such an idealized place in his poetry--no artist can produce a perfect work of art--so he insists that "you," which must refer back to the "time-honoured irritant" art, can obtain "no right of entry" in such a place. The "padlocked cube of light"--empirical photographic clarity--can produce only a "bare and sunscrubbed room," a sterile "dry point" devoid of ink. Patricia Ball points out that "trying to fix experience with a painstaking exactitude leads to a risk of killing them in their isolated poses" (55). Such photographic art that seems to hinge on perfection is simply too artificial; it is

Such a deliberate step backwards
 To create an object:
 Books: china: a life
 Reprehensibly perfect. (LD 34)

Neither life nor art can be perfect; Larkin's desire to preserve experiences is thus doomed to failure. Though he may be "compelled to action amid exalted vision," it "deserts [him] immediately the action is completed" (Rosenthal, The Modern Poets 223). His poetry can never accomplish what he theoretically proposes for it. The second stanza of "Latest Face" reiterates this point:

Admirer and admired embrace
 On a useless level, where
 I contain your current grace,
 You my judgment; yet to move
 Into real untidy air
 Brings no lasting attribute--
 Bargains, suffering, and love,
 Not this always-planned salute. (LD 41)

Extending a conception into "real untidy air" never leads to the "always-planned salute." Larkin's artistic productions never turn out as graceful or effective as he has planned.

Another problem with reproducing an experience exactly as it occurred is intimated in "Whatever Happened?":

At once whatever happened starts receding.
 Panting, and back on board, we line the rail
 With trousers ripped, light wallets, and lips bleeding.

Yes, gone, thank God! Remembering each detail
 We toss for half the night, but find next day
 All's kodak-distant. Easily, then (though pale),

"Perspective brings significance," we say,
 Unhooding our photometers, and, snap!
 What can't be printed can be thrown away.

Later, it's just a latitude: the map
 Points out how unavoidable it was:
 "Such coastal bedding always means a mishap."

Curses? The dark? Struggling? Where's the source
 Of these yarns now (except in nightmares, of course)?
 (LD 25)

This poem also implies that producing photographic clarity in art is impossible because "at once whatever happened starts receding." It immediately becomes "just a latitude," a vague mark used in an attempt to map out an experience. The two metaphors in the poem--using a map to chart an experience and snapping photographs of an event--both suggest "how unavoidable it was" for the speaker not to be able to reproduce the fight hinted at in the first stanza. Rather than making the reader experience what has happened, Larkin's speaker can try in vain only to explain why he cannot recapture the event, why he cannot seize the ever-fading margins of his experiences.

In a very similar fashion, John Kemp makes the following observation:

And he managed to slip away, half running out into the quadrangle before he realized that of course that extraordinary clarity of perception that had been vouchsafed him for a few moments had gone, utterly gone. When he had pencil and paper in his room, nothing presented itself to his mind except a flat dullness, like a grey stone wall, and sighing he put them down and lent back on the sofa with his hands behind his head. (Jill 154)

Kemp's initial "extraordinary clarity of perception" totally disappears. He also cannot recapture the moment and thus cannot reproduce "whatever happened," which according to Larkin is a necessary part of the composition of poetry:

"I've been thinking about the creative process a good deal . . . since I last wrote your firm; instead of a fruit machine it now seems to me to be a very delicate balance between what has happened and what one likes to think of as happening, and its function is to restore the balance after inroads have been made on one by reality. So my trouble may be insufficient invasions by reality, whatever that is--unhappiness, I suppose." (Monteith, Larkin At Sixty 39-40)

So Larkin suffers from "insufficient invasions by reality." Like the speaker in poem XXVII of The North Ship, his memories also seem to fail him:

And all the memories that best
Run back beyond this season of unrest
Shall lie upon the earth
That gave them birth.
Like fallen apples, they will lose
Their sweetness at the bruise,
And then decay. (NS 40)

Not only do his memories bruise and decay, but another problem with his attempt to pickle verbally "whatever happened" is that he prefers "unsorted experience" (preface to his reading of "Faith Healing" on Philip Larkin Reads and Comments on The Whitsun Weddings). Artistic creations, however, by their very nature, tend to "co-ordinate and bring into focus a great many . . . [loose and disorganized] impressions" (Frye, The Educated Imagination 64). So he is caught in an impossible situation. He apparently is not satisfied enough with what happens just to live it; however, his attempts to reproduce it cannot possibly succeed.

A fourth poem from The Less Deceived that negates the possibility of photographic clarity is "Triple Time":

This empty street, this sky to blandness scoured,
 This air, a little indistinct with autumn
 Like a reflection, constitute the present--
 A time traditionally soured,
 A time unrecommended by event. (LD 35)

Not only is the present "traditionally soured" (so much for verbal pickling), but it is also "a time unrecommended by event." The present is an empty, bland, scoured, indistinct "reflection." There is nothing happening that is worthy of the poet's empirical eye. Even the structure of the first stanza reflects the awkward position Larkin's theoretical base puts him in:

The first two lines mirror each other syntactically, just as the syntax of the fifth line reflects the syntax of the fourth. Furthermore the syntactical relationships within the first and second and fourth and fifth lines set these pairs of lines in relationship with each other. The reflection is not exact, but the relationship serves to set out visually the poem's point about imprisonment within the present; for the central line of the stanza, the object of the sentence, and the central idea of isolation, appropriately stand alone. (Petch 43)

Though it is a time of vagueness and inaction, because Larkin cannot surrender to the romantic impulse to transcend the "blandness" of the realistic present, he leaves himself with the impossible task of making something "traditionally soured" palatable to the reader. Unfortunately though, his poetry simply cannot achieve the goal he theoretically proposes for it.

Larkin is quite aware that any attempt to reproduce "whatever happened" must begin with the surface details of an event. Unfortunately it is oftentimes very difficult not only to manipulate these

details ("what control could he hope to have over the maddened surface of things?" [Jill 243]), but also to penetrate below them to the heart of an event's meaning. For example, I have previously discussed how the speaker of "Mr. Bleaney" can produce a catalogue of Bleaney's possessions in such a way that the reader may actually believe that he is viewing a photograph of his room. He can make the reader see how the "flowered curtains, thin and frayed,/ Fall to within five inches of the sill" (WW 10). The speaker's kodak-eye is accurate enough to be convincing, but his confession that he knows nothing about the man beyond his habits and material possessions is disconcerting to say the least:

But if he stood and watched the frigid wind
Tousling the clouds, lay on the fusty bed
Telling himself that this was home, and grinned,
And shivered, without shaking off the dread

That how we live measures our own nature,
And at his age having no more to show
Than one hired box should make him pretty sure
He warranted no better, I don't know. (WW 10)

He is unable to penetrate "the maddened surface of things"; a photograph can freeze a moment, but it is hard pressed to clarify basic human desires, emotions, and motivations.

