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TIME, TENSE AND STRUCTURE
IN
CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH POETRY:
LARKIN AND THE MOVEMENT

by

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FOR
MY MOTHER, SISTER, BROTHERS
AND
IN MEMORY OF MY FATHER
WHO MADE IT ALL POSSIBLE

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Summary

The central theme of Larkin's poetry is, in many ways, time and change. Certainly, Larkin is not concerned with the definition of the enigmatic quality of time. Rather, he is interested in time both in the sense of its passage and effect on man and the futility of life itself. This explains his distrust of the elements of time: the past is useless as it is irrecoverable, the present is empty and the only certainty about the future is that it brings old age and subsequent death.

Because man has to experience the reality of such a cruel world, the theme of time inevitably involves pessimistic implications. Hence, Larkin's comment about life: 'Life is first boredom, then fear . . . / And age, and then the only end of age', is perfectly sincere and serious.

Larkin's awareness of 'time's eroding agents', shown in Part One of this study, is the major element that sets the melancholy tone which permeates his poems and to which they also owe much of their strength. Indeed, most of the best poems of Larkin are those which, like 'Church Going', 'The Building', 'The Explosion' and 'An Arundel Tomb', show the change wrought by the passage of time.

Part Two investigates the same theme in Thom Gunn, D.J. Enright, Kingsley Amis and John Wain. The comparison shows that they are as

different in their treatment of the problem of time as in their reliance on the suggestive power of language.

Despite the fact that they reveal a strong commitment to the individual experience of actual reality, still, there is a world of contrast between them. Most importantly, however, they differ in the way they incorporate their personal experiences of everyday life into the structure of their poetry.

Although these poets accept the general view that life is tragic, yet, they are driven by different impulses to go on: Larkin by stoical acceptance, Wain by stoical resistance, Gunn by revolt, Enright and Amis by reconciliation.

Minor but not insignificant themes, such as love, death and sex, are also dealt with in this study. A close examination shows that they are related strongly to the theme of time.

Introduction

Larkin's reputation in contemporary English poetry is well secured and assured. In fact, it is his second book, The Less Deceived, 1955, which established him in the public eye. Ever since, he has been considered as one of the highly-regarded English poets. His work has been edited, reviewed, translated and researched. He is often described by his critics as a pessimist and a passivist. In his article, entitled 'The Climate of Pain in Recent Poetry', Martin Dodsworth argues that Larkin's subject is 'sadness':

He does not attempt to suggest that sadness is anything other than itself; it is no kind of triumph; he does not apply his art to that kind of transmutation. His poems are moving to the point of desolation because he lavishes such great skill on saying what we would prefer not to be said at all--that life can overcome us with the sense of futility, that it is full of failure, and failure is rarely compensated for.¹

And in 'Nothing to be Said', Larkin declares:

Hours giving evidence
Or birth, advance
On death equally slowly.
And saying so to some
Means nothing; others it leaves
Nothing to be said.

However, critics point out such aspects in Larkin mostly by way of cross-reference. It is the aim of the first part of this study to explore, in fairly detailed analysis, the structure of his poetry,

to demonstrate that the passivity in him is a positive stance in life and his pessimism is an element of strength in his poetry. The very important aspect of Larkin's poetry, that has not received due investigation and acknowledgement, is the integration which he achieves of everyday experience into traditional forms. He uses simple language effectively and efficiently that, as Clive James puts it:

He can call death more powerfully than any other poet ever has, but he does so in the commanding voice of life. His linguistic exuberance is the heart of him. Joseph Brodsky, writing about Mandelstam, called lyricism the ethics of language. Larkin's wit is the ethics of his poetry. It brings his distress under our control. It makes his personal unhappiness our universal exultation. Armed with his wit, he faces the worst on our behalf, and brings it to order.²

The first part of this study shows Larkin's skilful handling of language and how he uses it to introduce his view of life. Like that of William Barnes, Larkin's view of nature, as he himself explains, 'is clear, detailed and shining, full of exquisite pictorial miniatures: his view of human life is perceptive, compassionate, and sad'.³ His preoccupation is with:

. . . time, disappointment, waste, the illusion of Love and the evasive reality of loving . . . Larkin presents himself in the poems as a middle-aged bachelor who has missed out on most of the traditional pleasures of life: a colourful, or at least highly coloured childhood, a family, a religion, a poet's freedom. The only freedom he has, or likes to think he has, is freedom from illusions which make other people happy, or are supposed to make people happy.⁴

Why, without Larkin, 'would the poetry of the fifties have lacked what distinction has been claimed for it?'⁵ This is the question which I have attempted to answer mainly in the second part of this study. It is a comparative study between Larkin's poetry and that of Thom Gunn, D.J. Enright, Kingsley Amis and John Wain who are loosely labelled as the 'Movement'.

To them, poetry is not a bourgeois genre because it is concerned with reality as it is rather than with man's ways of organizing it. Thus, the demonstration of the work of language and the personal feeling in the poetic process is vital to the appreciation of their poetry and consequently their general attitudes towards life. Perhaps the right comment on this point is what Kingsley Amis says about Larkin:

I have never known him say anything he did not mean; when he tells you he feels something, you can be quite sure he does feel it--a priceless asset to a poet, and a poet of sensation at that. The same quality ensures that when he has nothing to say he says nothing, which helps him not to write any bad poems.⁶

The selection of these poets is not arbitrary. Many studies have been devoted to showing the similarities between them and Larkin. Most critics have considered them to share a common set of values about life and poetry: 'In short, they were antimodernist, readerly and realistic, and belong on the metonymic side of our bi-polar scheme.'⁷ Among other things, reading these poets carefully qualifies our claim that the differences between them not only exist but they have proved fundamental to any accomplished understanding of their poetry. Accordingly,

my present purpose in Part Two is to explore their work to show how these differences are brought about and how their different approaches to their subjects shape their attitudes towards time and human life in general.

This is not to say that nothing of worth has been written in this field. Rather, it is to say that the critics who tackled this subject were mainly concerned with showing the general features of their poetry. Against this background, Part Two gives the reader a comprehensive view of how these poets differ in their treatment of the same theme (time) by examining the structure of their poetry and the effectiveness of their use of language. Attention is also drawn throughout this study to poems and novels of other writers by way of comparison.

Yet, the examination of their work has not resulted in placing them within the context of any school of ideas or philosophies. Rather, it shows to what extent they manage to integrate their experience of time and change into the language and structure of their poetry. This, inevitably, has carried us deeper into their poetic world in a process of exploration of the potentialities of traditional forms they employ to convey their experience of actual reality. Their success as poets, to borrow Philip Hobsbaum's words, 'would be attributed to their recognition of the need to adapt the old forms to express new experience.'⁸

Notes

- ¹ Martin Dodsworth, 'The Climate of Pain in Recent Poetry', London Magazine, IV:8 (November 1964), p. 89.
- ² Clive James, 'On His Wit', Larkin at Sixty, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London, 1982), p. 108.
- ³ Philip Larkin, Required Writing, (London, 1983), p. 149.
- ⁴ Patrick Swinden, 'Old Lines, New Lines', Critical Quarterly, 9:4 (Winter 1967), p. 349.
- ⁵ Philip Hobsbaum, 'Where Are the War Poets?', Outposts, 61 (Summer 1964), p. 22.
- ⁶ Kingsley Amis, 'Oxford and After', Larkin at Sixty, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London, 1982), pp. 29-30.
- ⁷ David Lodge, The Modes of Modern Writing (London, 1977), p. 213.
- ⁸ Philip Hobsbaum, 'The Road Not Taken', The Twentieth Century Poetry, eds G. Martin and P.N. Furbank (London, 1979), p. 217.

PART ONE

LARKIN'S POETRY

Chapter One

THE NORTH SHIP

The North Ship is an anthology of influences. Introducing its second (1966) edition, Larkin wrote:

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

This statement directs the reader's attention to the extent of the influence of the said poets on the young Larkin. However, reading through these poems reveals that he does not only adopt their poetic strategies but also their rhythm and music, especially that of Yeats which is a 'particularly potent music, pervasive as garlic'.

Music is one of the components of poetry which cannot be separated from the rest because it is generated by their acting concurrently to bring about the final effect of a given poem. Hence, the influence involves the very structure and phrasing of

most of the poems. Such an influence can be detected in Larkin's use of the Yeatsian refrain and the dancing rhythm of short lines as in poem I (To Bruce Montgomery):

All catches alight
 At the spread of spring:
 Birds crazed with flight
 Branches that fling
 Leaves up to the light--
 Every one thing,
 Shape, colour and voice
 Cries out, Rejoice!
A drum taps: a wintry drum. . . .

These lines celebrate the world of nature animated by the coming of spring. Movement in nature is conveyed by a heavily accentual beat corresponding to the burst of joy evoked by words of action and quality, such as 'catches', 'crazed', 'fling', 'Cries' and 'Rejoice'.

The refrain 'A drum taps: a wintry drum', which recalls Yeats's 'the wintry wind' in 'The Withering of the Boughs',² is suggestive: it suggests that winter is there to destroy the beauty of spring. This shows Larkin's early 'awareness of sadness at the back of things, of the passing of time and the inevitability of death'.³ Moreover, the refrain closes the poem and consequently the cycle of seasons as it implies that spring alternates with winter:

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 the earth again.
A drum taps: a wintry drum.

This brings out one of the grand themes which is to concern Larkin in nature poems in his later books: the seasonal cycle and natural recurrence. Here, Larkin seems to 'borrow Yeats's view of time, of evolution and the second coming, his wheel another version of the Yeatsian gyre'.⁴ However, it should be stressed, at this point, that Larkin, unlike Yeats, is not a transcendental poet because he believes that time cannot be transcended by art.

Time in this context, like the river, is eternal in its flow and thus it is immutable as well as transient. Poem IV, subtitled 'Dawn', shows how the poet grasps this view by a new vision of poetic imagination:

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

The flow of utterance is smooth, interrupted only minimally by stops. In the meantime, the use of participles 'crying' and 'flying' produces a continuous movement in the poem which matches the ceaseless flowing of time.

In rationalising his concept of life, the poet is limited by being caught in the trap of time. In this poem, he has given his treatment of time a universal quality by holding it in a delicate balance between these equal and opposite certainties--the endlessness of the ritual cycle of everyday life and the finality to which it leads.

The first two lines record, with naive wonder, the advent of a new day as well as the spectacle of its decline as the infinitive 'To wake' implies the continuous succession of day and night. The poet here searches to surprise the ambiguity of nature's process by pinpointing the very moment of transition, convinced that night passes to day in an instant: 'To wake, and hear a cock crying'.

The poem disconcerts us yet, to borrow James Reeves's terms, 'our surprise at its apparent oddity immediately gives place to a recognition of the rightness of the poet's observation'.⁵ The 'cock-room-sky' image is easily shaped by our imagination, so we can hear with our mind's ear the cock crying and see with our mind's eye the clouds flying by.

Nevertheless, the poet does not regret the departure of night announced by the crying of the cock because he knows that it is just a guest and parting is inevitable. The flying clouds eliminate human presence on earth; and, by removing the veil ('To pull the curtains back') man's eyes fall on cold and loveless reality: time is treacherous in both its illusions, whether of lingering or fleeing.

The seasonal process and night-and-day cycle are recurrent statements in Larkin's poetry. Thus in:

One man walking a deserted platform;
 Dawn coming, and rain
 Driving across a darkening autumn;
 One man restlessly waiting a train
 While round the streets the wind runs wild
 Beating each shuttered house, that seems
 Folded full of the dark silk of dreams,
 A shell of sleep cradling a wife or child . . .

the poet's reaction to the impermanence in nature is set in motion in the second and third lines. Dawn suggests the lapse of night, in the same way as 'a darkening autumn' indicates the death of summer. The analogy of their vanishings implies an ambivalent value, for as they suggest life renewal, also, they indicate that time is rolling away and life is heading for death.

The realisation of this fact is a perpetual source of agony for man inhabiting a 'desert' because time is a destructive force against which he has to struggle: 'One man walking a deserted platform; / One man restlessly waiting a train'. But man is entrapped by time as shown by the clock--the timetable of the train's daily journeys--and his inability to work out a solution to this dilemma is the result of his mind's imprisonment in time rather than the imprisonment of his spirit in his body. Man's reliance on the mechanical time of the outer world causes failure and misunderstanding of the nature of life.

The poem consists of a sequence of eight participles, namely: 'walking', 'coming', 'driving', 'waiting', 'beating', 'cradling', 'journeying' and 'riding'. Larkin makes an extensive use of participles in his poetry, as will be indicated throughout this study. In this poem, the progressive tense is crucial in creating the general meaning. The events generated by these participles are not instantaneous. The durative situations include the present moment in its time-span, stretching for an unlimited period into the past and into the future.⁶ Thus, it evokes a harassing sense of time which rightly corresponds with the men's feelings of nervousness and boredom as 'One man walking a deserted platform; / One man restlessly waiting a train'.

Moreover, the images of train, wind, starset and cockrow are acceptable as symbols of time heading forward without heed to man. The rhyming of 'wild' with 'child' successively in the fifth and last lines of the first stanza juxtaposes the fragility of man and the wildness of cruel reality.

Larkin's poetry shows a constant concern with the effect of time on man. This theme has been established in The North Ship--'a theme to which Larkin insistently returns throughout his work.'⁷ He views time as a destructive and an annihilating power, and man as its victim:

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

The imagery is certainly concrete. It shows the young poet dealing with the effect of time rather than with time as an abstract idea.

In this sense, man is caught in the meshes and tragedy of everyday life and savagely brutalized by the passage of ruthless time in an uncompromising existence. Hence, man is deprived of the will to choose or to get what he desires. He is tormented by his awareness of the transience and futility of life itself and, to use John Press's words, 'the random quality inherent in human existence'.⁸

This awareness, however, underlies the tone of sadness which is apparent in this book and the later books as well. It is even depicted gloomily in 'Nursery Tale':

So every journey that I make
 Leads me, as in the story he was led,
 To some new ambush, to some fresh mistake:
 So every journey I begin foretells
 A weariness of daybreak, spread
 With carrion kisses, carrion farewells.

Comparing himself with the knight does not save the poet from self-pity; the 'new ambush'. The vocabulary--'horseman', 'hoofbeats', 'candlelit' and 'unpolished pewter dish'--is perfectly suited to its meaning; the menacing force in life, right from the beginning, is time. This intensifies the feeling of the dreariness of harsh reality and man's hopelessness in life. This, in turn, gives way to the surge of emotions evoked by the phrases 'new ambush' and 'fresh mistake' which spreads as does the 'weariness of the daybreak / With carrion kisses, carrion farewells.'

Such an ability to foretell these new ambushes and fresh failures gives evidence of Larkin's early stoicism as he struggles to survive in a dull and solitary existence and to achieve accomplishment and consistency in his work. 'Larkin's problem, then, has been to write in the grim countenance of these views, with their pride in naked endurance, their fierce modesty.'⁹ So in poem XX, when he sees a young girl playing joyfully in the snow, he chooses to identify himself instead with two ragged men who are 'Clearing the drifts with shovels and a spade / Now they express / All actions done in patient hopelessness, / All that ignores the silences of death'. He must suffer in order to cultivate his work:

Damn all explanatory rhymes!
 To be that girl!--but that's impossible;
 For me the task's to learn the many times
 When I must stoop, and throw a shovelful:
 I must repeat until I live the fact
 That everything's remade
 With shovel and spade;
 That each dull day and each despairing act

Builds up the crags from which the spirit leaps . . .

This poem seems closer in its technique and stanzaic form to Yeats's 'Sailing to Byzantium'.¹⁰ Undoubtedly, it has a noticeable verbal energy derived from Larkin's belief in the validity of ordinary life. Here, there are no rhetorical statements of that sort we encounter in some poems of this book or in Yeats's poem in question. Nevertheless, Yeats's 'scarecrow' imagery:

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
 A tattered coat upon a stick . . .

has been borrowed by Larkin:

Never in seventy years be more a man
 Than now--a sack of meal upon two sticks. . .