A second poem which makes a similar point is "Home Is So Sad":

Home is so sad. It stays as it was left,
Shaped to the comfort of the last to go
As if to win them back. Instead, bereft
Of anyone to please, it withers so,
Having no heart to put aside the theft

And turn again to what it started as,
 A joyous shot at how things ought to be,
 Long fallen wide. You can see how it was:
 Look at the pictures and the cutlery.
 The music in the piano stool. That vase. (WW 17)

The key to this poem is the two verbs in the last three lines. The reader is asked to "see" and to "look" at a few surface details--the pictures, the cutlery, the piano stool, the vase. The sense of sadness is produced by the recognition that no one is there to benefit from these details. Taken together they surely have meaning for someone, but the reader does not know whom this someone is, where he is gone, why he left, etc. It is almost as if the speaker helps the reader break into someone's home. The reader therefore becomes an interloper, a mere peeping tom, seeing everything but understanding nothing. Larkin's realistic eye may paint a pretty picture of the contents of a room, but if asked to elaborate on the inner workings of the owner of these contents, the reader will almost inevitably utilize Larkin's own confession about Mr. Bleaney--"I don't know" (WW 10).

Not only does photographic clarity imply a control over just the surface of things, but Larkin also seems to possess a deconstructive critic's awareness of the limitations of words to produce ultimate statements. He, too, would question "the desire for security through cognitive mastery of dissonance and uncertainty" and "the desire for fixed grounds where reference beyond to something other stops" (Ryan 33). For example, the poem "Maiden Name" makes it clear that words cannot control chaotic passages of time and that

they cannot be expected to maintain one outside referent:

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

Now it's a phrase applicable to no one,
 Lying just where you left it, scattered through
 Old lists, old programmes, a school prize or two,
 Packets of letters tied with tartan ribbon--
 Then is it scentless, weightless, strengthless, wholly
 Untruthful? Try whispering it slowly.
 No, it means you. Or, since you're past and gone,

It means what we feel now about you then:
 How beautiful you were, and near, and young,
 So vivid, you might still be there among
 Those first few days, unfingermarked again.
 So your old name shelters our faithfulness,
 Instead of losing shape and meaning less
 With your depreciating luggage laden. (LD 23)

Because of the passage of time, the referent, the woman, cannot be "semantically the same" as when the two words of her name seemed to fix her meaning. But even though "now it's a phrase applicable to no one," it is still not "wholly/ Untruthful." However, it no longer means her as she is but only as she was. The referent is no longer her in the present but in the past when she was beautiful, young, and near. As might be expected the two words are metaphorically converted into a photograph, an "unfingermarked" picture lodged away with "old lists, old programmes, a school prize or two." Though her "old name shelters [the speaker's] faithfulness," mere words cannot keep her from changing--they cannot freeze her in a moment of time except in metaphorical photographs that gradually become tossed aside with

other seemingly important memorabilia. So again one must conclude that Larkin became more and more disturbed over the failure of words to institute his literary theories. Given this fact it is little wonder that the last stanza of the title poem of Larkin's last collection of poetry would begin: "Rather than words comes the thought of high windows" (HW 17). Words apparently fail him; his desire to pickle verbally his experiences goes "sour." His empirical "cube of light" cannot properly or adequately illuminate an event or entity. His verbal pictures become "snaps" to be kept in his wallet (WW 41) or boxed up with "packets of letters tied with tartan ribbon" (LD 23).

CHAPTER VIII

APPROPRIATE FALSEHOODS--THE FAILURE OF "TRUTHS"

In Chapter IV it was argued that Larkin's method of composition is to begin with a photograph-like, empirical description and build up to an elevated flourish, to move from particular details to a more universal judgment of their significance. But not only is Larkin keenly aware of the limitations of empiricism, he is also cognizant of the failure of capital-t Truths. Even the "universal" observations he makes are only "appropriate falsehoods" (WW 16). He will never go beyond "the tentative truths he has to offer" (Morrison, "On Philip Larkin's Prose" 43). He insists that he has "never been didactic" (RW 74; Phillips 70) and that his poems entail only "a swill tub of finer feelings" (LD 42). The feelings are there, the universal statements are there, but he still refuses to elevate his work to a philosophical plane. To him truth is a "trite untransferable/ Truss advertisement" (WW 43). It is little wonder then that he would offer the following paean to "Ignorance":

Strange to know nothing, never to be sure
Of what is true or right or real,
But forced to qualify or so I feel,
Or Well, it does seem so:
Someone must know.

Strange to be ignorant of the way things work:
Their skill at finding what they need,
Their sense of shape, and punctual spread of seed,
And willingness to change;
Yes, it is strange,

Even to wear such knowledge--for our flesh
 Surrounds us with its own decisions--
 And yet spend all our life on imprecisions,
 That when we start to die
 Have no idea why. (WW 39)

The qualifiers in the first stanza--"or so I feel," "it does seem so," and "someone must know"--clearly imply Larkin's refusal to make truth-laden pronouncements. He accepts that we "spend all our life on imprecisions" and that he therefore can never be sure "of what is true or right or real." Truth holds little value in Larkin's economy; he can embrace only "appropriate falsehoods."

One so-called Truth that Larkin questions is Stevens' "heavenly fellowship of men that perish." He is certainly not a misanthropist, but he is honest enough to acknowledge that the average man is not going to offer redemption to or be redeemed by any other human being. To Larkin "self's the man"; it may sound unpleasant, but all a person can ultimately depend on is himself. Larkin's poetry and prose question the intrinsic value of children, adults, and old people. He argues that children are "selfish, noisy, cruel, vulgar little brutes" (RW 48; Miriam Gross 35). He complains that about the age of eleven he became disgusted with "the company of other children, their noise, their nastiness, their boasting, their back-answers, their cruelty, their silliness" (RW 111; "The Savage Seventh" 713). He insists that now "we know [children] for the little beasts they are . . . and nobody would pretend there is anything angelic about them, so that one of the major illusions of the Romantic movement has thereby quietly disappeared" (RW 191; "Big Victims" 367). Hence

Larkin uses his poem "I Remember, I Remember" to reject the romantic ideal of a perfect childhood:

By now I've got the whole place clearly charted.
Our garden, first: where I did not invent
Blinding theologies of flowers and fruits,
And wasn't spoken to by an old hat.
And here we have that splendid family

I never ran to when I got depressed,
The boys all biceps and the girls all chest,
Their comic Ford, their farm where I could be
"Really myself." (LD 38)

Larkin totally rejects Wordsworth's notion that "trailing clouds of glory do we come/ From God." He instead argues that "the nearer you are to being born, the worse you are" (Haffenden, Viewpoints 115). In fact, he boasts that he has "never lived in hideous contact with [children], having toast flung about at breakfast and so on" (Haffenden, Viewpoints 115). His one poem that deals explicitly with children, "Take One Home for the Kiddies," has an extremely sarcastic tone:

On shallow straw, in shadeless glass,
Huddled by empty bowls, they sleep:
No dark, no dam, no earth, no grass--
Mam, get us one of them to keep.