The early Larkin seems to share his mentor's view that life is a considerably hard journey through time. Time passing and the hollow quality of the present are vividly depicted in Larkin's 'train poems'. The theme of journey and that of death are woven rather haphazardly into this youthful work, but they represent a combination to which Larkin is to return rather frequently later with increased success. The significance of the train imagery in Larkin's poetry is to be investigated fully in the third chapter of this study. Larkin uses

it to suggest a momentary and contingent present by identifying man with whatever is fragile in nature. This can clearly be observed in 'Like the train's beat'--a poem which compares a 'Polish airgirl' to the quality of swiftness usually associated with the train's beat, swinging and narrowing sun, light, colour and sounds grasped from the window of a running train. It reveals the poet's distinctive approach to the problem of time. It is a vivid depiction of the illusory quality of things in nature:

Like the train's beat
 Swift language flutters the lips
 Of the Polish airgirl in the corner seat.
 The swinging and narrowing sun
 Lights her eyelashes, shapes
 Her sharp vivacity of bone.
 Hair, wild and controlled, runs back:
 And gestures like these English oaks
 Flash past the windows of her foreign talk. . .

The verse is lucid without being commonplace:¹¹ the description of the Polish airgirl in the poet's compartment is so accurate that it creates a vision of the girl which is indistinguishable from that of a mirage, illustrating the transient value of existence and the passage of time, which is compared to the movement of the train.

The above-mentioned stanza is full of a 'flight' vocabulary. The words indicate the passing of things and the elusiveness of objects and attempt to match the bird flying. The girl's hair 'runs' and her language is 'swift' and 'flutters' her lips. The word 'flutter' suggests the bird's flight, for it describes it moving wings hurriedly and irregularly without flying. The phrase

'runs back' recalls the movement of the train; 'runs on', which, like the movement of time, is uncontrollable. Again, 'flash' in the ninth line suggests the transitory appearance of things in life. This use of language allows for the illusion of human life.

The innocent beauty and the bird-like image ascribed to the girl in the first stanza are carried to a tragic confrontation in the second as they are set against the harshness and meaninglessness of life:

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.

The repetition of the train imagery re-enhances the idea of the transitory nature of life and carries it to a dramatic climax as the reader witnesses the destructive effect of time. Man is entrapped by his time and is unable to achieve his aspirations which are pressed 'As whorling notes . . . / In a bird's throat'.

Syntactically speaking, the use of the present tense throughout the poem sketches temporarily an image of beauty in passing time, being set against wild reality, which proves sterile: '. . . a voice / Watering a stony place.' The realization of this fact is what is behind the surface of everyday life, as A.K. Weatherhead indicates, noting that in his study of the Polish airgirl in his

compartment, 'Larkin is focussed on things beyond what he can actually see.'¹²

What is immediately noticeable is Larkin's obsession with time as shown by the clock. Although it is symbolic of his growing concern with the passage of time, it does not, however, serve him to formulate any philosophical concept about it. He is just a bored observer waiting '. . . for the morning and birds':

The bottle is drunk out by one;
At two, the book is shut;
At three, the lovers lie apart,
Love and its commerce done;
And now the luminous watch-hands
Show after four o'clock,
Time of night when straying winds
Trouble the dark. . .

The portrait evoked in this poem is that of a man suffering from insomnia and performing tedious night rituals: he stops his studying at two as he drains his mug and three o'clock sees the end of the love affairs. The device of indicating time as shown by the clock used in this poem recalls T.S. Eliot's poem 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night'¹³ in which he uses the same technique:

Twelve o'clock.
Along the reaches of the street
Held in a lunar synthesis . . .

Half-past one,
The street-lamp sputtered . . .

Half-past two,
The street-lamp said . . .

Half-past three,
The lamp sputtered
The lamp muttered . . .

Here, the sleeper also longs for a sleep,

Four o'clock,
The bed is open; the tooth-brush hangs on the wall
Put your shoes at the door, sleep, prepare for life.

in the way that the speaker in Larkin's poem quite differently does. Here, the speaker is fully conscious of his time problem in that he is engaged in thoughts about the details of night and is capable of hearing the speaking voice of nature: 'Every street-lamp that I pass / Beats like a fatalistic drum, / The street-lamp said, "Regard that woman / The memory throws up high and dry / A crowd of twisted thing . . ."' So he uses his time: 'I have seen eyes in the street / Trying to peer through the lighted shutters', unlike the speaker in Larkin's poem whose failure to grope a way along his own situation makes him 'sick for want of sleep' as though he has been tormented by a nightmare and left helpless, hardly believing in the eternal flow of time:

And I am sick for want of sleep;
So sick, that I can half-believe
The soundless river pouring from the cave
Is neither strong, nor deep;
Only an image fancied in conceit. . .

The word 'sick' is important here as it is entrusted with a large task: 'Whatever may lie back of the word in the mind of the writer, we can at least determine the success of the suggestion in arousing an image in the mind of the reader.'¹⁴ The image, the feeling of being sick evokes, is the result of changes in both nature and the

feeling of the observer. It prophesies that something will happen; but that something lies beyond the body of the poem because feeling sick with life necessitates a substitute, a new stance, perhaps a sort of philosophy which this poem is lacking. However, although only a half-guessed idea by the alienated mind of the speaker, but fully participated in by the unconscious, it has hinted at the essential cleavage between life and man.

Poem XI offers the poet a dramatic stance for indicating clearly the continuous motion of time through stars imagery which brings with it a rich background:

And in their blazing solitude
The stars sang in their sockets through the night:
'Blow bright, blow bright
The coal of this unquicken'd world'.

In fact, it is man who is earth-bound, i.e. time bound in the endless circling of the earth. The stars in their blazing solitude, as fixed points of light, furnish the poem with a time imagery by prompting a comparison between a moving object--the earth where wind blows the 'black poplars'--and the stars 'in their sockets'.

The drama of the last stanza, with its twofold contrast and circular rather than linear poetic structure, is enacted briefly as the poet glances at the sky to measure its creative potential. Lost in contemplating 'The stars sang in their sockets', he makes the false effort to lose himself in the world of the divine: 'And in their blazing solitude', but his earthly time limitations immediately assert themselves and render this attempt sterile.

So he has been drawn back to earth and 'this unquickened world'.
It is an unquickened world because held in its captivity, he
feels the slow passage of time.

The term 'through the night', in the second line of the final
verse, is just a pleonasm because it is 'semantically redundant in
that it merely repeats the meaning contained in what precedes it'.¹⁵
The fact that stars appear at night is unquestionable and to think
otherwise is groundless. Apparently, metre and rhyme dictate this
use yet it is unconvincing because poetry should suggest rather than
inform, as readers, to borrow Dr Johnson's terms, 'more frequently
require to be reminded than informed.'¹⁶ The repetition of the
phrase 'Blow bright' can be seen as a hopeless appeal by the poet
to unearthly objects (stars) to give meaning to his life, but it is
a cry that goes unheard because:

There were no mouths
To drink of the wind . . .

Here, there is something of Yeats. Larkin's metaphor is reminiscent
of that of Yeats in 'Among School Children':¹⁷

Did Quattrocento finger fashion it
Hollow of cheek as though it drank the wind
And took a mess of shadows for its meat?

Seen from his time imprisonment, the elements of time past and
future seem accumulating into the present moment. In poem XXVIII,
the poet draws the conclusion that 'I take you now and for always, /
For always is always now.' In such stagnation of life, time

terminates and things lose their actual existence:

Is it for now or for always,
The world hangs on a stalk?
Is it a trick or a trysting-place,
The woods we have found to walk?

Is it a mirage or miracle,
Your lips that lift at mine:
And the suns like a juggler's juggling-balls,
Are they a sham or a sign?

Here, the questions need no answers.¹⁸ They show the poet's uncertainty of life. In this situation, all around him are tricks which spoil even the moments of the lovers' meeting: 'Is it a trick or a trysting-place, / The woods we have found to walk?'

Larkin's reference for the conception of life as illusory gives way to a view of it as being deceptive and unreal; a dream but a bad one and a dim hovering. In the view of such circumstances, fugitive moments of love are fatally threatened as they are uncertain and temporal. The prevailing dreamy world (a world which is quite foreign to the later Larkin) has intruded into his everyday world so that the wood is a trick and his beloved's lips are a mirage and the sun is like a juggler's juggling-ball.

The sun gives his outlook of time a new dimension. In his introduction to this book, Larkin says: 'In early 1946, I had some digs in which the bedroom faced east, so that the sun woke me inconveniently early. I used to read'.¹⁹ It is as if the sun awakes him to the true nature of existence; a world which is a mere 'trick'. The moment when one awakes is the time when all senses start

activity--it is the moment of discovery which Franz Kafka describes when he writes: 'It requires great presence of mind to find everything in the room in exactly the same place that one left it the evening before'.²⁰ Thus, the sun introduces him to an existential problem; his time problem which evokes in him 'a sense of rather maudlin melancholy', as David Timms puts it, 'rather than to express his love, or its failure or to understand it'.²¹

Furthermore, this poem, XXVIII, shows the poet dealing with the sun within the context of time relying on his personal observations rendered on a plane of simile: 'And the suns like a juggler's juggling-balls', that has become hackneyed and recalls one of Emily Dickinson's poems on the sun which I quote in full:

Blazing in Gold and quenching in Purple
Leaping like Leopards to the sky
Then at the feet of the old Horizon
Laying its spotted face to die
Stooping as low as the Otter's window
Touching the Roof and tinting the Barn
Kissing its Bonnet to the Meadow,²²
And the Juggler of Day is gone.

In 'Winter', the sun is described as an unattainable object by the time-trapped man, as it is shown in its 'Endless and cloudless pride':

Then the whole heath whistles
In the leaping wind,
And shrivelled men stand
Crowding like thistles
To one fruitless place;
Yet still the miracles
Exhume in each face
Strong silken seed,
That to the static
Gold winter sun throws back
Endless and cloudless pride.

The jewel imagery, 'Gold winter sun', is reminiscent of the magnificence of the east as well as creating an aura of oriental richness.

The skill with which Larkin uses language deserves a special acknowledgement. His feeling for words is intense and sensitive. It exhibits the poet's awareness of the potentiality of words in registering one's individual experience. This is what the poet alone is endowed with, as F.R. Leavis argues: 'He [the poet] is unusually sensitive, unusually aware, more sincere and more himself than the ordinary man can be.'²³

The word 'static' in the final stanza is a good example of how language works. It directs the reader's attention to the grandeur of the sun as it exists in the eternal world, through a paradoxically sharp contrast with the 'leaping wind' and ever fleeing time and the changing life of the 'shrivelled men stand / Crowding like thistles / To one fruitless place.'

The first verse asserts the fact of time passing; 'a wind blows' as the river flows. Swans²⁴ announce the advent of winter as do clouds the coming of rain:

In the field, two horses,
Two swans on the river,
While a wind blows over
A waste of thistles
Crowded like men;
And now again
My thoughts are children
With uneasy faces
That awake and rise
Beneath running skies
From buried places. . .

As winter visitors to Britain, the swans' stay is limited in that they migrate at the end of winter. Their departure indicates the end of the duration of winter. In this sense, winter is demarcated and short-termed. Here, we are reminded of the short stay of summer in Shakespeare's sonnet XVIII:²⁵

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date. . .

Once more, time-cycle and renewal of life are worked out through winter imagery. Despite the transience of the seasonal renewal, it is eternal because of its yearly recurrence. Yet, it is of no use to man who struggles to escape the ravages of time in vain. Indeed, like a waste of thistles over which wind blows, he remains on the bank of the river of life watching it flowing: 'In the field, two horses, / Two swans on the river, / While a wind blows over / A waste of thistles / Crowded like men'. This feeling of time passing is evoked by the breathless, tumultuous music of the whole poem.

It is worth saying that the first five lines of the final stanza can be seen more or less as a rhetorical repetition of lines two, three and four of the first verse; a tautology which adds nothing new to what has already been said: 'the whole heath whistles' / 'While a wind blows over' it, and 'A waste of thistles', like 'shrivelled men' are both crowding in a 'fruitless place'.

At the heart of Larkin's poems is a grief of which he tells us in the harrowing poem VII:

Here, where no love is,
 All that was hopeless
 And kept me from sleeping . . .

Here, one feels the emotions are bitter but genuine. The poet is apparently convinced that reality must be in the conflict with the vision of the endlessness of time. The indifference of the natural beauty to man emphasises his disappointment with life. This gives evidence of the poet's persistent search of a personal voice. There is no sentimentality of these lines:

We must not meet again.
 Hearing this last word,
 There was no lambing-night,
 No gale-driven bird
 Nor frost-encircled root
 As cold as my heart.

However, such an abundance of emotions has been checked in poem XXIV:

There has been too much moonlight and self-pity:
 Let us have done with it . . .

There is regret. Always, there is regret.
 But it is better that our lives unloose,
 As two tall ships, wind-mastered, wet with light,
 Break from an estuary with their courses set,
 And waving part, and waving drop from sight.

Man is caught within the limitations of his existence: 'wind-mastered'. The image of two ships parting is to be substituted in 'Dockery and Son' in The Whitsun Weddings by the image of 'the ranged / Joining and parting lines reflect a strong / Unhindered moon'.

Poetry is a coming to terms. This involves coming to terms with an individual voice. And it is in poem XXXII, the central statement

in this book, that Larkin comes to his own. He has added this poem as a 'coda' to the book 'which, though not noticeably better than the rest, shows the Celtic fever abated and the patient sleeping soundly.'²⁶ It is a 'coda':

. . . in the sense that it shows Larkin speaking in his authentic tone, abandoning those attitudes towards poetry and what is suitable for inclusion in it that had marred the earlier work.²⁷

This poem is correctly considered by Larkin's critics and reviewers as a transition point in his poetic development for it establishes what becomes the distinct Larkinesque mannerisms:

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

These lines contain concrete images. There are no dreams to take the poet out of time into the world of spirits. They exhibit an assured movement of verse, a mastery of the eight-line stanza, a consistent picture of everyday reality, urban yet simple: 'coaches', 'drainpipes', 'fire-escape' and 'electric light', a remarkable handling of concrete details of the kind we will see in subsequent volumes, and a sober awareness of time; 'Featureless morning, featureless night'. Love is viewed within the context of real time and real place. There is a genuine sentiment rather than romance:

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, and part saint?

The language is suggestive, particularly in the association of the poet's promises with rivers that 'meet and lock and race'. The prevailing tone of melancholy in this poem, and elsewhere, does not promise much hope of finding a place for man to 'live / Part invalid, part baby, and part saint?'

Certainly, Larkin was quite right when he approved of the re-publication of The North Ship, which he, at first, rejected out of hand:

At first Philip was hesitant: 'They [the poems] are such complete rubbish, for the most part, that I am just twice as unwilling to have two editions in print as I am to have one'.²⁸

There is a good deal of moralizing in the poems of this book as has been shown earlier--namely the formation of Larkin's attitude towards the conflict between man and life. They depict 'a world eaten through at the root by time'.²⁹ Above all, they establish Larkin's major themes--time, frustrated love, unfulfilled desires and death--to which he is to return frequently in his later books.

Notes

¹ Philip Larkin, The North Ship (London, 1979), p. 8. David Timms points out that Larkin's 'Conscript' is based on the poems from Auden's In Time of War: 'Its language has the rather cultivated toughness, and even a hint of the psychological jargon of Auden's early work.' (Philip Larkin, Edinburgh, 1973, p. 23.)

² The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats, eds Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (New York, 1957), p. 203.

³ Philip Gardner, 'The Wintry Drum: the Poetry of Philip Larkin', Dalhousie Review, 48 (Spring 1968), p. 89.

⁴ See 1, above, p. 28.

⁵ James Reeves, Understanding Poetry (London, 1978), p. 45.

⁶ For more details, see Geoffrey N. Leech, Meaning and the English Verb (London, 1980), pp. 14-16.

⁷ See 1, above, p. 32.

⁸ John Press, A Map of Modern English Verse (London, 1969), pp. 254-5.

⁹ Calvin Bedient, Eight Contemporary Poets (London, 1974), p. 72.

¹⁰ See 2, above, p. 407.

¹¹ David Timms argues that Dylan Thomas's influence on Larkin can be seen in the latter's use of the:

. . . trick of fusing two ideas together into a metaphor that surprises because it is completely inappropriate . . . The oaks flash past the windows, certainly; but there is no sense, literal or metaphorical, in which her talk has 'windows'. Indeed, if her talk is 'foreign', it is presumably quite opaque to the listening poet. (See 1, above.)

However, the effectiveness of the metaphorical term depends on its power 'to bring associations and suggestions with it'. (Winifred Nowotny, The Language Poets Use, London, 1975, p. 64):

Hair, wild and controlled, runs back:
And gestures like these the English oaks
Flash past the windows of her foreign talk. . .

I take this metaphor to mean that the girl might quote some English words (the poet might imagine this too) in the course of her foreign talk. As the oaks flash past the windows as the train moves, so do English words throughout her conversation with her companion. Here, the metaphor describes the unusual and the abstract concretely. Thus, Larkin achieves what David Lodge calls 'the paradoxical feat of expressing in words something that is beyond words.' (The Modes of Modern Writing, London, 1977, p. 220.)

¹² A. Kingsley Weatherhead, 'Philip Larkin of England', ELH, 38 (December 1971), p. 618.

¹³ T.S. Eliot, Collected Poems 1909-1962 (London, 1974), p. 26.

¹⁴ June E. Downey, Creative Imagination (London, 1929), p. 80.

¹⁵ Geoffrey N. Leech, A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry (London, 1980), p. 132.

¹⁶ Quoted by I.A. Richards, The Philosophy of Rhetoric (New York, 1979), p. 27.

¹⁷ See 2, above, p. 444.

¹⁸ It is interesting to notice that the image of the world as a flower that 'hangs on a stalk' is to be ascribed to the sun in 'Solar' in High Windows; the sun is like a 'stalkless flower':

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

Scientifically, both images are absolutely correct: the 'stalk' on which the earth 'hangs' refers to the gravity of the sun which keeps it in a fixed orbit. On the other hand, the sun is 'stalkless' in that it is the centre of gravity round which all planets revolve.

¹⁹ See 1, above, p. 10.

²⁰ Franz Kafka, The Trial (Penguin Books, 1953), p. 319.

²¹ See 1, above, p. 30.

²² The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (London, 1970), p. 104. The reference here is to the medieval juggler who tosses balls and keeps them in continuous motion, like the sun which tosses and keeps all planets in perpetual orbits. It is worth remarking that such references to legends, denounced by Larkin, are later to be pointed out in the following chapters of this study.

²³ F.R. Leavis, New Bearings in English Poetry (London, 1979), p. 13.

²⁴ Larkin's concern with winter, swans, gold, gives a further evidence of Yeats's influence on The North Ship. The appearances of these words are quite frequent in Larkin's first book and Yeats's poetry. Larkin seems not only to be 'infatuated' with Yeats's music but to borrow his phrasing; in 'The Man Who Dreamed of Faeryland', Yeats marvels:

Why should those lovers miss
Dream, until God burn Nature with a kiss?

(See 2, above, p. 128.)

And in 'The Dancer' Larkin wonders:

. . . would the moon go raving,
The moon go swerving
Down at the earth for a catastrophic kiss.

²⁵ Shakespeare: Complete Works, ed. W.J. Craig (London, 1974) p. 1108.

²⁶ See 1, above, p. 10.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 34.

²⁸ Charles Monteith, 'Publishing Larkin', Larkin at Sixty, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London, 1982), p. 43.

²⁹ See 9, above, p. 73.

Chapter Two

THE LESS DECEIVED

Praising Hardy's poems, Larkin said:

I was struck by their tunefulness and their feeling, and the sense that here was somebody writing about things I was beginning to feel myself. I don't think Hardy, as a poet, is a poet for young people. I know it sounds ridiculous to say I wasn't young at twenty-five or twenty-six, but at least I was beginning to find out what life was about, and that's precisely what I found in Hardy. In other words, I'm saying that what I like about him primarily is his temperament and the way he sees life.¹

The key words here are 'feeling' and 'temperament'. Strong feelings and gloomy temperament are characteristic of this book. Larkin writes only about what he deeply feels. His poetic strategy ascribes a major role to the personal experience of everyday life. This is the characteristically visionary undertaking: to look hard at the world of everyday reality until its surface of accustomed appearances dissolves revealing its truth. To speak of real time and real place is, inevitably, to move to the issue of the truth about human life. In an interview with Ian Hamilton, Larkin says: 'I suppose I always try to write the truth'.² The truth which he writes is that life is suffering and ageing and then death. 'At Grass' makes the point forcefully:

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. . .

These lines are dense in meaning and tell precisely what the poem is all about. Their effect depends upon the landscape they evoke which is presented to the reader as an actual place. They offer an image composed of two retired race-horses set against a twofold background; partly existing and partly inferred. The existent one is the place where the horses spend their last years: 'the unmolested meadows and the stable'. The horses' past, suggested in the first verse and introduced by the remaining stanzas, forms the second.

The first stanza combines the past and the present within its texture by rich and suggestive language. The passage of time is depicted by the present condition of the horses: they are so changed by time and so inactive that 'The eye can hardly pick them out'. They incarnate a misty truth of their past as they stand as a reminder of that past.

More remarkable is the establishment of the poet's awareness of time by the phrase 'moves about' through speculation and juxtaposition of the present with the past which allow the poem to yield itself gracefully to a gloomy view of human destiny. Ironically, one of the horses 'crops grass, and moves about', but actually it is fixed to that self point both in time and space. In its movement, the horse only completes the circle of the present moments. The word 'anonymous'

is also important: the horses are 'anonymous' because they are no longer on the race-course. It refers to their impoverished present because they are doomed to anonymity for their identity matters no more as contrasted with the richness of their past.

The clarity of evocation and the purity of language are what sustain the flow of the verse and make the transition smooth and palatable from a static present to a far more vigorous past which the second and third stanzas record:

Yet fifteen years ago, perhaps
 Two dozen distances sufficed
 To fable them: faint afternoons
 Of Cups and Stakes and Handicaps,
 Whereby their names were artified
 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. . .

The tone is sad. It has been evoked by simple words, such as 'faint' which suggests the remoteness of the horses' past, now only recalled vaguely. The syntactical pattern and the metrical management enact the meaning:

The lines describe the scene, but the change in metre makes us hear and see it. Where the other stanzas are written in iambic pentameters, reversals of feet in this third stanza turn the first halves of the first three lines into rocking choriambics, enacting the horses' gallop.³

Now, ' . . . they / Have slipped their names . . . / Only the groom,
and the groom's boy, / With bridles in the evening come'. The poem
stresses the idea that the horses are lapsing into oblivion and then
death; a quality which appeals to anyone and suggests human fate:

The placing of the simple word 'come' at the very
end of the poem suggests the inevitability of the
horses' fate. As they are taken back to the stables,
it is as if, as with all men, they are submitting to
death.⁴

Larkin's poetry is not nostalgic as that of Hardy. The past is
recalled unregretfully only as a reminder of time passing and its
effect on man. It is to intensify the pathos of man's life in the
emptiness of 'Now'. 'Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album'
exhibits such an awareness achieved by the poet's grasp of the
relations inherent in what he is about to impart:

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

The verse unfolds exquisitely: the use of nine-to-twelve-syllable
lines slows the movement, and so rightly introduces the poet's
reflections on the girl's pictures. The sound [t] in 'At last' sus-
pended in the sound [d] in 'yielded' and the repetition of the gliding
consonant [j] in 'you yield' followed by the vowel [i:] lengthened by
[d], which comes after it, render the flow of verse unbroken, to match
the fading of man's resistance as time goes by. Here, time indeed

seems to be 'passing slowly, luxuriously, like thick cream pouring from a silver jug'.⁵

The change wrought by time is evoked by the poet's bewilderment upon seeing the photographs: 'Once open, sent me distracted'. The knowledge of time is gained by a sharp contrast between youth and maturity--past and present. The rhyme scheme is at work here: 'rich' takes us back not only to 'which' with which it rhymes, but to the implications embodied by the whole line as 'which' itself feeds back into it: the girl's past is sweet and with nutritious images though it contains glossy and black pages. By an associative connection, the rhyming of 'pages' with 'ages' and 'images' gives a sense of forever changing time. Life is an 'album' and days are its pages--some of which are dull and some of which are bright. Thus, rhyme supports syntax in that, to borrow Winifred Nowotny's terms, 'it can take us back not only to one word with which it rhymes but to the whole line'.⁶

The present actuality is illuminated by past reality. Like the horses' past: 'almanacked, their names live . . .', the girl's past, with its dull and shiny aspects, is a treasure now locked in. It is kept untouched yet unrealised: 'In short, a past that no one now can share':

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. . .

Mortality is inherent in all our actions and these photographs are a witness to a life rooted deep in time:

The poem becomes a serious reflection on the past's effect on our present. It is affecting because it is simply past: he senses the mortality implicit in all our actions and memories of them. Seen at one level, 'Life is slow dying', Larkin says in one poem, and these photographs are a perpetual reminder that time is constantly passing.⁷

The melancholy feeling here is not the result of the fading away of the past which 'is forlorn because excluded from us'⁸ because it is already invalid: 'A valley cropped by fat neglected chances / That we insensately forbore to fleece', but because the past makes us relinquish our hold of the present as being unstable and empty as 'Triple Time' states:

This empty street, this sky to blandness scoured,
This air, a little indistinct with autumn
Like a reflection, constitute the present . . .

The emptiness and dreariness of the present are evoked by the 'empty street' and indistinct air. The tone of voice is of a settled, rather, explicit statement of the reality of pain and suffering in life.

In 'Dry-Point', life is suffering and our never-fulfilled desires are like a bubble which continuously forms and bursts to expose a barren reality:

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. . .

Thus, life is a constant struggle and non-stoppable search for meaningfulness to a meaningless existence. This is an acknowledgment that desires (whether fulfilled or not) are mere deceptions and 'suffering is exact'. Larkin's unhappiness originates largely in his acute sense of pity. He is deeply sensitive to pain suffered by others as his 'Deceptions' shows:

Even so distant, I can taste the grief,
 Bitter and sharp with stalks, he made you gulp.
 The sun's occasional print, the brisk brief
 Worry of wheels along the street outside
 Where bridal London bows the other way,
 And light, unanswerable and tall and wide,
 Forbids the scar to heal, and drives
 Shame out of hiding. All the unhurried day
 Your mind lay open like a drawer of knives. . .

These lines are evocative. The second line makes the reader taste the bitterness of the girl's sorrow as 'the cliché of the first line is converted into a vivid allusion to drugs in the second'.⁹ This is invoked not only by the epithets 'bitter' and 'sharp', but more, by the words 'stalks' and 'gulp'. The girl's grief owes its depth and persistence to 'stalks': as her grief is the poisonous flower of the act of raping, then 'stalks' would support innumerable flowers of that kind.

This has been reinforced by a skilful manipulation of sound-structure. The sound [g] in 'grief' and 'gulp' gives a new dimension to the girl's condition: in producing this sound, the breath is trapped and then released to rush on the sound plane of the vowel [i:] and the voiceless sound [f] so the quality of accumulated sorrow is

conveyed through a trap-and-release device. The same can be said about 'gulp' except that it begins and ends with stop sounds which create a sense of one choked with grief that he is unable to cry. The pathos of the girl's dilemma is heightened by the comparison between her pitying condition and the unsympathetic nineteenth-century London: 'bridal London', and then, between the severity of the 'damage' inflicted on her and the drawer of knives: 'Your mind lay open like a drawer of knives'. This image is concrete and rough enough to convey the harshness to which the girl has been subjected.

The strength of Larkin's poetry lies in his early mastery of language which has been recognised by his contemporaries. Commenting on a similar point made by Charles Monteith on The Less Deceived, T.S. Eliot wrote: 'Yes--he often makes words do what he wants'.¹⁰ Larkin gets us involved in this experience which is transmitted through time by using suggestive language and active imagination and this is exactly what he 'wants'. The message the poem conveys is emphatic, straightforward and paradoxical:

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.

The rapist's sexual fulfilment is only an illusion. It turns into a sexual disappointment as he is more deceived than his victim. This is what Larkin calls the 'big finish' of this poem. One aspect of

Larkin's poems is that some of them start with an event (here, the rape of the girl) which develops into a general statement:

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. Other people, I suppose, will just take a flying start several yards off the ground, and hope the reader will ultimately catch up with them.¹¹

Here, the general statement is more a value placed on suffering than a consoling statement. Thus, Larkin uses a past experience to explain a present condition: 'suffering is exact'. He believes that suffering develops man's awareness of life. This is what he has pointed out in Hardy who 'associated sensitivity to suffering and awareness of the causes of pain with superior spiritual character'.¹²

The same point has been suggested in 'Wires'; the lambs achieve maturity through a painful experience:

Beyond the wires

Leads them to blunder up against the wires
Whose muscle-shedding violence gives no quarter.
Young steers become old cattle from that day,
Electric limits to their widest senses.

The language, plain and simple, is suited to the subject of the poem.

This poem as David Timms points out:

. . . enacts the limitations: it is in two stanzas of four lines each. There is no rhyme within each stanza, but the rhyme scheme of the second stanza is a mirror image of that of the first, so that the last line of

the poem rhymes with the first, the next last with the second, and so on, abcd dcba. Like the electric fence, the rhymes gradually close round until the circle is complete.¹³

However, talking about limitations in life involves our wishes and desires. 'The recognized rewards and goals in life are deceptions',¹⁴ because, as Larkin says in one poem: 'our element is time'--a very frustrating element. So, when 'Young steers' (and man too) 'are always scenting purer water', they blunder up against the electric fences. This is far more positive than a merely melancholy element in Larkin's poetry:

What seems to have misled Larkin's critics into regarding him as uniformly depressed is the fact that he clearly has no faith in inherited and reliable absolutes. But in so far as this means that individuals must discover and develop their own internal resources, his poems have an unmistakably affirmative aspect.¹⁵

Preoccupied with the destructive passage of time, Larkin is convinced that time is of no significance to the fulfilment of what it promises: 'This is the future furthest childhood saw / An air lambent with adult enterprise'--a future which depends upon contingencies. It is continuously turning into the present which turns into the past. In 'Next, Please', the future is a long-awaited for armada of promises which is 'No sooner present than it turns to past' leaving 'us holding wretched stalks / Of disappointment':

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!

In this often admired poem, the failure of time to fulfil its promises has been evoked by a set of poetic devices working in collaboration. One of them is the use of colloquial title which creates an experience--the experience of what man thinks of what is to come. It is invested with power capable of conveying what the poet wants to convey because, to borrow William E. Baker's words:

That many modern poets employ colloquial word order and concrete noun fragments suggests that they are at various times trying to imitate the assimilation of immediate sense data, the spontaneous formation of thoughts to be uttered, and the coalescing forces underlying consciousness.¹⁶

'Next, Please' gives a sense of waiting that finds its correspondence in the expectancy of something approaching, which is what the poem is all about. Actually, there are two parallel lines of things at work in this poem, namely the notion of time passing as we are waiting for the future and the armada of promises in the sea approaching which is, as Anthony Thwaite describes, 'concretely drawn, a literal fleet appearing and then disappearing, on the horizon.'¹⁷ These two lines are brought out in the poem by a balanced handling of the media of metre and rhyme. By employing a looser form of rhymed couplets throughout the poem, a sense of continuity of discourse has been maintained of that kind which the transmutation of this experience demands. The sense of running on

from line to line and from stanza to stanza regardless of rhyme matches the two above-mentioned parallel lines of things in motion and 'makes the statements appear truism we must accept',¹⁸ as C.B. Cox puts it. Roger Bowen calls this:

. . . an example of what becomes one of Larkin's particular skills, the run-on not only from one stanza to the next but from one level of experience to another.¹⁹

Moreover, the long lines in the poem create a feeling analogous to that which is associated with waiting for the long-desired ships of rewards whereas the short line which concludes each stanza serves as an outlet for the conflicting desires within ourselves during the waiting process. They are the now and then eruption of these suppressed expectations under the pressure of our impatience with the future which is 'Refusing to make haste!', as well as our disappointment with it.

Without flaws, Larkin creates a continuous vein which runs throughout the stanzas to substantiate the claims this poem makes concerning the experience of time it communicates and its last stanza sums up:

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.

Our expectancy, developed and sustained throughout the poem, dies out in the final stanza. These lines confirm the fact of the inevitable. The view that nothing is promising in life and the only certainty is death constitutes Larkin's general attitude towards life which has been established in his early years of age:

What Larkin seems to be bent upon remarking in his poems, however obliquely but over and over again, is the failure of time to bring forth the expected results, its failure, sometimes, to keep promises then, very occasionally, its offering of a gratuitous spiritual beauty. Larkin is often the poet of middle age, by which time all the choices have been made and one can take stock of what curious ends they have led to . . . What we do expect does not materialize.²⁰

Larkin's concern with the problem of time forces him to look for alternatives rather than final solutions. Much of the strength of the poems of this book depends on the solidity and convincing nature of their arguments. Where 'Next, Please' is constructed round a descriptive meditation, 'Toads' is constructed round a meditative dialogue. The speaker seems to have been trapped in an argument which shows his complaint against 'toad work' as an obvious attempt 'at self-persuasion':²¹

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?