Living toys are something novel,
But it soon wears off somehow.
Fetch the shoebox, fetch the shovel--
Mam, we're playing funerals now. (WW 26)

Though it is not readily apparent if the puppy has died, it is fairly clear that Larkin is dismayed by the callous lack of feeling exhibited by the "kiddies." The initial desire to possess a living toy

quickly gives way to an inclination to play funerals. The overall tone of the poem is as cold and clinical as anything in Larkin.

Larkin also has problems with the adult members of the "cut-price crowd." Mr. Bleaney, Dockery, and Arnold (see "Self's the Man") are all supposed to be well-adjusted, fairly-typical British subjects. However, Larkin's persona almost always remains quite aloof from these types of men. Perhaps Larkin's clearest expression of his attitude toward these adults is in "The Whitsun Weddings." He offers the following description of fathers, mothers, uncles, and daughters:

The fathers with broad belts under their suits
And seamy foreheads; mothers loud and fat;
An uncle shouting smut; and then the perms,
The nylon gloves and jewellery-substitutes,
The lemons, mauves, and olive-ochres that

Marked off the girls unreally from the rest. (WW 22)

Though the poem apparently ends in a positive image uniting the speaker with the other train passengers, even it can be questioned:

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

There we were aimed. And as we raced across
Bright knots of rail
Past standing Pullmans, walls of blackened moss
Came close, and it was nearly done, this frail
Travelling coincidence; and what it held
Stood ready to be loosed with all the power
That being changed can give. 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. (WW 23)

The "arrow-shower" is "aimed" at the "squares of wheat," but as Larkin insists time and again, this arrow will probably become "a

joyous shot at how things ought to be,/ Long fallen wide" (WW 17). It will probably miss those "squares of wheat" "as bad as a mile" (WW 32). Though Larkin vehemently argues that "there's nothing to suggest that their lives won't be happy" (Haffenden, Viewpoints 125), the possibility of the arrow's hitting its target is an "appropriate falsehood" at best--after all, there is also nothing to affirm that their lives will be happy.

Larkin is also aware that old age also fails to bring fulfillment. The first stanza of "The Old Fools" is chillingly honest:

What do they think has happened, the old fools,
 To make them like this? Do they somehow suppose
 It's more grown-up when your mouth hangs open and drools,
 And you keep on pissing yourself, and can't remember
 Who called this morning? Or that, if they only chose
 They could alter things back to when they danced all night,
 Or went to their wedding, or sloped arms some September?
 Or do they fancy there's really been no change,
 And they've always behaved as if they were crippled or tight,
 Or sat through days of continuous dreaming
 Watching light move? If they don't (and they can't), it's
strange:

Why aren't they screaming? (HW 19)

Even though they are not screaming, they must be aware of the signs of coming death:

Not knowing how, not hearing who, the power
 Of choosing gone. Their looks show that they're for it:
 Ash hair, toad hands, prune face dried into lines--
 How can they ignore it? (HW 19)

The speaker initially finds their ability to "ignore" their fate impossible to grasp. And though he does seem finally to come to some

understanding of their plight, he still ends with a series of doubt-producing questions:

and them crouching below
Extinction's alp, the old fools, never perceiving
How near it is. This must be what keeps them quiet:
The peak that stays in view wherever we go
For them is rising ground. Can they never tell
What is dragging them back, and how it will end? Not at night?
Not when strangers come? Never, throughout
The whole hideous inverted childhood? Well,
We shall find out. (HW 20)

So children are beasts; adults are unhappy failures; and old people regress to a "hideous inverted childhood." And "we" go through or "find out" these stages as we age. Human fellowship then is not an all-powerful good--it is not a Truth that one can bank on.

Another so-called Truth questioned by Larkin is the possibility of human love. "This Be the Verse" rejects the necessity of parental love, "High Windows" questions sexual love, and "An Arundel Tomb" doubts the validity of love and marriage. The first poem begins with a marvelously humorous pun:

They fuck you up, your mum and dad,
They may not mean to, but they do.
They fill you with faults they had
And add some extra, just for you.

But they were fucked up in their turn
By fools in old-style hats and coats,
Who half the time were soppy-stern
And half at one another's throats.

Man hands on misery to man.
It deepens like a coastal shelf.
Get out as early as you can,
And don't have any kids yourself. (HW 30)

Though Humphrey Clucas calls the first line "really poor taste" and rejects the whole "silly poem" (14), Larkin insists that the beginning is "perfectly serious" (Haffenden, Viewpoints 128). Parents really do "fuck up" their children. Though he may not intend to, "man hands on misery to man." So a person should leave home "as early as [he] can" and should not have any kids himself. Parental love then is not one of life's dependable Truths that can be held up for reverence and admiration.

Not only does "Dry Point" illustrate "how awful sex is" (Haffenden, Viewpoints 118), but the first two stanzas of "High Windows" also suggest the emptiness of sexual freedom:

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

Everyone old has dreamed of all their lives--
Bonds and gestures pushed to one side
Like an outdated combine harvester,
And everyone young going down the long slide

To happiness, endlessly. (HW 17)

The "kids" may be having a good time, but their sexual pleasure still takes them nowhere. They still go down "the long slide" only to end up in "the deep blue air, that shows/ Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless" (HW 17). Larkin's ironic tone certainly negates the speaker's assumption that sexual freedom is "paradise." As Robert Seidman points out, "man's relation to happiness is not altered by . . . improved means of contraception, even if these 'advances,' naturally have their pleasure" (145).