This complaint pinpoints a recurrent theme in Larkin; the gap between desire and reality; between dream and actual state of affairs:

A characteristic tension in his [Larkin's] verse is the conflict between a disappointed resignation in the face of what life is, and a continuing awareness of what it 'should' or 'might' or 'could' or 'ought to' have been.²²

However, the conflict of selves within the individual does not result in a clear-cut solution to his predicament. What the poem offers is only a semi-notion that working and not working are more or less the same:

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.

Perhaps, it is the 'immorality' of idleness: 'It was immoral not to work',²³ set against the routine of 'toad work' that makes it hard for him to choose either. This is an example of the poetry of compromise and reconciliation with time and life.

Larkin chooses to settle to what he already has rather than to run risks. 'Poetry of Departure' suggests that the recognition of our miseries in life does not necessarily guarantee a solution for them:

We all hate home
 And having to be there:
 I detest my room,
 Its specially-chosen junk,
 The good books, the good bed,
 And my life, in perfect order:
 So to hear it said

He walked out on the whole crowd
 Leaves me flushed and stirred,
 Like Then she undid her dress
 Or Take that you bastard;
 Surely I can, if he did?

The blend of colloquial language and argumentative discourse 'catches the momentary intensity of people's frustration with their routines'.²⁴ The uncertainty of life reduces man to impotence. As time goes by, choice becomes even harder and then impossible 'at that vague age that claims / The end of choice'. Here, the theme of time and time passing is not ostensible but real and being so:

. . . it is of all themes the one likely to force a writer's uneasy and disturbing contemplation-- necessarily uneasy and disturbing--of past, present and future; of a Present Time which will become the Past, of a Future which will become first Present and then Past.²⁵

'Places, Loved Ones' tells us that the lack of a favourite person and a 'proper ground' convinces one to settle for the second best. This self-persuasion, that is, to persuade oneself that 'You want no choice in where / To build, or whom to love', suggests that human destiny lies in the hands of a blind power which is indifferent to the sufferer. The 'ailment' is both in making a voluntary choice and when a choice is forced upon us as 'No Road' expresses. Neither brings

satisfaction or peace in a world in which 'time will be the stronger':

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

Never at any time is Larkin's poetry intoxicating or magical. His early awareness of time's 'eroding agents' and its failure to console man makes him accept bare reality as it is: to be an ordinary man living in an ordinary world. Hence, in 'Born Yesterday', 'ordinariness became something to pursue rather than evade':²⁶

May you be ordinary;
 Have, like other women,
 An average of talents:
 Not ugly, not good-looking,
 Nothing uncustomary
 To pull you off your balance,
 That, unworkable itself,
 Stops all the rest from working. . .

Ordinariness, in this sense, suggests the abandonment of the past as being invalid in favour of everyday world. In 'I Remember, I Remember', Larkin rejects his childhood in Coventry as being uneventful and even dull. He finds it difficult to remember: 'I've completely forgotten it':²⁷

'Was that', my friend smiled, 'where you "have your roots"?'
 No, only where my childhood was unspent,
 I wanted to retort, just where I started:

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' . . .

The language is plain and contemporary without being flat. One can see why Larkin says his childhood is unheroic. His birth-place has perhaps only one function: to remind him of his childhood which 'was unspent'. The rhyming of 'unspent' with 'invent' establishes firmly the idea of his childhood as being uneventful. The poem expresses the poet's feeling upon the experience of remembering the past rather than on the past itself. There is no sense of separation as Larkin shows a full commitment to real place and real time. The poet's obvious unwillingness to acknowledge the glamorous fantasies of the past as an escape from reality makes him a 'simple ordinary man in an unromantic modern world':²⁸

. . . he shakes free from his former self and at the same time denies popular Romantic and Lawrentian notions of childhood. The poem is an expression of personal and literary autonomy, even though it describes its speaker as a prisoner of disappointment.²⁹

The poem could be seen as a reaction against the sentimentality and unrestrained emotions in the work of the Romantic poets. It brings to mind Thomas Hood's poem of the same title:³⁰

I remember, I remember,
 The fir trees dark and high;
 I used to think their slender tops
 Were close against the sky:
 It was a childish ignorance,
 But now 'tis little joy
 To know I'm farther off from Heav'n
 Than when I was a boy.

These lines are nostalgic. The surge of emotions, evoked by the poet's concentration on the joys of his childhood, comes in the form of a lament over that past when he has been closer to Heaven than he is now. The pathos of Hood's self-attention results in self-pity: 'childish ignorance' and 'little joy'. Thus, the poem falls short of establishing the destructive power of time because of the poet's complete absorption in the elation of the child.

Childhood is an 'ignorant' escape that time allows and Larkin rejects it out of hand here. His resentment of sentimentality in poetry and his celebration of the earth-bound poet are shared by his Movement colleagues, as the second part of this study shows. Perhaps, Larkin had in mind Dylan Thomas's 'Fern Hill',³¹ when he wrote his poem. It shows that his poetry differs dramatically and in many ways from that of Thomas. As D.J. Enright's 'On the Death of a Child' is a 'revision' of Thomas's 'A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London' (see my chapter six), so Larkin's 'I Remember, I Remember' is a 'revision' of 'Fern Hill'. This is the first stanza:

Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs
 About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green,
 The night above the dingle starry,
 Time let me hail and climb
 Golden in the heydays of his eyes,

And honoured among wagons I was prince of the apple towns
 And once below a time I lordly had the trees and leaves
 Trail with daisies and barley
 Down the rivers of the windfall light. . .

Although this is a poem of nostalgia for childhood, it is a better poem altogether than Hood's, and in important respects, it is different from Larkin's. Unlike Hood's, Thomas's use of language is clever, suggestive and rhythmic: 'Now' establishes the sense of time directly --it tells of youth under apple boughs, the words 'was' and 'night' intensify it as youth and apples belong to day and to the past. 'The apple boughs', 'the lilting house', 'grass was green', 'dingle starry', 'heydays', 'apple towns', 'trees and leaves' and 'windfall light', charged with sentiment, evoke a sense of ease and peace usually associated with golden joys of childhood. They also contribute to the rhythmic pattern of the poem: the tumbling rhythm and its breathless felicities are created by the combination of long and short lines and strong and weak stresses.

While 'Fern Hill' displays Thomas's reliance on an army of concrete images and on rhythm to capture, in nostalgia, what can never otherwise be recovered, Larkin uses simple idiom and a conversational tone to check any nostalgic indulgence.³² Obsessed with nostalgia, Thomas gives the impression of a man pitying himself for growing older as the last two lines of his poem suggest:

Time held me green and dying
 Though I sang in my chains like the sea.

Here, Thomas achieves a reconciliation between life and death rather than between himself and life as does Larkin. Hence, 'Fern Hill' does not attain the mature reality of 'I Remember, I Remember'.

By rejecting his past, Larkin accepts maturity and its implications. His poem is not given up to self-pity. It displays a stoic acceptance of human tragic situation:

And against Thomas's rhetoric is set a level-toned scepticism--a scepticism which finally prevents the speaker from succumbing to the self-pitying error of seeing the 'nothing' of his childhood as entirely 'the place's fault': it is, he implies, his fault too.³³

'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'.

Most important is the religious overtones of 'Fern Hill': 'The sabbath rang slowly / lie the pebbles of the holy streams'. Thomas ascribes an 'Edenic' quality to childhood,

. . . glorifying the child, or speaker as a child-in-glory. This, of course, is characteristic of the child-spirit which sees nothing funny about itself--cannot place itself, but must believe solemnly in its own grave mien.³⁴

Thus, 'Fern Hill' is a romantically serious poem with a religious gesture and 'I Remember, I Remember' is a positively serious satire as Larkin himself points out:

I don't think that's a negative poem, I think it is a very funny poem. I can't read it without laughing or almost laughing . . . Really that poem started off as a satire on novels like Sons and Lovers--the kind of wonderful childhoods that people do seem to have. I was thinking how very peculiar it was that I myself never experienced these things, and I thought one could write a funny poem about it. So I did. It wasn't denying that other people have these experiences, though they did tend to sound rather clichés, the first fuck, the first poem, the first this, that and the other that turn up with such wearisome regularity.³⁵

An interesting aspect of Larkin's poetry is the use, for the first time in this book, of a mode of humour of which we will see a great deal in the next two books. It is introduced here by witty language. Apart from the disconcerting comedy of 'I Remember, I Remember', there is the disguised envy of the speaker of 'Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album': 'Not quite your class, I'd say, dear, on the whole.' Larkin's satirical treatment of serious subjects stems from his conviction that life is tragic yet it should be lived stoically. This is what he achieves in his poetry and what he likes in other writers' work:

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.³⁶

This pessimistic view of life is arrived at by Larkin's early awareness of a world moving towards extinction. Man and his beliefs are no exception: 'Here endeth', as 'Church Going' suggests:

Once I am sure there's nothing going on
 I step inside, letting the door thud shut.
 Another church: matting, seats, and stone,
 And little books; sprawling of flowers, cut
 For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff
 Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;
 And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,
 Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off
 My cycle-clips in awkward reverence . . .

Here, the effect of the passage of time is depicted in terms of the change not in the physical structure of the church but in what it stands for: '--marriage, and birth, / And death, and thoughts of these--'. It is the change in and may be the collapse of religious ideas: 'But superstition, like belief, must die . . . (the title also suggests this notion); '. . . musty, unignorable silence, / Brewed God knows how long', and also in the poet's attitude towards them evoked by his very language which suggests derision: 'awkward reverence', 'snigger', 'the place was not worth stopping for', 'rent-free to rain and sheep', 'dubious', 'crew' and 'some ruin-bibber, randy for antique'. In this sense, this poem is not concerned with religion as it does not deal with the concept 'that the affairs of this world are under divine surveillance', as Larkin puts it:

Of course the poem is about going to church--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; and my own feeling that when they are dispersed into the registry office and the crematorium chapel life will become thinner in consequence.³⁷

Truly, life becomes even thinner when we contemplate the idea of human life being 'dispersed' into nothingness. There is loss in Larkin's poems--loss at the decay of things: birth leads to old age and then death as it is subjected to the inevitable. The sheer pleasure promised by marriage is delusion. In 'Wedding-Wind', time and nature conspire to spoil the happiness of the bride on the very day of her wedding--'I was sad':

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?

This is 'a sympathetic projection into the bride's psychology'.³⁸

The clarity of language exhibits a power of evoking a sense of rurality and subtleties of an emotional relationship. The sense of softness and sensual connotations of 'Shall I be let to sleep / Now this perpetual morning shares my bed?' are evoked by the liquidity of the consonant [l]: 'The liquid [l] always describes a continuity, usually a lovely continuity, of sound, sight, movement or emotion.'³⁹

However, this feeling remains just a hope whose fulfilment is uncertain because hope is not the 'shall be' as Francis Berry argues:

Hope is not the 'will be' of the Indicative, but a 'may be' or a 'might be', sustained in faith until a target-date is reached, or protracted even beyond that, depending on the temper of him who hopes. If the hope is broken in time--elapse of time is needed for defeat, as for fulfilment of hope--then it becomes a 'might have been'. The Grammatical Mood for the spiritual condition of hope is therefore the Subjunctive.⁴⁰

The passage of time--night alternates with day--robs life of its continuity. Not only is the transience of things shown by the expiry of the past, but is also seen in the emptiness of the present and the uncertainty of the future. Things lose their identity when they are subjected to change wrought by the passage of time. This has been conveyed by the use of participles which create a sense of continuity in the poem syntactically. In this poem, they 'convey a sustained visual experience'⁴¹ better than a simple present tense or participles with the verb to be would do. Participles, like 'leaving me stupid', 'hearing rain', 'seeing my face', 'seeing nothing', 'the wind hunting', 'thrashing my apron' and 'a thread carrying beads', help to give a continuous value to a series of events experienced both at a particular time and in a particular place. These events were continuous only at that particular time (the wedding-day and the wedding-night). They are momentarily helping to ensure a link between the various ingredients of that experience throughout the poem. And the expiration of these events denotes the temporal quality of life.

The contrast to Lawrence's handling of the same theme in The Rainbow is striking. Unlike Larkin, Lawrence depicts a sentimental and romantic picture of Anna's wedding: while in 'Wedding-Wind',

'The wind blew all my wedding-day, / And my wedding-night was the night of the high wind', Anna's wedding-day is perfect: 'It was a beautiful sunny day for the wedding, a muddy earth but a bright sky'; and her wedding-night 'was flashing with stars'. There is nothing ostentatious about the couple's wedding in Larkin's poem: they have no wedding ceremony in church, no party where 'Everybody must drink', and no 'lamps lighted' as Anna and Brangwen have. The bride's night in 'Wedding-Wind' is constantly spoiled by the banging of a stable door that makes the bridegroom 'go and shut it, leaving me / Stupid in candlelight, hearing rain'. This is to be contrasted with Anna's wedding-night when 'The bells were ringing away against the windows'. Ironically, while in bed with husband, Anna is 'scared' by her father and relatives carolling them and 'The hymn rambled on outside, all the men singing their best, having forgotten everything else under the spell of the fiddles and the tune'.

Compared with the laziness of the couple in The Rainbow, the practicality of the couple in Larkin's poem--the bridegroom 'has gone to look at the floods' and the bride feeds the chickens--suggests that they are ordinary people living in 'a world of ritual and necessity, where human joy finds its appointed place amid the strife of nature's forces';⁴² a fallen world characterized by a fatal marriage to time. By comparison, Lawrence has detached his couple from the material world by placing them in a dreamy world: Anna spends the following day reposing and Brangwen is so intoxicated with joy that he 'had felt so secure, as though this house were the Ark in the flood, and all the

rest was drowned'. This is because they belong to a world that is out of reach of time:

As they lay close together, complete and beyond the touch of time or change, it was as if they were at the very centre of all the slow wheeling of space and the rapid agitation of life, deep inside them all, at the centre where there is utter radiance, and eternal being and the silence absorbed in praise: the steady core of all movements, the unawakened sleep of all awakefulness . . . for their moment they were at the heart of eternity, whilst time roared far off, for ever far off, towards the rim.⁴³

It is also worth noting that the dominant imagery in 'Wedding-Wind' is 'wind'. The wind, here as elsewhere, is blowing. The melancholy feeling evoked by the blowing of the wind is carried on the plane of sound effect. The abundance of the sound [s] in the poem echoes the sighing of the wind because both sounds are fricative. Added to this, the chiming of the alliteration of 'wind . . . wedding-day' and 'wedding-night . . . wind' gives the impression that the bride's happiness will blow over soon. Moreover, the sounds [u:] and [u], being rounded vowels, suggest that the circle of this gloomy mood is now completed as the wind blows all day and all night. Another factor is the monosyllabic words with which the poem is crowded:

This exceptional density of monosyllables goes with an exceptional density of consonants, since monosyllables tend to have a high proportion of consonants to vowels. Consequently, the poem has a rather slow-moving, consonant-congested movement.⁴⁴

The slow movement of verse corresponds with the bride's unhappy mood: 'and I was sad'. Thus, 'the unnatural disturbance in nature [is] disturbing even their wedding-night'.⁴⁵

The emphatic statement this poem makes is brought about by Larkin's efficient handling of images. In addition to the image of the wind which keeps 'thrashing / My apron' are the images of the sun which stands as a reminder of time, of the morning that 'shares my bed' and that of man 'kneeling as cattle by all-generous waters!'. These images, in Keith Sagar's terms, 'enable Larkin here to achieve a unique blend of virginal innocence, frank sensuality and religious awe.'⁴⁶ The religious awe is a feeling of fear caused by the transience of life and the violence of the elements of nature. This feeling is a primitive homage to nature paid by man all through the ages and is latent in his subconscious.

Water is another imagery of time in Larkin's poems. 'Absences' describes a stormy day:

Rain patters on a sea that tilts and sighs.
Fast-running floors, collapsing into hollows,
Tower suddenly, spray-haired. Contrariwise,
A wave drops like a wall: another follows,
Wilting and scrambling, tirelessly at play
Where there are no ships and no shallows. . .

The first line sums up the situation and provides its continuity. The immediacy of the scene depicted is achieved by the use of simple present tense 'patters'. It suggests the continuous act of the rain pattering on the sea. The horizontal as well as the cyclical movement of water is also implied in the first line: the sea connotes water which is a symbol of life and of death too. The sea is an inexhaustible source of rain in that clouds come from and fall again, as rain, into it. Thus, the cyclical movement of water in nature is completed. Like time,

water is uncontrollable and in a ceaseless motion. Hence, the image of water is not symbolic; it is evocative. It becomes a dense time imagery; one of those words of 'objects and actions, words which partake of the denseness and the tang of things they stand for.'⁴⁷

The confusion between moving and motionless objects in nature shows itself in 'fast-running floors' of the sea in the second line. By turning to this device, the poet attempts to create a state of continuity in motion. But the effect created has been weakened by the details of the waves given in the two lines next to the last line of the first part. By allotting the epithet 'fast-running', usually associated with waves, to a stationary object (the floors of the sea), an illusory quality of movement has been evoked and the waves in motion would be there in the scene even though they were not mentioned in the poem at all.

Larkin's most vivid picture of change and transience of life occurs in 'Coming'. This poem celebrates time passing to make despair beautiful. It is the tale of rebirth which nature tells in the death of winter. It is told by the light bathing the 'Forehead of houses' and by the 'fresh-peeled voice' of a thrush 'In the deep bare garden', singing:

It will be spring soon,
It will be spring soon--
And I, whose childhood
Is a forgotten boredom,
Feel like a child
Who comes on a scene
Of adult reconciling,
And can understand nothing . . .

The association of the child and his feelings with quarrelling adults is not a 'nostalgia of the late developer reconsidering without regrets [his] youth'⁴⁸ for Larkin's view of childhood is not romantic. Rather, it suggests the hostility of the world we inhabit. It also serves to show our ignorance of the way things change in life despite our awareness of their change. Such an awareness reduces the world to mere shadows of reality and the rebirth in nature to an illusion as they are linked to the inevitability of change and decay.

Finally, there is in this book a strong impulse to reject the conventional view of the personal past as a time of happiness: Larkin takes the real world of everyday life as the land in which his poetry takes root. There is, too, a noticeable preoccupation with death that increases with the passing years. More important is that the poems have, to borrow Larkin's own terms:

. . . what one looks for in any writer of stature:
the individual note or theme by and with which he
or she will henceforth be identified.⁴⁹

Their general tone is of pessimism and of seriousness balanced occasionally by ironic humour. What we sense in them is a formal truthfulness and a peculiar profundity of feelings characteristic of one who tries in his poetry to achieve what he misses in life.

The conviction that fulfilment in this sinister world is deception has been forcefully conveyed by the clarity of expression and the mastery of rhythmic organization. In response to George

Hartley's request for a new title for his first Marvell Press collection, Larkin wrote:

I especially didn't want an 'ambiguous' title, or one that made any claims to policy or belief: this The Less Deceived would however give a certain amount of sad-eyed (and clear-eyed) realism, and if they did pick up the context they might grasp my fundamentally passive attitude to poetry (and life too, I suppose) which believes that the agent is always more deceived than the patient, because action comes from desire, and we all know that desire comes from wanting something we haven't got, which may not make us any happier when we have it. On the other hand suffering--well, there is positively no deception about it.⁵⁰

Notes

- ¹ Philip Larkin, Required Writing (London, 1983), p. 175.
- ² Ian Hamilton, 'Four Conversations', London Magazine, IV:8 (November 1964), p. 75. Also see my chapter 8, note 8.
- ³ David Timms, Philip Larkin (Edinburgh, 1973), p. 74.
- ⁴ C.B. Cox and A.E. Dyson, Modern Poetry (London, 1963), p. 141.
- ⁵ Philip Larkin, A Girl in Winter (London, 1977), p. 101.
- ⁶ Winifred Nowotny, The Language Poets Use (London, 1975), p. 15.
- ⁷ See 3, above, p. 78.
- ⁸ Calvin Bedient, Eight Contemporary Poets (London, 1974), p. 84.
- ⁹ Christopher Levenson, 'Some More Practitioners', Delta, 8 (Spring 1956), p. 27.
- ¹⁰ Charles Monteith, 'Publishing Larkin', Larkin at Sixty, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London, 1982), p. 40.
- ¹¹ Quoted by Blake Morrison, The Movement (London, 1980), p. 125.
- ¹² See 1, above, p. 172.
- ¹³ See 3, above, p. 71.
- ¹⁴ Alan Brownjohn, Philip Larkin (London, 1975), p. 10.
- ¹⁵ Andrew Motion, Philip Larkin (London, 1982), p. 60.
- ¹⁶ William E. Baker, Syntax in English Poetry 1870-1930 (University of California Press, 1967), p. 129.

- 17 Anthony Thwaite, Twentieth Century English Poetry (London, 1978), p. 106.
- 18 C.B. Cox, 'Philip Larkin', Critical Quarterly, 1 (Spring 1959), p. 10.
- 19 Roger Bowen, 'Poet in Transition', Iowa Review, 8 (1977), p. 91.
- 20 A. Kingsley Weatherhead, 'Philip Larkin of England', ELH, 38 (December 1971), p. 625.
- 21 See 15, above, p. 66.
- 22 See 11, above, p. 189.
- 23 Philip Oakes, 'The Unsung Gold Medallist', Sunday Times, 27 March 1966, p. 65.
- 24 See 14, above, p. 11.
- 25 Francis Berry, Poets' Grammar (London, 1958), p. 40.
- 26 See 11, above, p. 174. The 'average of talents' is what the poet stresses in 'Born Yesterday'. It seems to me that in Larkin's poems, the characters' satisfaction with the way they live is, to a certain extent, like Larkin's with his job as a librarian since his graduation from St John's College, Oxford, in 1943.
- 27 See 1, above, p. 47.
- 28 J.R. Watson, 'The Other Larkin', Critical Quarterly, 17:4 (Winter 1975), p. 354.
- 29 See 15, above, p. 22.
- 30 The Poetical Works of Thomas Hood, ed. William Michael Rossetti (London, 1871), p. 260.
- 31 Geoffrey Grigson, ed. The Faber Book of Poems and Places (London, 1980), p. 231.

³² Concerning the reservations of the Movement poets about Dylan Thomas's poetry, see Part Two of this study, particularly chapter 6, note 10.

³³ See 11, above, p. 153.

³⁴ David Holbrook, Llareggub Revisited: Dylan Thomas and the State of Modern Poetry (London, 1962), p. 174.

³⁵ Quoted by Neil Powell, Tradition and Structure in Contemporary Poetry (unpublished M.Phil. thesis, University of Warwick, 1975), p. 90.

³⁶ See 10, above, pp. 42-3.

³⁷ See 2, above, pp. 73-4.

³⁸ See 9, above, p. 26.

³⁹ Mary M. Macdermott, Vowel Sounds in Poetry: Their Music and Tone-Colour (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Glasgow, 1941), I, pp. 17-18.

⁴⁰ See 25, above, pp. 56-7.

⁴¹ See 16, above.

⁴² See 19, above.

⁴³ D.H. Lawrence, The Rainbow (London, 1971), pp. 129-43.

⁴⁴ Geoffrey N. Leech, A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry (London, 1980), p. 94.

⁴⁵ See 9, above.

⁴⁶ Keith Sagar, 'Church Going' and 'Wedding-Wind', Criticism in Action, ed. Maurice Hussey (London, 1969), p. 126.

⁴⁷ Donald Davie, Articulate Energy (London, 1955), p. 122.

48 Frederick Grubb, A Vision of Reality (London, 1965), p. 229.

49 See 1, above, p. 279.

50 George Hartley, 'Nothing to be said', Larkin at Sixty, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London, 1982), p. 88.

Chapter Three

THE WHITSUN WEDDINGS

In his middle age, Larkin became more aware of the essence of existence and the problem of time.¹ Time keeps on pressing heavily upon his thinking as he observes the change, mostly for the worse, taking place everywhere around him. By capturing moments of dissatisfaction with life, Larkin introduces in 'Mr Bleaney' a remarkable vision of that state when we are far away from the fulfilment of our wishes. This poem demonstrates the response one feels upon arrival at a new residence. It also depicts the life of the previous lodger by speculating on his belongings, the surroundings of the bed-sitting-room and a few remarks the landlady makes about him:

'This was Mr Bleaney's room. He stayed
The whole time he was at 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 . . .

The title sums up what the poem is all about. 'Mr Bleaney' is the name of a man, so we assume the poem will tell us more about him and his life in general. One of the functions of the title is to

help the reader to discover a clue to the poem; a key to unlock its meaning, or in Michael Riffaterre's words:

. . . to inform the reader and facilitate access to the text by stating its subject, its genre, or its code. Thus the title, here, functions as a 'sign' hinting at a hidden meaning, or a meaning reserved for initiates, or a second meaning in addition to the surface one.²

Thus, the title prepares us to hear more about the attitude towards life of Mr Bleaney who is the main figure around whom revolves the meaning and significance of the poem. In his interesting discussion of the relevance of the title to the meaning of the whole poem, David Timms states that the very title, i.e. "Mr Bleaney" shows how mean life can be: Bleaney's very name combines the notions "bleak" and "mean" and ends in a diminutive "ey".³

In the course of the discussion of the relation of the title to the poem, it is quite clear that the first five stanzas are an expansion of the title. The emptiness and meaninglessness of Bleaney's life is expressed straightforwardly through the details of the room: 'Bed, upright chair, sixty-watt bulb' and 'no room for books or bags'. This statement has been introduced twice: firstly, by the conventional language of the plain descriptive reality in the first five verses and secondly, by the metaphorical allusion in the sixth verse. The featureless room where Mr Bleaney used to live and the dullness of his life show him as an indifferent person. Much of that, the title foretells right from the beginning. However, what the text as a unity refers to is the most significant.

The opening stanzas of the poem, as Veronica Forrest-Thomson puts it, 'refer us to a known world and invite us to explore the associations of the real in an operational expansion'.⁴ Above all, they give a faithful picture of Mr Bleaney's life, and show the poet's remarkable ability to depict reality which Philip Hobsbaum calls his 'real genius': 'The capacity for setting down reality as it is, not as other people have held it to be, seems to me Larkin's real genius'.⁵

The enjambment creates a sense of continuity necessary to the descriptive process which invites the meditative state. Another function of the enjambment is that it intensifies the process of meditation by 'the conflict it creates between the metrical system which requires a pause and the grammatical system which resists such a pause'.⁶

Mr Bleaney's belongings, poor as they are, serve as witnesses to his shabby personal life. None of them can be looked for to give a sort of meaning to his life. On the contrary, they show his life as empty and meaningless as well as sad. It is sad because 'it really can be summed up in his landlady's remarks and bits and pieces of his "one hired box"'.⁷ And as motionlessness never generates motion, so his empty secret life leads to an empty life as a whole and accordingly shapes his attitude towards existence. Mr Bleaney's existence, without meaning as it is, becomes a problem to which he finds no solution other than nihilism. To sit and do nothing to solve

this problem is an attitude, that is true, but it is a passive and an ineffective one. To reject the existent state only is not enough; more important is to find the way out and the better alternative.

To live without a goal is the outcome of an ignorance of the significance of time. Mr Bleaney's inability to cope with life is the result of his failure to participate in it effectively; time is passing and he can do nothing about it; he performs the role of an observer and not a participant. Doing little activities, such as visiting his sister at Christmas and looking after the landlady's garden, shows him helplessly victimised by time. His present has been abandoned, as it turns out to be a heavy load that burdens his shoulders. Consequently, the past cannot be relived in the present nor can the future be looked upon as a harbinger of a dawn of happier days. This abolition of the present is a barrier holding him back from the promise of what lies ahead; the future. I feel it is the lack of the knowledge of time which is the heart of the matter in Mr Bleaney's case. It is the cause of his miseries, rather than his religious freedom or his lack of religion as J.R. Watson argues. He claims that Mr Bleaney is a type of man who belongs 'involuntarily to modern desacralised cosmos'.⁸

Not until the sixth stanza does the poet show a sign of departure from this state--the state of ignorance of time:

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 . . .

In a noticeable comparison with Mr Bleaney, the above lines show the speaker's awareness of the change in life and the fact of the passage of time. And the force of this poem lies in the contrast set between these lines and the rest of the poem. The poet's knowledge of time is heightened by a remarkable contrast between the passive interior--Mr Bleaney's featureless room and the sort of life it symbolizes--and the hostile exterior, the cold wind tousling the clouds. These lines express the poet's attitude towards life. It is merely a personal attitude, as it is based on an emotional experience of life. The moving exterior, contrasted with the static interior, stands as a witness to the entire lack of purpose and meaning in Mr Bleaney's life. This point is clearly stated by the speaker's supposition: 'But if he stood and watched . . .'

Furthermore, this observation indicates the speaker's awareness of Mr Bleaney's impotence and, also, suggests that he is not going to lead the same life as his predecessor. In other words, he is not sharing the same lot with Mr Bleaney despite his acceptance of the same room:

So it happens that I lie
Where Mr Bleaney lay, and stub my fags
On the same saucer-souvenir . . .

Firstly, because he realizes 'That how we live measures our own nature'. Secondly, he, in David Timms's words 'is an intellectual, and Bleaney is not. The speaker looks for bookshelves, but finds none: Bleaney had no need of them'.⁹ And thirdly, he concerns

himself with his surroundings and this suggests his awareness of the problem the previous tenant has faced, and a serious attempt to do something about it. In this context, I do not agree with David Timms when he echoes William Shakespeare's words: 'Thus conscience does make cowards of us all',¹⁰ by saying 'Thinking too hard on his surroundings, the speaker is less equipped to cope with life than Bleaney is',¹¹ because it seems a contradictory assertion. For how can we solve any problem without studying it and thinking about it first?

As we have already seen, to Mr Bleaney history has no meaning--by history I mean the past--and the present is a wearisome burden crushing his being ruthlessly because he lacks the knowledge of time. The lack of this fact is emphasized in 'Ignorance':

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 . . .

On the semantic level, this stanza has been modelled in the theme of time already dealt with in the sixth stanza of 'Mr Bleaney'. Both stanzas are uttered by the same speaker. Again, this stanza shows a sign of the speaker's understanding of the problem of time. He admits the strangeness of our ignorance of time when he says that it is strange that we do not know how things work. Beneath this wonder, there is an implied acknowledgement of the change of things because though he does not know the way things work, he does already know that they do change. No one, I suppose, can know everything about time

and change and how they work. One may know about things in life to the extent that he can manage to cope with life. In other words, to be 'ordinary' as Larkin himself termed it in 'Born Yesterday'.

Since our prime concern here is time, so the discussion will be confined to the relation between being 'ordinary' and the understanding of the problem of time. The speaker has the ordinary knowledge of time because he knows that things change and time passes and that is enough to construct an attitude towards life as a whole. In the speaker's case, it is not necessary to know the details of how time and things work because he is not a philosopher and he does not want to form a philosophy about them. The poet stresses this view early in the last line of the first stanza when he asserts that 'Someone must know'. It is the job of the specialists to know the details of their industry and not otherwise. The poet goes on to argue that even the extent of the knowledge of such people is also limited. There are limits to our knowledge of time, for example, and there are areas beyond these limits which are not accessible to the human mind:

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.

Once again, the essence of the problem is an entrapment in time rather than in the body. And even when we manage, occasionally, to enjoy moments of freedom, a full knowledge of life appears to be inaccessible. Such being the case, we spend our short life on imprecisions. Larkin, here like elsewhere, makes a salient picture of the spirit of the age. These lines express the relative values of the period which state, to use Lawrence Durrell's words, that:

. . . nothing has permanent value--that is really the message behind them--everything depends upon its context in a given system, depends on the way you use it. The identity of opposites precludes any complete and final judgement upon reality.¹²

Time and the ignorance of the way it changes have been well illustrated in 'Send No Money'. Being aware of the fact that time is passing, the speaker embarks upon the task of looking for the truth of life, or what David Timms calls 'his persistent effort to face truth':¹³

Tell me the truth, I said
Teach me the way things go. . .

Thematically, both lines (in fact the whole poem) are concerned with the tension between the changing power latent in time and man's impotence to understand the way it works. The speaker's knowledge of the fact of time changing balances the situation and tempers the tense speaker-time relationship. This sense of balance is carried by semantic symmetry. This is quite clear in the careful balance of

the items of the above two lines invocations (to somebody). Both of them show parallel syntactic patterning: verbs, first object and second object. The second of them echoes the line ' . . . of the way things work'.