Though "An Arundel Tomb" deals with a more idealized aspect of love, it comes to the same conclusion as the other two poems. The constancy of the earl's holding the countess' hand suggests the possibility of a permanent, almost transcendental, form of love; however, the ending makes it clear that the love the poem describes entails another "appropriate falsehood":

Time has transfigured them into
Untruth. The stone fidelity
They hardly meant has come to be
Their final blazon, and to prove
Our almost-instinct almost true:
What will survive of us is love. (WW 46)

"Our almost-instinct" about love is "almost true." Their "stone fidelity" is an "untruth"--a lie. The assertion that "what will survive of us is love" is a "tentative truth," an "appropriate falsehood," a pleasant "lie" we all long to believe. But fortunately (or unfortunately for that matter) Larkin will never allow us to embrace it fully as a bankable Truth. It too is another "truss advertisement" (WW 43), something we try desperately to cling to us for support.

Another possible Truth rejected by Larkin is the belief that religion can or does bring meaning and order. In "Aubade" he refers to religion as "that vast moth-eaten musical brocade/ Created to pretend we never die" (1491). In "Vers de Societ  " the speaker off-handedly refers to "talking to God (who's gone too)" (HW 35). Even the people who come to "the building" for medical treatment search outside past the hospital only to find "a locked church" (HW 25).

And the speaker of "The Old Fools" tries to comfort himself by saying death is "only oblivion" and that

We had it before, but then it was going to end,
And was all the time merging with a unique endeavour
To bring to bloom the million-petalled flower
Of being here. Next time you can't pretend
There'll be anything else. (HW 19)

Prenatal oblivion gives way to birth and human existence, but after death "there'll be [nothing] else," no eternity, no afterlife.

But obviously the quintessential Larkin poem on the failure of religion is "Church Going." The speaker describes the church as being "a shape less recognizable each week," containing "a purpose more obscure" (LD 29). In the penultimate stanza, he makes it clear that the power once held by the church is passing or already gone:

Bored, uninformed, 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 which* was built
This special shell? For, though I've no idea
What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth,
It pleases me to stand in silence here. . . . (LD 29)

The "ghostly silt" of the church has been "dispersed." What the church held "unspilt" is now "dispersed" to other vessels. The church is reduced to an "accoutred frowsty barn." Each of these terms carries a negative connotation. R. N. Parkinson associates

*The Farrar, Straus paperback released in the U.S. misprints this as "for whom."

"accoutred" with "knights in armour" and points out "the out-of-dateness of a Christianity co-eval with them" (229). Larkin himself includes "frowsty" in a list of words he labels as terms of disapproval: "blinking awful, bloomin', 'orrible, boring, cheesy, corny, daft, disgraceful, flippin' awful, foul, fusty, frowsty, etc." (RW 114; "The Savage Seventh" 713). And even though "barn" may suggest the nativity, it still seems quite derogatory to reduce a church to a barn. The speaker may admit that "it pleases me to stand in silence here," but he certainly does not want to hear a sermon. The emphasis is on "silence." The words of religion are no longer soothing; the speaker prefers mere silence.

As was pointed out in the introduction, though Larkin's argument that religion is no longer a viable source of meaning is fairly traditional in twentieth-century literature, his refusal to elevate art to its place negates a typical thematic of modern poetry. The value of art as an intrinsic good is another so-called Truth that Larkin questions. The speaker of "Church Going" says that even though religion is failing, "power of some sort or other will go on" (LD 28). But the "power" is apparently not art. The speaker of "Days" asks "where can we live but days," an existential question that

Brings the priest and the doctor
In their long coats
Running over the fields. (WW 27)

Here the doctor and the priest are the metaphysicians who will help to explain death; the artist will not be present.

Another weakness of art that Larkin dwells on is that its effect is momentary at best. Like the American faith healer described in "Faith Healing," a poet can create the illusion of using his words "to lift and lighten" a reader's sufferings; however, as Larkin's speakers so well know, "nothing cures" (WW 15) these sorrows. "Love Songs in Age" makes the same observation. The song lyrics from the woman's girlhood recreate "the unfailing sense of being young," but though they promise "to solve, and satisfy," the persona has to admit that they "had not done so then, and could not now" (WW 12). Like the women and children who glimpse a stretcher-laden ambulance

And sense the solving emptiness
That lies just under all we do,
And for a second get it whole,
So permanent blank and true (HW 33),

art can also hold the reader only "for a second," and the so-called Truths it dispenses are as abrupt as an ambulance screeching by. Even though the speaker of "A Study of Reading Habits" is initially satisfied by the books he reads, they soon lose their hold on him, and he too concludes that "books are a load of crap" (WW 31). Since all four of these poems are from The Whitsun Weddings, it is clear that even while writing his third volume of poetry, Larkin felt dissatisfied with the possibilities of poetic achievement.

Perhaps the classic Larkin poem that illustrates both the potential and fragility of artistic creation is "The Explosion," the final poem of High Windows:

On the day of the explosion
 Shadows pointed towards the pithead:
 In the sun the slagheap slept.

Down the lane came men in pitboots
 Coughing oath-edged talk and pipe-smoke,
 Shouldering off the freshened silence.

One chased after rabbits; lost them;
 Came back with a nest of lark's eggs;
 Showed them; lodged them in the grasses.

So they passed in beards and moleskins,
 Fathers, brothers, nicknames, laughter,
 Through the tall gates standing open.

At noon, there came a tremor; cows
 Stopped chewing for a second; sun,
 Scarfed as in a heat-haze, dimmed.

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

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

Larger than in life they managed--
 Gold as on a coin, or walking
 Somehow from the sun towards them,

One showing the eggs unbroken. (HW 42)

Here through the magic of art the dead men can "somehow" return to life, can be recaptured before the explosion. But as Frederick Grubb points out, "the poet's will . . . seems powerless" to prevent the disaster itself ("Dragons" 133). It can return them to life in a poetic conceit, but the effect is only "for a second" (a phrase repeated twice in the poem).

Though the last line seems extremely positive, it too casts a negative hue on the possibility of creating poetic Truths. Not only

does the use of "lark's eggs" automatically bring in Larkin the poet, but he also consistently associates eggs with poetry. For example, he claims that poems "are [as] self-sufficient as eggs" ("Words for Music, Perhaps" 222) and that he feels as if he has "laid an egg" (RW 52; Miriam Gross 35) when he completes a poem. In "If, My Darling" he also asserts that his poems are "double-yolked with meaning and meaning's rebuttal" (LD 42). Giving this consistent association, the "unbroken" eggs that survive the explosion seem to suggest the power of Larkin's art to sustain his vision. The fact that he claims that "the point of the eggs" is to create "a vision of immortality at the end" (Haffenden, Viewpoints 129) also strengthens this notion of permanence through artistic invention. But as always with Larkin the irony here is too obvious to ignore. Are we to take these "lark's eggs" to be Larkin's equivalent to Yeats' "golden bird" of Byzantium? Perhaps, though, eggs are the perfect symbol for Larkin's "tentative truths." He could never be Yeats' "golden bird" laying permanent golden eggs, but he could be a simple lark who lays eggs in the hope that they will remain "unbroken." So the final line of Larkin's collected verse--"one showing the eggs unbroken"--is the consummate statement of his ironic view of poetry. Perhaps imaginative art can after all preserve the fragile "eggs" of human hopes and desires, but what an incredibly tenuous shell to have to depend on. The lasting power of the egg may seem "appropriate," but it is certainly a "falsehood."

Though there are no Truths in Larkin, there are many other "appropriate falsehoods." For example, the "almost true" assertion

in "An Arundel Tomb" that "what will survive of us is love" (WW 46), Larkin's passionate praise of jazz in "For Sydney Bechet" (WW 16), and the "arrow-shower" of fertile rain that concludes "The Whitsun Weddings" are all "appropriate falsehoods." Another poem that illustrates this point is "Essential Beauty." The first stanza describes unreal, idealized billboards:

In frames as large as rooms that face all ways
And block the ends of streets with giant loaves,
Screen graves with custard, cover slums with praise
Of motor-oil and cuts of salmon, shine
Perpetually these sharply-pictured groves
Of how life should be. (WW 42)

Larkin's rejection of this billboard world is suggested by the distasteful association of salmon with motor oil (Petch 77). But even if the reader misses this subtlety, the final stanza makes it clear that these billboards may depict perfect beauty but not essential beauty:

They dominate outdoors. Rather, they rise
Serenely to proclaim pure crust, pure foam,
Pure coldness to our live imperfect eyes
That stare beyond this world, where nothing's made
As new or washed quite as clean, seeking the home
All such inhabit. (WW 41)

Our eyes may "stare beyond this world," but they cannot envision overly-idealized, totally-inappropriate pictures of some nonexistent "pure" reality. Instead "our live imperfect eyes" seek for essential beauty, something necessary to our being, something akin to the woman the "dying smokers sense":

Walking towards them through some dappled park
 As if on water that unfocused she
 No match lit up, nor drag ever brought near,
 Who now stands newly clear,
 Smiling, and recognising, and going dark. (WW 42)

Though she is anything but "a real girl in a real place" (LD 13), Larkin seems to approve wholeheartedly of this Joyce-like epiphany afforded to these dying men (compare the scene in Portrait of the Artist when Stephen Dedalus sees the girl standing mid-stream).

One final example of an "appropriate falsehood" is found in "The Trees":

The trees are coming into leaf
 Like something almost being said;
 The recent buds relax and spread,
 Their greenness is a kind of grief.

Is it that they are born again
 And we grow old? No, they die too.
 Their yearly trick of looking new
 Is written down in rings of grain.

Yet still unresting castles thresh
 In fullgrown thickness every May.
 Last year is dead, they seem to say,
 Begin afresh, afresh, afresh. (HW 12)

The trees come into leaf as a poem comes into form (compare Keats' "that if poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree it had better not come at all"). Not only are these trees "like something almost being said," but "their yearly trick of looking new" is also "written down." Because the poetic treatment transforms their "fullgrown thickness" into "castles" that "thresh" in the air, perhaps their palatable message to "being afresh" explains how Larkin could continue to write poetry as long as he did. That these

"castles" are "falsehoods" is obvious, but they too seem to be "appropriate." In the poem "Forget What Did," the speaker explains why he stopped writing his diary and muses about taking it up again:

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

Celestial recurrences,
The day the flowers come,
And when the birds go. (HW 16)

Perhaps "The Trees" gives an example of such a "celestial recurrence." But rather than producing an elaborate, sophisticated Truth, Larkin never forgets that his "tentative truths" are "like something almost being said." He could never escape from the belief that his poetry was incapable of replacing religion as the new receptacle of "essential" meaning or as the new purveyor of "essential beauty."

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CHAPTER IX

CONCLUSION

In a recent profile in the London Times, Larkin says, "I didn't give poetry up--it gave me up" (A. N. Wilson 10). And perhaps this simple assertion is true. If so, he may rediscover his muse and begin publishing again. But even if he does, it is still important to understand his attitude toward poetry and art in general in order to get a broader perspective on how he could stop writing poetry after forty years of faithful service. When the best British poet "in our century since Yeats" (A. N. Wilson 10) gives up poetry making, it is essential to ask why. Perhaps the next study of Larkin will focus on why he began writing and publishing poetry again. A new collection of Larkin poems would be greatly welcomed. In a letter to Larkin, Barbara Pym mentions "that library novel" (251), a phrase which implies that Larkin had been working on one or considering writing one. Though this letter was written in 1969, maybe there is another Larkin novel in progress, another fictionalized treatment of academia, perhaps told from the point of view of a grown-up John Kemp or a mellowed Jim Dixon with maturity and tenure.

But whether or not Larkin publishes again is clearly overshadowed by why he stopped writing to begin with. Presently the best answer involves his overwhelming sense of inevitable failure, of not being able to achieve his intended effects, of having to accept that "art is small beer" ("W. H. Auden [1907-1973]" 479). In the

future, however, when Larkin's biography and letters are made public, the emphasis will probably shift to his childhood, his distrust of sex, his relationship with his parents, and many other psychological concerns. Larkin ends his review of John Stallworthy's biography of Wilfred Owen with the following observation:

Yet in retrospect two casual sentences from a letter Robert Graves wrote to Owen seem increasingly significant: "For God's sake cheer up and write more optimistically--The war's not ended yet but a poet should have a spirit above wars--" It is as if Graves guessed intuitively that for Owen the war was not an impersonal calamity to be got rid of as soon as possible, but a private involvement, something that seemed part of his isolation, his frustrated ambitions in poetry, his sexual hang-ups. This is not to accuse Owen of insincerity. Lines such as "The Poetry is in the pity" and "The eternal reciprocity of tears" will never lose their enormous impact that is utterly free from affectation. It is just that they no longer seem like utterances of The Spirit of the Pities. Somewhere behind them was a human problem that even after fifty years we are a long way from understanding. (RW 239; "The Real Wilfred" 81)

Except for the direct references to World War I this whole passage could apply to Larkin himself, especially the phrase "his isolation, his frustrated ambitions in poetry, his sexual hang-ups." But it will probably be fifty years before the reader of Larkin's poetry can fully understand how these problems are related to his lack of poetic production. A recent review of Required Writing hints at the problem: "his poems always return to an unhappiness contracted in early manhood, for which words themselves are a helpless remedy" (Bromwich 34). Even Larkin himself allows his fictional biographer, Jake Balokowsky, to refer to him as "one of those old-type natural fouled-up guys" (HW 27). So while waiting for the first psychoanalytical study of

Larkin, a study which will probably not be published during his lifetime, one has to focus on less glamorous explanations for why he gave up poetry, such as a recognition that he could not reproduce emotions in or give pleasure to an average reader, that he could not be "an uncommon poet for the common man."