Moreover, it is not without aim, the phrase 'I said' is not placed at the beginning or at the end of the two grammatically similar structures. It has been inserted between them to enhance the sense of balance and harmony created by the simple syntactic arrangement of the two lines in question. Again, semantically, both lines could be regarded as a variation on the same meaning. The second line is just an expansion of the first one as the truth is the knowledge of how things work or the way they go. Meanwhile, the period after 'go' invites the reader, as well as the speaker, to make a syntactic stop. Thus, it gives the impression of someone already prepared himself to listen to something to be said--here, to an explanation. As we and the speaker are anxious for an answer, the following six lines keep us in suspense and it is not until the third line of the second stanza do we find a semi-answer:

Sit here, and watch the hail
Of occurrence clobber life out
To a shape no one sees . . .

At this point, the suspense dies out as our curiosity is not satisfied. It has been baulked of satisfaction twice: first, by the simple syntactic structure, verb, adverb and verb, object . . . , which echoes the syntactic structure of the first two requests.

Thus, it takes us back to the previous state of balance and suspense. And second, by the fact that the explanation is never satisfactory, because to sit and watch the new shape of life being formed i.e. when things work, is pointless as it cannot be seen: 'To a shape no one sees.' Both question and answer or request and explanation are of the same semantic matrix. For, despite its clarity, the question is quite difficult to answer. And in order to maintain the balance between them, the difficulty, implied in the question, has been answered ambiguously. The answer is inadequate because it is ambiguous as well as contradictory in that the process of change in life gives things a new shape, yet this new shape cannot be seen.¹⁴

In the previous chapters I have pointed out that the process of change in life involves both space and time. Change in time is the active force which underlies 'First Sight'. It is the centre of polarization in the poem for all lines are linked to it by deep semantic bonds. One of the remarkable and characteristic images of time and change used by Larkin is the 'Earth's immeasurable surprise':

As they wait beside the ewe,
Her fleeces wetly caked, there lies
Hidden round them, waiting too,
Earth's immeasurable surprise . . .

The idea behind 'Earth's immeasurable surprise' is, clearly, that of change in nature and the passage of time. It is a symbol which serves to express the inevitability of time and change. Once more, we are confronted with the knowledge-of-time theme. The 'lambs' image takes

us back to the innocent world of childhood. Hence, it is similar to the child's and bird's images which are very frequent in Larkin's poetry.

The lambs, here, do not understand the way change takes place. At the outset of the poem, the speaker states the fact of the lambs' ignorance of events as they ' . . . know / Nothing but a sunless glare'. This brings echoes from T.S. Eliot's lines from 'Burnt Norton':¹⁵

And the bird called, in response to
The unheard music hidden in the shrubbery,
And the unseen eyebeam crossed . . .

In Eliot's lines the acts of seeing and hearing have been cancelled as they become 'see nothing' and 'hear nothing'. So, the cancellation of the action in the two transitive verbs (see and hear) creates the quality of 'nothingness'. Now, the key words developed in the second and third lines above are 'silence' and 'invisibility' respectively. In Larkin's poem 'Nothing' cancels the act expressed by the verb 'know', so it becomes arbitrary.

This arbitrariness is re-enhanced by another one; the cancellation of the same fact, to know, in 'sunless glare'. Unquestionably, the sun is the only source of light (at least in the circumstances involved in this poem), so, how does the light exist without the sun? This negation, to a certain degree nonsensical, appears to be the agent of another state of affairs. This time, it creates a concrete picture (lambs in a vast land covered with snow on a sunless day)

out of the abstract contemplation on the central idea (ignorance). The arbitrariness, shown so far, is designed to indicate man's incompetence to know the secrets of the process of change. This idea has been expanded more in the last three lines of the poem by dwelling on the idea of understanding through the repetition of cognates expressed, here, by the word 'grasp': 'They could not grasp it . . .'

In the course of this discussion, it is worth noticing that the unity of the poem has been achieved in many ways. Strong semantic bonds have been established by a repetition of words and cognates: 'Iambs that learn . . . / . . . know / All they find . . . / They could not grasp it if they knew . . .'. All the verbs mentioned above are variations on the theme of knowledge (to know).¹⁶

Moreover, it does no harm to point out the poet's gloomy view of life as being totally hostile: 'Iambs that learn to walk in the snow / Meet a vast unwelcome . . .' and evermore changing: '. . . waiting too, / Earth's immeasurable surprise'. First reading of the poem under discussion does invite such thoughts, and consequently one may say that the poet brings nothing new as he only points out ideas which most of us already know. But, such a reading causes a crucial damage to the poem because it depreciates the role of the poetic tools in poetic innovations. What we should look for, then, in the poem is not just ideas, but the way the poet introduces them, i.e. the poetic means he employs to bring out these ideas.

In 'First Sight' the sound-structure, which stands in solidarity with other semantic bonds stated above, creates the general movement throughout the poem. Sound is linked to meaning and this link-up has been achieved by a careful management of the sound [o]. The context of a dreary melancholy feeling, usually experienced on a sunless day in a vast land covered with snow; conversely the vision of lambs caught in snow and cold weather, has been invoked by the sound [o] which is usually associated with pain and sorrow.¹⁷ Then this context is transformed into the bleating of the lambs. Meanwhile the sound [o] collaborates with the sound [e] to create the general effect of the poem. Out of seventy nine words (the total words in the poem), twenty one contain the sound [e] or its variations [ɜ:], [ɛ], [ei]. These long vowels could be pronounced with a fluctuating motion by short and slight interruptions of the continuity of the breath to produce a sound which echoes the bleat of the sheep. Thus, these sounds are onomatopoeic owing to their mimetic ability to imitate a non-linguistic sound, i.e. the bleating of the lambs mentioned at the outset of the poem. In doing so the sound creates a new value; to borrow Winifred Nowotny's phrase, the 'sound enacts the sense':

A formal structure capable of articulating, in its own terms, fine differences beyond the discrimination-level that is possible in blunt verbal terms, charges those merely verbal terms with precise 'values' of another order of existence. It should perhaps be added that in relating these values to the sense of the words, we probably tend to pick out from among the myriad events occurring in a stream of verse those which most successfully 'enact' the sense; we disregard the irrelevant aspects of the total particularity of what is occurring.¹⁸

Certainly, the lambs and the ewe are waiting for the coming of spring time when snow melts and grass grows. In the meantime, this does not, in any case, entail a full understanding of how it takes place. Grammatically, the poet shows the unlikeliness of such realization by using past conditional tense. He, also, denies the possibility of our understanding of the way seasons change even if we know that what the lambs are waiting for is spring:

They could not grasp it if they knew,
 What so soon will wake and grow
 Utterly unlike the snow.

What underlies these lines (apparently water, grass and warmth usually associated with spring) is put in a sharp contrast with winter. Furthermore, the unlikeliness of the understanding of the process of change, conveyed by the use of a past tense in an adverbial clause of condition, indicates the inevitability of the events in nature--the seasonal change and the passage of time.

To sum up this discussion, it is clear that the last three lines of the poem contain its basic idea; its subject--the passage of time and our ignorance of how things work. They can be pointed out from the rest because they are central in the poem. The whole poem can be divided into four separate units varying in length and ending with periods. The last unit contains two auxiliary verbs (could and will) and four finite verbs (grasp, knew, wake and grow). The use of these verbs helps to create a sense of syntactic movement to match the action and motion usually associated with the process

of change in nature which these lines are assigned to convey. They have this potential energy which Donald Davie points out when, in his comment on Hugh Kenner's discussion of:

Swiftly the years beyond recall.
Solemn the stillness of this spring morning.

he says: 'What are missing are the verbs, hence the syntax . . . Significantly what we get is only a state, an immobile grouping, not an action, a dynamic transference of energy.'¹⁹ Hence, it is not without significance that the verbs 'wake' and 'grow' are intransitive. They do not require objects or predicates to describe their action syntactically. Similarly, nature has the potential energy within itself that makes the change. Thus, a beautiful symmetry has been achieved between the syntax and the situation it describes. .

The problem of time still exerts pressure upon the poet forcing him to consider it more explicitly. In 'Days', he approaches it through the present moment:

What are days for?
Days are where we live.
They come, they wake us
Time and time over.
They are to be happy in:
Where can we live but days?

These lines are constructed round the theme of temporal time because they do not contain any hint at eternity or timelessness. By adopting the conscious moment as a scale for the measurement of time, the poet is able to show the transience of life and the speed at which time is

passing. And it is this passage of time which is the cause of his fear and anxiety. The poet seems to abandon fruitless speculation on the past, as being a record of a series of failures, and on the future, as being unpredictable, and he concentrates on the present. He has set himself to explore the identity of the present which, he knows beforehand is, also, temporal as it is passing.

The sense of motion in time is beautifully depicted by a careful management of the syntactical effect. A sense of detectable movement in the poem has been conveyed by the use of the verbs 'come' and 'wake'. As for the phrase 'time and time over', the likeliest verb is the present tense of the verb 'to be' which is a verb of existence because the phrase itself expresses a fact--the passage of time. The absence of the verb in its infinitive form from the line under consideration is of special importance. In the line which precedes it, the reader has been informed that days come and wake us. This stirs his curiosity to know what they wake us to. In doing so, a semantic relationship has been established between the third and fourth lines. After a short while, the reader will bridge the gap between them by suggesting the missing syntactical items to make them read: 'Days come, they wake us' [to the fact that] 'Time and time are over'. Such syntactical management gives the poem its intensity and immediacy of effect matching that of motion which is underlying the poem--the continuity of the motion of time as time comes and goes; it never stops.

Here, the missing syntax helps to enrich the meaning by urging the reader to get involved directly in the experience of time. In Anne Cluysenaar's words:

The syntax is not missing, it is being used--to better effect than if (the grammatical items) that 'should be there' had been there . . . The meaning is not just described, it happens. And that, whether it involves deviation or not, is what using language is all about. 'A poem should not mean, but be' is perhaps another (though a misleading) way of indicating this.²⁰

This, I feel, is the essential technique of poetry--to suggest rather than to say; to stimulate the reader's drive to hunt up the idea rather than to offer the idea for him.

Adopting the present moment, as a scale to measure time with, involves motion because time is always in motion. Consequently, motion versus motionlessness is another method by which time can be measured. The state of motionlessness means death, whereas motion is viewed as being alive. In this sequence, the idea of death versus life has been ushered in by the word 'priest' in the second part of the poem:

Ah, solving that question
Brings the priest . . .

As far as the problem of time is concerned, the speaker is unsuccessful in his attempt to arrive at a satisfactory solution in the first part of the poem. This dissatisfaction has been shown by the speaker's perplexity and confusion when he ends the first part of the

poem with another question and answer which repeat the meaning of the first two lines. As a result of his failure to solve the question of time, the poet turns to the priest for help. The hint at the priest, here, is ironic and a religious explanation to this problem cannot be adopted as the poet shows no interest in religion and there is nothing in the poem that can account for such an explanation.

The poet's obsession with time indicates different aspects of reality because it takes two forms: it is either descriptive meditation as has been shown in 'Mr Bleaney', 'Days', 'Triple Time' and (as we will see later) 'Talking in Bed', or meditative discussion as in 'Self's the Man', 'A Study of Reading Habits', 'Send No Money' and 'Toad Revisited'. It is to be noted that both forms of pre-occupation with time are mere approaches to find out a way of reconciliation with time. They are not final solutions to the problem of time as we will see in this discussion. They give a variety of alternatives in an attempt to lessen the pressure of time on the poet. Among the many ways he tried to escape the impact of time is to be free of responsibilities.

This theme of choice and purpose in life, already introduced in 'Toads', is dealt with in its sequel 'Toads Revisited'. Here, Larkin expresses his disappointment with the life of those people who are exempted for one reason or another (probably for their weakness or stupidity) from the 'toad work':

Walking around in the park
Should feel better than work:
The lake, the sunshine,
The grass to lie on . . .

The theme of this poem, in Neil Powell's terms:

. . . is not just the boringness of everyday working existence but the conflict of selves within the individual. To put it another way, Larkin is frequently accused of being negative in many of these poems: but the negatives almost invariably imply the existence of a positive.²¹

The conflict between states of working and not working has been dramatised by the struggle of self within the speaker to enjoy freedom even though temporarily. Yet, the result is not what he desires but which he expects to be: being free from work does not bring the long-desired peace or content but a scarring situation:

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.

Neither work nor idleness can stand in the face of the destructive force of time and in the end, the speaker falls as a helpless victim under the 'axe of time'. Moreover, the poem shows the absurdity and 'uselessness of trying to break out of the particular set of conditions of a very specialized kind of bourgeois professional life'.²²

Andrew Motion calls this particular set of conditions (work) misleadingly a ritual and identifies it with religious rituals (birth and marriage):

It is not so much a routine as ritual and, like all rituals, supportive. Work may be less glamorous than the ceremonies surrounding birth in 'Born Yesterday', or marriage in 'The Whitsun Weddings', or even social communion in 'Show Saturday', but it shares their essential qualities.²³

Performing any ritual entails a triangular relation between man, the ritual and time. One's attitude towards time is greatly affected by one's own view of the ritual one is performing. Unlike work, religious rituals might transcend time. Most religions believe in life after death, hence to believe in religion involves the belief in the continuity of life. Considered so, religion offers its followers a kind of solution to the question of time by enabling them to transcend time spiritually. This spiritual bond is missing between work and man, hence, no solution is to be offered.²⁴

The cemetery is a symbol of death or at least a reminder of it and consequently the closing two lines are ironic in that the end of everything is death; work and idleness are alike. It is to be mentioned here that this conclusion does not support some of Larkin's critics and reviewers who accused him of depicting 'a uniquely dreary life' and about whom he wonders: 'I'd like to know how all these romantic reviewers spend their time--do they kill a lot of dragons,

for instance?'²⁵ Rather, it is reality as it is, as if Larkin says: this is the end of everything (death) and this is the way I feel it and it is up to you to believe in it or not.

What makes this inference acceptable is that it has been predicted in the poem right from the beginning. The very syntax of the two opening lines enacts this conclusion. First, the speaker is talking about an experience and any experience requires two components to take place; space and time. In this poem, the park furnishes the setting whereas the participle 'walking' provides time. By turning verb into participle, the poet manages to create a sense of continuity for the experience of being idle wandering in the park because the participle conveys a sustained action unlike the infinitive 'to walk' or the present continuous 'is walking'. This new continuous state of time is where the meaning of the whole poem moves against a sense of continuous 'now'. In so doing, the poet gets the reader involved in this experience which evokes both in the poet and the reader a harassing sense of time and of the transience of things in life which shows itself in the disappointing end of the poem.

Second, the supposedly promising experience of being free from work (walking in the park) turns out to be an illusion immediately in the second line when the past tense of the auxiliary verb 'shall' has been used. The use of 'should' serves a double purpose: it proclaims the expiration of the speaker's experience of being idle on one hand and shows that idleness is as bad as work if not worse on the other.²⁶

As has been considered above, the fact that everything in life is subject to time and change makes people in Larkin's poems dissatisfied with the way they live. This dissatisfaction is shown in their attempt to experience something new; something different from their present state. In this ceaseless search for alternatives, a similar theme moulded on the work - idleness theme has been introduced in 'Love Songs in Age'; it is the marriage - singleness theme.

In this poem, a widow has come across old copies of love songs she used to play when she was young. Within the context of time, the poem sheds light on the three stages of man's life: youth when one is single, married life and widowhood. Getting married means the acceptance of marriage obligations and responsibilities as it puts an end to the freedom enjoyed in one's youth (singleness). Nothing in the poem indicates that the woman was rejoicing in her married life. Instead, she might have been caught by its obligations and demands. Now, she feels she lost her identity amidst family affairs to the degree that she had not the time to listen to those albums which she loved:

So they had waited, till in her widowhood
She found them, looking for something else . . .

The songs serve two purposes: first, they show time as a destructive force. Through these albums, she realises the passage of time and its effect upon her as they remind her of her youth, now destroyed by time, as well as the period of time which lies between her prime and middle age. This power of destruction, attributed to

time, has been shown by the use of a familiar and homely image; the albums. Like any other objects in nature, their covers decay through time:

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 . . .