One other possible explanation yet to be suggested is that Larkin decided to abandon poetry and become like one of his readers. Not only is he obsessed with pleasing average readers, but "his 'views' [also] coincide with those of his fellow countrymen" (A. N. Wilson 10). Since he had established himself into a conventional job as a librarian, perhaps he also (probably unconsciously) established himself into a more conventional frame of mind, traded his view from "high windows" for the "lowered sights" of the average man. And without his poetry-making faculties, he is like any other workman who takes the 8.15 to his job. Rather than being called by "that lifted, rough-tongued bell/ (Art if you like)" (LD 18), he now seems to have taken his place inside "the lighted glass," to have joined the procession of average people, living conventional lives, and all "going down the long slide" (HW 17) together.

However, the most telling example of how Larkin's attitude toward art would allow him to give it up is his insistence that a poet cannot earn a living just writing poetry--he must have another more conventional job. As early as 1941 Larkin knew that a writer "need expect no lasting salary/ Beyond the bowels' momentary applause" (quoted in Johnson 38). The poet, therefore, receives little financial reward for his literary endeavors. If he continues to write, he

must find other means of putting food on the table. Luckily for Larkin though he came "from a solid background in which everybody worked. No question about it. It was immoral not to work" (Oakes 65). It was essential, then, from the start for Larkin to be something other than just a writer. He says he was

brought up to think you had to have a job, and write in your spare time, like Trollope. Then, when you started earning enough money by writing, you phase the job out. But in fact I was over fifty before I could have "lived by my writing"--and then only because I edited a big anthology--and by that time you think, Well, I might as well get my pension, since I've gone so far. (RW 62; Phillips 52)

Larkin therefore became a part-time poet and a full-time librarian.

But while his fame as a poet is generally diffused it is only a part-time job; what occupies the majority of his waking hours is the business of running an efficient and effective library to serve an academic community, teaching staff and students, of an English provincial university--Hull. (Bloomfield, Larkin At Sixty 48)

Since it was only a part-time job, it is easier to understand how Larkin could write only about four poems a year. It is also easier to understand how he could give up writing poems; after all, it was not his "life's work."

In the introduction to The North Ship Larkin thanks Vernon Watkins for introducing him to the 1933 edition of Yeats' Collected Poems (NS 9-10). But he also learned from Watkins the value of having another job outside poetry writing:

By this time, too, I was beginning to learn something about his life. This, too, impressed me. Having spent all his adult life in a bank, he was now a flight-sergeant, no doubt

for the duration; after the war he would go back to being a bank clerk again. This in no way hindered his devotion to poetry, which in turn was quite unaffected by ambition: he had waited until what then seemed the farthest brink of middle age before publishing his first book. Plainly he had not the slightest intention of "living by writing"; he was not interested in journalism or reviewing ("I would never review a living writer"), and found banking much more acceptable than pot boiling. . . . To anyone who, like myself, was on the edge of the world of employment his example was significant. Indeed, it was almost encouraging. (RW 42; "Vernon Watkins: An Encounter and a Re-encounter" 30)

Watkins, therefore, taught Larkin that "the conventional life was compatible with total devotion to poetry" (Oakes 65), a valuable lesson for a struggling young poet. He could work a regular job and be a successful poet too; in fact, he had to.

Obviously the problem with having to have two "careers"--being a writer and something else--is that there is so little time to meet one's obligations. In a letter to Larkin Barbara Pym complained that

unfortunately I am the Assistant Editor of Africa, though I quite enjoy it, and I also have to see all the books we publish through the press. The only thing is that it takes too much time and energy. A pity one has to earn one's living--why isn't there a fund for middle-aged writers to have a year off to write a novel! (204)

There is then the danger of one's other job interfering too much with writing, but there is also the danger of one's writing keeping him from being a success at a regular job. Larkin says, for example, that John Betjeman

was expected to carry on the family business of making luxury articles of fine wood, glass and silver for sale by Asprey and Mappin and Webb. He refused--implicitly, when young, by incompetence; explicitly, when older, with defiance. This

was a grave defection for an only son, and Mr. Betjeman does not minimise his father's anger ("bone idle, like my eldest brother Jack, A rotten, low, deceitful little snob") nor his own feelings of remorse ("A sense of guilt increasing with the years") that spread like a discoloration across his whole life. The excuse he gives is single and unvarying: "I was a poet. That was why I failed." (RW 131: "The Blending of Betjeman" 913)

It is consequently necessary for the writer to be able to juggle two occupations. Fortunately for his readers, Larkin was able to live a "conventional" life as a librarian and still produce four volumes of poetry.

A poem that illustrates the strange position Larkin the writer found himself in is "Money":

Quarterly, is it, money reproaches me:
 "Why do you let me lie here wastefully?
 I am all you never had of goods and sex.
 You could get them still by writing a few cheques."

So I look at others, what they do with theirs:
 They certainly don't keep it upstairs.
 By now they've a second house and car and wife:
 Clearly money has something to do with life

--In fact, they've a lot in common, if you enquire:
 You can't put off being young until you retire,
 And however you bank your screw, the money you save
 Won't in the end buy you more than a shave.

I listen to money singing. It's like looking down
 From long french windows at a provincial town,
 The slums, the canal, the churches ornate and mad
 In the evening sun. It is intensely sad. (HW 40)

What "is intensely sad" to the speaker is that he has to work in order to earn money to survive. However, since he is a poet, he is somehow outside (or beyond) the bourgeois need for "goods and sex." He therefore cannot revel in the comforts bought by money, but he

still has to earn it. He also has to admit that "clearly money has something to do with life," whereas poetry, especially for the "average" person, has very little, if anything, to do with life. Unlike others who have "a second house and car and wife," the speaker apparently has spent most of his time on artistic pursuits only to conclude that it is money, not poetry, which he hears "singing." Because the average reader will not buy his poetry, he has to work a conventional job in order to earn the money needed to live on.