The albums revert to decay and disorder. The flux of time is in its flow; the widow's attempt to stop it proves a failure. The line 'when a tidy fit seized her' shows the precision with which Larkin handles the language as it gives a description of man's psychology. Like fits of nervous disorder, fits of tidiness are also momentary. They are moments of nervousness and impatience we feel with our surroundings when we are under pressure of time. In both cases, they are a manifestation of disorder within one's self. In this poem, the disorder comes from the harassing pressure time exerts on the widow. This disorder is released through these fits which do not last very long. The widow's fit of tidiness is a faint sign of rebellion against the ruthlessness of time already doomed to defeat. She has mended them and her daughter has coloured them, but this very act means that they are still liable to decay sooner or later.

Second, these songs are a symbol of love. They form an inexhaustible source of passion and vivid memories of her youth:

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 . . .

Love is a dominant theme in Larkin, and its images, to use Harry Chambers' phrase, 'stand out':

In Mr Larkin's poetry two opposing groups of images stand out. I see them as images of death and images of love: on the one hand, 'The glare of that much-mentioned brilliance, love' of 'Love Songs in Age'; on the other hand, the 'cold sun' of 'No Road' in The Less Deceived.²⁷

These songs are where her prime and love are never untouched. Her fears grow when she notices time's fatal impact creep up on them. Again, the association of love with the albums implies that love comes under the destructive power of time. As they are a symbol of love and beauty, so they show the fragility and powerlessness of love against the rage of time. The songs recall old memories and:

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 . . .

Fixing the albums by mending and colouring them is just like recalling the past; both are temporal. The widow is fully aware of this fact. Her maturity enables her to attain this conclusion which

has been shown by her rejection of music as a solution to the problem of time:

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

The conclusion of the poem shows that even the momentary triumph upon time by recalling the past is an illusion. These moments in which we recall memories are nothing more than a false stoppage of time's flow. They are moments when we are under the spell of the sweet remembrance which in fact does nothing to change the fact of time passing.

In his comparison between Larkin and W.H. Auden, in this respect, Frederick Grubb says:

At moments we feel that Larkin catches the tone of his time, is ephemeral, but unlike Auden's his time is likely to enjoy a long innings. This is sheer luck, since it raises the chances for that 'central core of personality' which Mr A. Alvarez thinks Auden lacks.²⁸

The central core of the widow's personality (conversely the poet's as he speaks through her) is her awareness of the passage of time. The poet manages to make the widow recall her youth and enjoy old love theoretically and for a short time. But even this short period of time does not give solace to a middle-aged woman harshly oppressed by time. Her mature personality is indicated by her knowledge that these songs bring her neither happiness nor compensation for the years she lost: this is why 'To pile them back, to cry, / Was hard.' She is no more misled by the phantom of 'The glare of that much-

mentioned, love'. She comes down to earth and adopts a realistic attitude towards life which she is disappointed with. It is the kind of disappointment which evokes sadness for things that are heading towards the inevitable.

This kind of sadness is analogous with the speaker's in '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 . . .

The speaker is punning upon the word 'sad'. The home incarnates the speaker's own sad state as he projects his own sadness onto the home. As any other physical externals, the house is subjected to decay by time. Abandoned by its inhabitants, it seems to decline and the traces of time can clearly be spotted on its contents. They have changed and:

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

The last two lines are significant because they show the poet's conviction of the transitory nature of life. Through the appeal to domestic particulars: 'pictures', 'cutlery', 'piano stool' and 'vase', the poet gets us involved in his experience of time. Here, his personal involvement and ours have been achieved through language. It is more a creation than a mere description of the experience. The poet does not observe these domestic details but he feels their presence through collocation. The vital past is remembered on the ash of the present.

'The music in the piano stool' operates on two different levels of meaning: on one hand, it indicates that the piano and its stool, as a symbol of the past, are now abandoned as is the house. On the other hand, the music in the 'piano stool' appears to be an odd collocation. Usually, the piano stands for music and not the stool. But it is this use of negative through which Larkin achieves his most distinguished victory in language. The stool suggests music as well as a pianist as it is where the pianist (or anybody) usually sits and plays music. Hence, the stool creates a positive value because it has been charged with an animating power to bring back the past when the house was inhabited. Such being the case, the phrase 'piano stool', to use Michael Riffaterre's words:

. . . functions like an encyclopedia of representations related to the meaning of that word. Their actualization has the effect of saturating the derivative verbal sequence with that meaning, overtly confirming what could have been gathered from a single word. Hence, emphasis, visualization, and the need for the reader to decode connotations as well as denotations.²⁹

Such richness of meaning, implied in the above-mentioned phrase, is reinforced by the whole poem. Nevertheless, the 'joyous shot at how things ought to be' is soon 'fallen wide'. The last two lines of the poem usher in the end of this excursion in the past and suggest that the present takes over.

We might, also, observe that the vase, now empty, could stand for water or flowers and in both cases, the water has drained away and the flowers have withered.³⁰ Such density of meaning, latent in

the final two lines, makes them of especial significance and as Barbara H. Smith argues ' . . . the conclusion of a poem has special status in the process, for it is only at that point that the total pattern . . . is revealed'.³¹

A further point, which should be made, is the lucid and plain language of the whole poem in general and the closing two lines in particular. The attraction of the poem is achieved by the rhythmic sense that keeps the lines moving slowly and placidly along. The long vowels in 'music', 'piano' and 'vase', with their heavy stresses, slow down the flow of the poem and signal the end of the experience of the past, which is what the whole poem is all about, and bring the poem to an end as well. The poet uses simple syntax and familiar images to convey what he experiences to the reader directly and without any beat-about-the-bush methods. And such is the language of 'common intercourse' which T.S. Eliot praises:

But there is one law of nature more powerful
than any of these varying currents, or influences
from abroad or from the past: the law that poetry
must not stray too far from the ordinary everyday
language which we use and hear.³²

Like the albums in 'Love Songs in Age', the furnishings of the house evoke a feeling of hopelessness which Larkin wants to impart; a sort of feeling that follows the disappointment with any attempt to escape time. Meanwhile, they work as a reminder of the past, casting the speaker in the ever flowing river of time finding it impossible to swim against its current. But I should stress the

fact that the speaker's knowledge of this impossibility is not so much passive surrender to time as understanding its nature. For that reason, it is not so much a nocturnal agony as a pathetic statement of a sense of futility in life. It comes from his choice to face the truth that time is a ceaseless motion. It is true that any reminder of the past might capture some aspects of that past, but soon it would abandon them.

Past experience has no link with the present unless there is an agent to reanimate the sensation of that experience in the present. In 'Dockery and Son', such a recurrence comes to the poet by visiting his old college. However, his excursion in the past evoked by this visit lasts only for a short time because he does not show any effort in giving details about Dockery. Apart from bits and pieces given by the Dean about Dockery,

'Dockery was junior to you,
Wasn't he?' said the Dean. 'His son's here now' . . .

the poet said very little about him.³³ However, his attempt to work out the date of Dockery's marriage suggests the poet's concern with time and the change it brings on people including himself:

But Dockery, good Lord,
Anyone up today must have been born
In '43, when I was twenty-one.
If he was younger, did he get this son
At nineteen, twenty?

Here, the visit functions as a catalyst for the process of recalling the bygone days. Hence, it unlocks the sealed jars of the past that the poet is to recall. And what is important is that Larkin's recollection of past experience does not bring about a union between past and present. Instead, it invites the poet to abandon the past and to concentrate on the present and gets him engaged in a serious speculation on life in general.³⁴ His consciousness of the present is clearly suggested by his awareness of the physical external, immediately in the first stanza:

I try the door of where I used to live:

Locked. The lawn spreads dazzlingly wide.
A known bell chimes. I catch my train, ignored . . .

The locked door, in fact, suggests the vain attempt of recalling the past and signals the end of the poet's visit. The door, firm and solid as it is, stands as a witness to the disunion of the past and the present as well as a symbol of the immutability of the flow of time. The poet conveys the rigidity of the door with a remarkable accuracy by the strongly stopped consonant [t] at the end of the heavily stressed monosyllabic word 'locked' and the period after it which leads the reader to insert a syntactic break at this point. As the poet stops (unable to get in because the door is locked), so does the syntax too.

The poet also employs another device; it is the poetic play between 'locked' and 'wide' and 'known' and 'ignored' in the first and second lines respectively of the second stanza. The word 'wide'

suggests that the poet is consistently aware of the present as he has been locked out of his past. In the same manner, his past (the time when he was a student in the College) is 'known' to him whereas his uncertainty and ignorance of the present and the future are suggested by the word 'ignored'.³⁵

The train imagery is frequent in Larkin's poetry.³⁶ It is a symbol through which the poet gets his feelings about time across to the reader:

I catch my train, ignored.
Canal and clouds and colleges subside
Slowly from view . . .

The above-mentioned lines are reminiscent of these lines,

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

from 'The Whitsun Weddings' and a comparison between them would be of interest. In both poems, the speaker is contemplating, in the course of a railway journey, on the same subject (time and life in general). Furthermore, the poet adopts a similar approach to his subject in both of them. It begins with an observation (the visit to the college in this poem and the wedding parties in 'The Whitsun Weddings') and gradually develops, by a series of speculations, into a decisive conclusion: 'And age, and then the only end of age', in the former and 'A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower / Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain' in the latter. Such development of the subject parallels the movement of life which ends in death, as well

as the train journey which terminates once the train reaches its destination.

Another characteristic to be noted in both poems is their predetermined view of life. Like the train trip on which the passengers have no control, so is life. The speaker in 'The Whitsun Weddings' shows the powerlessness of the young couple in the face of time. Here, the life-styles of the speaker and Dockery are also predetermined. Both of them start their life very similarly (as students), yet, they are different now: the poet is a bachelor, Dockery is married with a son. Their lives are like the railway lines; they join and part, yet both are heading for the self destination:

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

Unhindered moon . . .

Though the moon may look very high and free, but its movement, like our lives, is predetermined as it goes round the earth, consequently the sun, in a fixed orbit.³⁷

Still, one may argue that Dockery is more decisive than the poet in deciding his own present life-style. But, to get married is not all. Perhaps Dockery might lead a family life similar to that of Arnold in 'Self's the Man', which the poet has happily escaped. Comic and a bit cruel, the poem shows that, like Dockery, Arnold's choice of marriage is deliberate and the result is:

. . . when he finishes supper
 Planning to have a read at the evening paper
 It's Put a screw in this wall--
 He has no time at all,

With the nippers to wheel round the houses
 And the hall to paint in his old trousers
 And that letter to her mother
 Saying Won't you come for the summer . . .

What differentiates the poet from Arnold (maybe from Dockery as well) is that he is a better hand than them at avoiding what might spoil his life. Almost in both cases, the poet argues that our lifestyles are shaped either by way of innate ideas or by way of habits:

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? Not from what
 We think truest, or most want to do:
 Those warp tight-shut, like doors. They're more a style
 Our lives bring with them: habits for a while,
 Suddenly they harden into all we've got . . .

Hence, it is as natural for Dockery to have a son as for the poet to be devoid of a family and property. Whether it has been consciously sought or accidentally shaped, life becomes inescapable: '. . . the only end of age'.

'Reference Back' shares a marked resemblance and linguistic effects with the previous three poems. In this poem, an escape from time has been also attempted through music, but as before it is doomed to disappointment. The son, now thirty years old, tries to

find a means by which he can destroy the barrier of time which separates him from his mother and makes their relationship 'unsatisfactory'. He thinks that jazz music, which he likes most, may give his relationship with, and visit to, his mother a kind of meaning. For a short while, the music serves to hide their differences:

Three decades later made this sudden bridge
From your unsatisfactory age
To my unsatisfactory prime . . .

This temporary mother-son bridge has been constructed through collocation; many different experiences have been summed up together to make an integrated whole. Through associations, 'The flock of notes . . .' brings to mind the image of birds flying in flocks:

Oliver's Riverside Blues, it was. And now
I shall, I suppose, always remember how
The flock of notes those antique negroes blew
Out of Chicago air into
A huge remembering pre-electric horn
The year after I was born . . .

This meaning is reinforced by the word 'air' in the following line:

'Out of Chicago air . . .' So, an emotional experience of the past has been recalled in the present through the medium of language.

However, this bridge is not long lasting. This has been indicated three times: first, in the outset of the poem, the son is distressed by his mother's banal comment on the jazz record he puts on: 'That was a pretty one, I heard you call . . .' That is the first signal which predicts the subsequent collapse of this bridge. Second, the fragility of the bridge is indicated in the phrases 'the unsatisfactory

hall' and 'the unsatisfactory room'. The mother is in the hall and the son is in the room and this means that he is too far behind her in the ever-flowing river of time; he is in his prime and she is a middle-aged woman. And third, the gap between them in time as well as temperament, is introduced, once more, by the self word 'unsatisfactory' in:

From your unsatisfactory age
To my unsatisfactory prime . . .

The music is used to bridge the gap in their attitudes in life. This poetic richness comes from the creative use of language; simple constructions of language are endowed with a dense meaning. In this connection, A. Alvarez says: '. . . the poet is not a strange creature inspired, on the contrary, he is just the man next door--in fact, he probably is the man next door.'³⁸ And I would add that Larkin is really 'the man next door', a man who is inspired in the sense that he creates and introduces the potentialities of ordinary language.

In addition to what has been mentioned above, the bridge itself, in David Timms's words, 'only serves to emphasise the gap'.³⁹ Where there is a bridge, there should be a gap and time is the destroyer of what we try to build:

Truly, though our element is time,
We are not suited to the long perspectives
Open at each instant of our lives.
They link us to our losses: worse,
They show us what we have as it once was,
Blindly undiminished, just as though
By acting differently we could have kept it so.

At the bottom of the speaker's speculation lies the idea of discrepancy between youth and middle age caused by the passage of time. Though the son's disappointment is caused by the very short lease given to the past in the present, it is the idea that discrepancies in life cannot be avoided nor solved, which lies at the back of his mind.

Time is the source of such discrepancies to which life surrenders. In a poem entitled 'MCMXIV', the speaker fuses the past and the future in the present. The elements of this experience of time, implied and expressed in the poem, do not depend only on a causal relation between them, but they also depend on the suggestiveness and connotations of the language in which they are couched. One way to recall the past is the traditional method, in which old particulars are described to serve as a reminder of a certain period of time in history now past. Details, such as bleached sunblinds of shut shops, old coins, now no longer in currency, dark-clothed children at play called after kings and queens, tin advertisements, differently-dressed servants and tidy gardens, are considered as a symbol of the Edwardian lifestyle by all Larkin's critics who discussed this poem. But how the poet introduces the past and predicts the future, through his acute and unfeigned consciousness of language, is what concerns us here in the first place:

And the shut shops, the bleached
Established names on the sunblinds,
The farthings and sovereigns,
And dark-clothed children at play
Called after kings and queens,
The tin advertisements
For cocoa and twist, and the pubs
Wide open all day . . .

' . . . the bleached / Established names on the sunblinds', to begin with, operates on two semantic levels: it brings to mind the past by suggesting that those sunny days and times of relaxation and peaceful rest have faded now like 'the bleached names'. On the other hand, the phrase 'bleached names' foretells what might have been after the war (the future). In other words, it suggests what would come to be the list of names of soldiers killed in the war, usually engraved on a monument to their remembrance. By time, these names are bleaching under the effect of natural elements. Such careful mobilisation of words creates the focus of the poet's experience at which all the elements of time meet. This meaning, implied in the above stanza, is once more reinforced by the general meaning of the poem. Moreover, the phrase '. . . dark-clothed children at play' suggests sorrow and sadness upon the destruction caused by the war, rather than gaiety and happiness, for children at play should be happy and in brightly-coloured and not dark clothes.

Furthermore, the future is foretold us through collocation in the third stanza:

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 . . .

The first line of the above stanza echoes the following lines in 'Talking in Bed', where the wind outside

Builds and disperses clouds about the sky,

And dark towns heap up on the horizon.

None of this cares for us . . .

In both cases, things in nature run their usual courses on which we have no influence whatsoever. In fact, we are hopeless in our attempts to stop the cycle of life. In addition to its literal meaning (the shadow thrown on the ground by wheat), the phrase 'Shadowing Domesday lines' alludes to the people, patiently standing in 'Those long uneven lines', who would be dead in the war.