Though Larkin admits that "nowadays you can live by being a poet," he qualifies it by saying that "it means a blend of giving readings and lecturing and spending a year at a university as poet in residence or something" (RW 51; Miriam Gross 35). So he cannot earn a living simply by writing poems; he must take on other outside duties. He argues that

though most poets would find it impossible to live on what they earn directly from writing poetry, they can generally scrape along from lecturing, reviewing other poets, holding poetry fellowships and all that. Not that I think this is a particularly good idea; it forces one too much to play the role of a poet; personally I feel, without any denigration of poetry, that it should be a sideline--one should have another job and write poetry only when one wants to and has to. I doubt if there is room in the modern world for the full-time poet; even a great poet like Yeats, who early decided to make poetry the centre of his life, found it difficult, and there is quite a lot of work where one feels he is deliberately hunting round for something to write a poem about. Of course one often wishes one had more time for poetry: in what spare time I have poetry has to compete with letter-writing, social life, reading, mending socks . . . and of course it often comes off worst. (Anonymous, "Speaking of Writing XIII: Philip Larkin" 16)

So Larkin chose to be a part-time poet, to have an "outside" job. He could not be the reviewer described in "The Life with a Hole in It":

So the shit in the shuttered chateau
Who does his five hundred words
Then parts out the rest of the day
Between bathing and booze and birds
Is far off as ever. . . . (97)

Nor could he be the lecturer described in "Naturally the Foundation Will Bear Your Expenses," a man whom Larkin vehemently condemns as an academic "shit" (Haffenden, Viewpoints 126).

Another problem with being a full-time poet is that "nobody wants to live on the heights forever" (Anonymous, "Speaking of Writing XIII: Philip Larkin" 16). Larkin is keenly aware that "you can't write poetry all the time, and you can't live on the proceeds of it, and therefore you must do something else" (Anonymous, "A Conversation with Philip Larkin" 5). Larkin even notes Dylan Thomas' assertion that "you can't write more than two hours a day and after that what do you do? Probably get into trouble" (RW 51; Miriam Gross 35)--unless, of course, you have another job to take up the rest of your time. Edward Thomas, on the other hand, "was that unfortunate character, a 'man of letters,' to whom no hardship or humiliation outweighs the romance of scraping a living from the printed word" (RW 189; "Grub Vale" 9). Larkin therefore gives the budding writer only three choices: he can embrace the "savage drudgery" (RW 188; "Grub Vale" 9) which Edward Thomas endured, he can be a lecturer or reviewer or some other type of academic, or he can take on a conventional job and write poetry as a "sideline."

The two poems that best illustrate Larkin's insistence on the necessity of being something other than a poet are "Toads" and "Toads Revisited." Larkin claims he wrote the first poem because he "was very indignant about having to work" (preface to "Toads Revisited" on the 1984 Faber recording):

Why* should I let the toad work
 Squat on my life?
 Can't I use my wit as a pitchfork
 And drive the brute off?

Six days of the week it soils
 With its sickening poison--
 Just for paying a few bills!
 That's out of proportion.

Lots of folk live on their wits:
 Lecturers, lispers,
 Losels, loblolly-men, louts--
 They don't end as paupers. . . . (LD 32)

Since he has a poet's "wit," he should be able to live without having to bear the "sickening poison" of a conventional job. Why should he waste all of those hours to earn money "just for paying a few bills"? His answer comes in the third stanza. Each word designating the so-called wits--"lecturers, lispers,/ Losels, loblolly-men, louts"--not only begins with a liquid, slippery-sounding "l," but it also carries very negative connotations. Though these "wits" may not "end as paupers," Larkin's engrained work ethic will not allow him to follow their example. "Lots of folks [may] live on their wits," but Philip Larkin cannot.

*The paperback published in the U.S. misprints this as "What."

Though he apparently longs to escape from the necessity of work, he finally admits that he will never be able to:

Ah, were I courageous enough
 To shout Stuff your pension!
 But I know, all too well, that's the stuff
 That dreams are made on:

For something sufficiently toad-like
 Squats in me, too;
 Its hunkers are heavy as hard luck,
 And cold as snow,

And will never allow me to blarney
 My way to getting
 The fame and the girl and the money
 All at one sitting.

I don't say, one bodies the other
 One's spiritual truth;
 But I do say it's hard to lose either,
 When you have both. (LD 32-33)

Despite complaining that "if I had more time I'd read more poetry, but work encroaches like a weed over the whole of my life" (Horder 9), Larkin could never be "courageous enough" to give up his job, "to shout Stuff your pension!"--a phrase which Arthur Edward Salmon associates with Humphrey Bogartish brashness:

The reference seems to be not to Shakespeare, but to Humphrey Bogart's paraphrase of Shakespeare at the conclusion of The Maltese Falcon (1941), which, in its depiction of a cynical urban "hero," provides 1950s poets a model for identification in escapist fantasies. (124)

But Larkin could never fulfill this "dream" or fantasy because he carries something "toad-like" in him too. Larkin's reading of the poem clearly emphasizes the word in (see Philip Larkin Reads The Less

Deceived and the Watershed recording). The "toad work" is as much inside him as outside, and it is impossible for him "to lose either." He must, therefore, work not just to meet financial demands but also to fulfill an engrained work ethic. M. L. Rosenthal argues that the images in the last stanza "carry the connotations of self-disgust" (The New Poets 238), but they in fact seem to reflect an acceptance, not a condemnation, of the speaker's personality.

A less obvious companion poem to "Toads" is "Poetry of Departures." Not only do they immediately follow one another in The Less Deceived, but they also deal with the same theme:

Sometimes you hear, fifth-hand,
As epitaph:
He chucked up everything
And just cleared off,
And always the voice will sound
Certain you approve
This audacious, purifying,
Elemental move. (LD 34)

"To shout Stuff your pension!" would be such an "audacious, purifying,/ Elemental move." But to do it would be too artificial, too much an attempt to live the life of a "wit":

Yes, swagger the nut-strewn roads,
Crouch in the fo'c'sle
Stubby with goodness, if
It weren't so artificial.

Such a deliberate step backwards
To create an object:
Books; china; a life
Reprehensibly perfect. (LD 34)

To "chuck" it all would be the final, clichéd "deliberate step backwards," giving up all he has gained in order to make the final expected gesture of the poet who transcends worldly concerns, who can live without the "toad work."

Because such a step would be "reprehensibly perfect," Larkin kept his post as librarian and "about ten years later . . . found [himself] writing another 'work' poem and was surprised to discover that [his] attitude to it had become much more affectionate" (preface to "Toads Revisited" from the 1984 Faber recording). He begins "Toads Revisited" by once more speculating about not having to work:

Walking around in the park
Should feel better than work:
The lake, the sunshine,
The grass to lie on,

Blurred playground noises
Beyond black-stockinged nurses--
Not a bad place to be.
Yet it doesn't suit me,

Being one of the men
You meet of an afternoon:
Palsied old step-takers,
Hare-eyed clerks with the jitters,

Waxed-fleshed out-patients
Still vague from accidents,
And characters in long coats
Deep in the litter-baskets--

All dodging the toad work
By being stupid or weak. (WW 16)

In "Toads" the emphasis is on why he should not have to work; here the emphasis is on why he must work. He cannot be one of the "stupid or weak" men who manage to dodge "the toad work." It just does not

suit him to be idle; he has to work. He concludes by saying

No, give me my in-tray,
My loaf-haired secretary,
My shall-I-keep-the-call-in-Sir:
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. (WW 19)

He prefers the drudgery of work to "walking around in the park" all day with those who have managed to escape from the necessity of working.

The value of work to Larkin is that it gives structure to the passing hours that make up his life. Andrew Motion asserts that

for all its unavoidable tedium, work helps to combat the thought of impending death, and the main reason for this is its very dailiness--the fact that its repetitive structures allow Larkin to feel palpably involved with life. It is not so much a routine as a ritual and, like all rituals, supportive. (Philip Larkin 68)

In a similar fashion John Reibetanz points out that because of his work "at least there are lights to come on" at the end of the day ("The Particular Vision of The Whitsun Weddings" 166). And Calvin Bedient argues that even the forms of "Toads" and "Toads Revisited" reflect how Larkin's attitude toward work gradually mellowed:

Then the unconscious rightness of his forms, "Toads" being, for example, appropriately restless in alternating uneven trimeters and dimeters, "Toads Revisited" properly more settled in trimeters; "Toads," again, troubled with alternating off-rhyme and "Toads Revisited" calmer in off-rhyme couplets, full rhyme kept in reserve for the entente cordiale of "toad" and "Road." (Eight Contemporary Poets 88)

Luckily for Larkin, even though a writer had to work another job in order to pay "a few bills," he was able to accept the value and necessity of his outside job, of his "toad work."

But the point is that though his "conventional" job is necessary, the writing of poetry is not. He prefaces a reading of "Aubade" with the following comment:

in 1871 Thomas Hardy wrote in his notebook, "Dawn, lying just after waking, the sad possibilities of the future are more vivid than at any other time." I've always found this true. And there came a time when it seemed more sensible to get up and write about it rather than lie there worrying. The result was this poem "Aubade." (See the 1984 Faber cassette.)

Because he has published only one poem since "Aubade" appeared in 1977 ("Party Politics" 1984), perhaps he decided that it was even easier to get up and go to work rather than to write. After all, "when the lights come on at four" (WW 19), he looks to work for comfort. Even at the end of "Aubade" the emphasis is on work--not poetry writing:

Meanwhile telephones crouch, getting ready to ring
In locked-up offices, and all the uncaring
Intricate rented world begins to rouse.
The sky is white as clay, with no sun.
Work has to be done.
Postmen like doctors go from house to house. (1491)

"Work has to be done"; "loaf-haired" secretaries must be in offices ready to answer ringing telephones. Communication takes place through phone calls and letter writing--not through reading or writing poetry. It is little wonder then that Larkin could give up writing poems; after all, it clearly is (or was) a secondary activity

that had "to compete with letter-writing, social life, reading, [and] mending socks" (Anonymous, "Speaking of Writing XIII: Philip Larkin" 16). Even though he gave up his "hobby" of writing poems, he managed to keep his job as head librarian at the University of Hull. Philip Larkin is a librarian who happens to write poetry; he is not a poet who happens to be a librarian. Even if he could have earned a living writing, he distrusts poetry-making so much that he would almost certainly have relegated it to a secondary activity anyway. He simply refuses to overemphasize the importance of poetry in his life. And again, with this fact in mind, it is easy to see how he could conclude a 1982 interview by saying, "it's unlikely I shall write any more poems" (RW 75; Phillips 72).

Because he was only a part-time poet, it usually took him about ten years to fill up a new collection. Since his last volume, High Windows, was published in 1974, the Larkin scholar or follower probably expected another collection around 1984. Though a compilation of his prose pieces appeared in 1983 (Required Writing), Larkin has published only three poems since High Windows--"A Life with a Hole in It" (1975), "Aubade" (1977), and "Party Politics" (1984). A new volume in the near future is therefore almost assuredly out of the question. But most Larkin followers would still be quick to applaud the optimism with which Blake Morrison ends his review of Required Writing:

but there is still the question of why the mysterious private impulse died out, or seems to have. Did his full-time career gradually use up the creative energy that was once left over? Did the subversive pleasure in writing dry up as he became

accepted as our leading poet? Did he become too aware of how his poems work, despite his superstitious vow never to examine their processes? Or did he simply run out of things to say? We don't know, and there is no guarantee that we shall find out. We can only hope that the past tense is temporary, and that when posterity comes to pose the question it will also have to pose a second one: "Why did he resume writing poetry with such abundance in his long old age?" ("On Philip Larkin's Prose" 47)

As alluring as Morrison's final question is, Larkin's own reference to a "blank book" seems to be more apropos:

Perhaps George Orwell best used the book-as-symbol in a way satisfactory to both sides: you remember how in 1984 he made his hero, Winston Smith, treasure a book that he had acquired from "a frowsy little junk shop"; it was, Orwell tells us, "a peculiarly beautiful book" in paper and binding alike. Only, the pages were blank. For a writer, the image is a powerful one: the books the past has given us, the books in which the bookseller deals, are printed; they are magnificent, but they are finite. Only the blank book, the manuscript book, may be the book we shall give the future. Its potentialities are endless. (RW 86)

Perhaps Larkin intends his fifth volume of poetry to be such a "blank book." The pages will not be filled up by him (he judges all of his efforts to be failures), but by a new young poet, whose "potentialities are endless," carrying on in the tradition of Philip Larkin, just as Larkin had carried on the tradition of Thomas Hardy. But even if Larkin never publishes another poem, his place in the history of English poetry is already set. He is the quintessential poet of the fifties, who was cut "ruthlessly down to size" (Jill 12) by the events of World War II, and who therefore attempted to reproduce verbally the "ordinariness" of common human existence. And though

he judges his efforts to be failures, posterity will certainly recognize them to be superb poetic achievements.

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