Similarly, the phrase 'restless silence' brings the echo of 'outside, the wind's incomplete unrest' in 'Talking in Bed', 'He said the horses were restless' in 'Wedding Wind' and '. . . leaves unnoticed thicken' in 'Here'. It is a faithful picture of English life before the outbreak of World War I. Though it was apparently a period of peace, yet it was that sort of peace which is identical to the calm that precedes the storm (restless silence). Such word coinage detaches, though partly, the known world from each other and puts it into a new form. It, to borrow J. Korg's words:

. . . suggests a whole new order of things, free the mind from routine ideas, and open imagination to new limitless possibilities . . . Successful images of this kind, like dream images, resist conscious analysis, elusively suggest a latent content, and deny the reader access to their meanings unless he first becomes a convert to the vision they embody.⁴⁰

However doubtful it may look, the negative image, 'restless silence', has a 'latent content'; a power to foretell what will

shortly happen (the war).⁴¹ This richness of Larkin's language has been pointed out by Philip Hobsbaum: 'To be fair, this is a positive image in Larkin's poem, and Larkin is always at his best in negatives'.⁴²

Technically speaking, the poem is held together in one coherent entity through sound-structure, rhyme-structure and the connective 'and'. The sense of continuity, created throughout the poem by the use of participles and the lack of main verbs, is kept within all stanzas by the single rhyme in the fourth and eighth lines of each one of them.⁴³ And between the first and second stanzas, the flow of discourse is maintained by the sound [tʃ] in 'stretched', 'bleached' and 'children', as well as by the connective 'and' which also connects the third stanza with the first two stanzas. As to the last stanza, it is a comment on and a conclusion to the preceding stanzas. It starts and ends with the repeated line: 'Never such innocence again'.

The word 'innocence' is usually associated with beauty, order and love: 'The place-names all hazed over / With flowering grasses'. In fact, love is beauty and beauty is love and both are eventually at the merciless ravages of time.

This point is emphatically expressed in 'Talking in Bed'. This poem is constructed round two themes: that of love in the first stanza and of time in the following three stanzas. The first thing to be noted is the contrast between spiritual internal objects,

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

and physical external ones:

Outside, the wind's incomplete unrest
Builds and disperses clouds about the sky . . .

The comparison is meant to reveal the relation between the human value, i.e. love supposedly immortal, and the natural elements which are temporal. By juxtaposing images of human feelings (love) and natural phenomena, the poet shows an insight into their temporality which forms his attitude towards life in general.

The natural imagery is dominated by the idea of motion manifested by transitive verbs: 'builds' and 'dispersed'. The close relation between time and motion is clearly illustrated by the ceaseless movement of the clouds as they build up and disperse. The building and dissolving process of the clouds, contained in the world of time, constitutes an endless movement leading nowhere, only repeating itself. Again, the words 'build' and 'disperse' contain a sense of power of action time possesses and reveals its cruelty to which all objects are subject. Time renders things powerless and consequently such a comparison helps to show the pathos of the total powerlessness of love.⁴⁴

The wind-cloud imagery is full of foreboding.⁴⁵ It ushers in the discovery of a serious flaw in the couple's relationship with each other and with the world, or in Harry Chambers' words:

The distance between human beings may be great but the distance between man and his environment is even greater, and for Mr Larkin the need to close the gap between man and man takes first priority, and the necessary concomitant of the choice he here makes is a form of anaesthetism in face of the non-human.⁴⁶

Similar to the cloud, as it builds and disperses, are the man's thoughts in his attempt to construct a kind of meaning to his love life. This has been heightened by being contrasted with the almost silent interior: 'Yet more and more time passes silently'. The silence, pervading inside the room, also, creates an appropriate background for the contemplative process the man is engaged in. Nevertheless, this attempt is doomed to failure because love has been associated with natural objects which are vulnerable to time.

In view of this comparison, a new state of affairs has been introduced; it is that of illusion and disappointment. The comparison here, to borrow Roman Jakobson's phrase, is for 'likeness' sake'.⁴⁷ This analogy between objects and love offers itself as a symbol of all transient things in life. In the course of his speculation, the man is appalled at the discovery that they, as well as their relationship, are a slow-dying subject of time. And it is this realisation which shows him that life, as Kenneth Moon puts it: '... is uncertain and impermanent, like the restless wind and the clouds, which build and disperse.'⁴⁸

The awareness of transience in life evokes in the poet a limpid feeling of sadness which constitutes the settings of most of his poems. This is Larkin's world; it is a very special world, once

one gets into, one realises it is Larkin's; a world analogous to that of Hardy (the figure Larkin most admires) about whom Donald Davie says: 'Hardy has the effect of locking any poet whom he influences into the world of historical contingency, a world of specific places at specific time.'⁴⁹

Larkin himself seems to enjoy being locked in sadness as he sees that the end of everything in life, including love, is death. In an article in praise of Hardy, Larkin celebrates sadness and suffering in his work considering them as a remarkable characteristic peculiarly his:

What is the intensely maturing experience of which Hardy's modern man is most sensible? In my view it is suffering, or sadness, and extended consideration of the centrality of suffering in Hardy's work should be the first duty of the true critic for which the work is still waiting . . . Hardy was peculiarly well equipped to perceive the melancholy, the misfortunate, the frustrating, the failing elements of time. It could be said of him as of Little Father Time that he would like the flowers very much if he didn't keep thinking they would all be withered in a few days.⁵⁰

At this stage of his contemplation, the man moves gracefully from the world of nature, evoked by wind and clouds, to the human world. This movement is quite acceptable by the reader. It is as if he moves his eyes from the sky downwards to towns which heap up endlessly: 'And dark towns heap up on the horizon'. What makes the movement as such is the masterful use of the comma at the end of the second stanza and of the connective 'and' at the beginning of the third stanza. This technical device keeps syntax lucid and makes

the progression of thoughts take its course towards the end of the contemplative process.

The state of conflict, both within the man's mind and the world of nature, has been transmitted to us through irregular lines composed of the iambic meter and its variations:

The lines in 'Talking in Bed' are all recognisably iambic pentameters, with the exception of the last and second last, iambic tetrameter and an iambic trimeter respectively. Almost all the lines have the standard ten syllables, but there is no one line that is completely regular.⁵¹

The culmination of the man's conflict reaches its peak in the last stanza:

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

Here is the conclusion of the hard struggle; life is ruled by time and death is the only end of it. The pain felt upon this realisation is clearly indicated by the use of relatively short lines at the end of the poem. It is not so much impatience with life as sadness and melancholy where one finds it pointless to say more than necessary words. These short lines assert nothingness and, as Calvin Bedient puts it, 'suggest an almost painful expenditure of language.'⁵²

The language of the whole poem is plain, depicting two sentiments; a man speculates on love and life using the wind-cloud imagery. It points out a discrepancy between the two or, to borrow Larkin's words:

. . . somewhere within them [the lines] there is a deep fracture, that chills the harmless properties into a wide and arctic plain where they are wedged together eternally to represent a life gone irrevocably wrong.⁵³

Moreover, the memorable ending of this poem is one of Larkin's many stylistic qualities. His use of negative qualifiers and particularly his reliance on the prefix 'un' is noticeable, especially in his later books. This, in Andrew Motion's words:

. . . is not that he replaces one kind of language with another after finishing The North Ship, but that he continually juxtaposes the two, and creates a dialogue between aspiring, elevated cadences on one hand, and all the 'niggling army of modifiers and qualifiers'.⁵⁴

The affirmation in 'not untrue and not unkind' is used to show the conclusion the man comes to: the domination of time over human world and the world of nature as well. It celebrates the triumph of time on life and depicts the poet's realistic view of it and his belief in the finite and the physical.

Time appears to be the destroyer and nothing can stop its flux. Having realised this fact, then the man lies to or hurts nobody when he makes it known, not like David Timms thinks:

The guarded negatives of the last line indicate the defensive tone the speaker feels he must adopt towards the person who shares his bed: a careful concern not to hurt, but not to lie.⁵⁵

Furthermore, the man is only contemplating on and not discussing his love relationship. Since life is ruled by time, so it is uncertain

and this uncertainty makes it difficult to find true things and even to say true words. It is to describe reality only and this is what Bruce Martin tries to confirm in his argument about Larkin's use of double negatives; it is 'to whittle things down to their true dimensions and qualities . . . and to avoid rendering things in any more positive terms than their reality can bear.'⁵⁶

One more point to make is that the scene of two people lying in bed conveys sexual implications. And since the man views love, consequently sex, according to time-scheme, so the result is discord. The harmony of lovers breaks off owing to the transient nature of their love. Thus, the final two lines disrupt the ecstatic mood of the first stanza and evoke a feeling of disappointment; a disappointment with love which comes, to quote David Timms again, from the fact that love 'does not match up to the idea we had of it, nor does it do all we expected of it'.⁵⁷

'Broadcast' is a calm contemplation on the gulf between the lover and his girl and a refusal to sentimentality:

I think of your face among all those faces,

Beautiful and devout before
Cascades of monumental slithering . . .

This poem talks about a love experience. It expresses feelings of love only or, in other words, it is about love rather than a love poem because it does not analyse or philosophise the love concept.⁵⁸ Regarded in this way, the speaker introduces love magnificently in two ways: first, when he uses music as a background for this love

experience. Music and love are delicate and intricate concepts (notes are to music what feelings are to love)). And then, when he provides a musical introduction to his girl similar to that of the royal reception:

Giant whispering and coughing from
Vast Sunday-full and organ-frowned-on spaces
Precede a sudden scuttle on the drum,
'The Queen', and huge resettling. Then begins
A snivel on the violins . . .

The idea behind such a device serves two purposes: to show the grandeur of love and then to make the pathos of love, being pitted against the destructive force of time, most effective.

Turning more directly to the speaker's part, one can notice clearly that it is that of a commentator who sees in his mind's eye what is going on in another place; the hall where the concert is given and in which his girl is in attendance. More important is that the poet is painting in words a scene depending on hearing rather than on sight. He introduces his scene by using alternating lines and syllables: short lines with short vowels are followed by long lines with long vowels. The short vowels in 'whispering', 'sudden', 'scuttle', 'drum', and 'snivel' release the short lines as they accelerate the speed of their rhythm. On the other hand, the heavy-stressed long vowels in the long lines, such as 'vast', 'organ-frowned', 'space', 'Queen', 'huge', 'I', 'your', 'face', 'those' and 'faces', slow down the movement of those lines. Seen in this way, the rhythm of the above-mentioned lines is made to echo

the fluctuating rhythm of the music. At the same time, this effect has been reinforced by the use of the sound [s] in 'whispering', 'vast', 'Sunday', 'spaces', 'precede', 'sudden', 'scuttle', 're-settling', 'snivel', 'face' and 'faces'. Fricative as it is, the sound [s] is associated with the wind hissing as it blows in a forest. This notion is to be re-enhanced later in the poem when the speaker says:

I lose
All but the outline of the still and withering
Leaves on half-emptied trees . . .

On looking more closely, still there is the involvement of sound with meaning: 'whispering' and 'sudden scuttle' echo the fluctuating tempo of music and consequently the speed of the wind. Hence, the sound [s], here, is significant because it, to use William Empson's words, 'suggests incidental connections of meaning.'⁵⁹ Besides, the alliteration in 'Sunday-full' and 'spaces' has been called in to make emphasis fall on the contrast between them; a contrast which adds to the impact and meaning of 'sudden scuttle' and 'snivel'. The space in the forest is filled with the hissing of the wind, similarly the space in the hall (where the concert takes place) is filled with music.

The relation between sound effect and meaning has been well pointed out, once more, by William Empson: 'I think myself its most important mode of action is to connect two words by similarity of sounds so that you are made to think of their possible connection.'⁶⁰

However, it must be made clear here that the connection of two words by a similar sound does not necessarily entail a correspondence to a similar meaning between them, unless this connection itself makes such a suggestion. In our case, such a suggestion has been made between the sound [s] and a two-level meaning (the sound [s], the hissing of the wind, and the music).

The sound [s] makes it, I believe, possible to bring forward a new value to the meaning; it is qualitative value, as it defines the nature of that value. The hissing of the wind, suggested by the sound [s], is produced as the wind beats the trees. This process corresponds to the music being produced by beating drums or strings of musical instruments. In both cases, the result is a sound of pain and complaint which matches the speaker's feeling of sadness and loneliness as we will see later.

What I wish to emphasise again is that the meaning of the poem has been expanded and enriched with new dimensions, by making words bear more than their lexical meaning suggests. Such expansion and enrichment of meaning come from the establishment of linguistic relationships between words. The significance of words comes from considering them collectively and, as Philip Hobsbaum remarks:

Words cannot be considered separately. They are not separate units but part of a whole. This whole is created by the various parts working upon one another: a process of mutual and aggregative definition. But it is the whole that is defined, not the individual word.⁶¹

This mutual relationship between poetic tools, as has been demonstrated above, as well as between words makes the final effect of the poem. The phrase 'Cascades of monumental slithering' gives a salient example on this point. Apart from its meaning as a symbol of love and life, it operates on two different dimensions:⁶² first, the roar of water cascading and beating against the rocks down a slope corresponds to the applause of the audience in the concert. This suggestion is reinforced by the whole poem:

One of your gloves unnoticed on the floor . . .⁶³

Here, the speaker's girl is too preoccupied with what is going on in the hall to notice her glove on the floor, conversely to think of him. This notion intensifies his feeling of loneliness which is fully realised in the last stanza:

Behind
The glowing wavebands, rabid storms of chording
By being distant overpower my mind
All the more shamelessly, their cut-off shout . . .

She is so preoccupied that she appears to him to be sinking and disappearing amidst the host of hands of the attendants, leaving him:

. . . desperate to pick out
Your hands, tiny in all that air, applauding.

The sense of loneliness has been intensified by the distance created between the speaker and his girl. It is significant to notice

that the distance between them is made in space and not in time so they are close, yet very distant from each other. And I feel I do no better than quote Philip Hobsbaum's discussion of this distance:

. . . a distance made so much greater by this one-sided and imperfect means of communication --her applause, merged with that of thousands of others, crackling over the radio. For me, it is a stroke of genius to make the girl's hands--the only ones he cares about, the ones he listens for--inconceivably remote, surrounded by space, 'tiny in all that air'. And the break in that last line--stressing 'tiny', prolonging 'all that air' into a hopeless sigh, leaving us to dwell on the 'applauding' with its bitter irony.⁶⁴

The second dimension, on which 'Cascades of monumental slithering' operates, is that it evokes the perpetual change and destruction of the waterfall. The waterfalls seem to beat ceaselessly against the rocks of the cliff. They signal a change in the general mood created in the poem. The poem starts with a bright and happy mood and as soon as we pass the second line of the second stanza, the speaker's tone changes all of a sudden. He feels the distance that separates him from his girl grow wider and wider. He tries desperately to bridge it by attempting (though theoretically) to attract her attention, to make her feel his presence, by mentioning individual items such as her 'gloves' and 'new shoes'. But his mood is growing rapidly sad, as the distance becomes greater and loneliness takes over. In this way, the said line serves as a transitional point in the general mood of the poem.

This is another example of how language is made to work and how a detailed scene is depicted by words working upon each other. It is a unique characteristic of Larkin. His language, to use W. Nowotny's simile, is not like the 'onion' when:

. . . one strips the layers off it one after another until there is nothing left inside; Poetic language has the quality, paradoxical in non-poetic language, that when one layer of it is stripped off, the onion looks bigger and better than it did before--or, to speak more rationally, the process of examining its structure in critical terms sharpens the enquirer's appreciation of the power residing in poetic configurations of words.⁶⁵

In 'Broadcast', the speaker's love for his girl deepens his feeling of loneliness and increases his isolation. Once love is associated with physical objects, it collapses and appears hopeless to offer any solution to time.

Perhaps Larkin's attitude towards love is best introduced in 'An Arundel Tomb' which concludes this book.⁶⁶ At first sight, the title introduces the subject of the whole poem. It is so because the tomb stands as a symbol of love as well as of death or rather it contains them. This thematic relation has been established right from the outset of the poem.

Every lexical item of the first line: 'Side by side, their faces blurred' contains long and heavily stressed vowels ([ai], [ɛə], [ei]). This, as a matter of fact, results in a powerful auditory sequence that matches the dignified subject and the solemnity of the dead for whom the tomb stands. In the meantime, the first line shows

solidarity with the second through the sound bond [ai] in 'Side by side' and 'lie'. This asserts the scene to be of a couple lying together in the grave.⁶⁷

Hence, the absence of their actions comes into focus. All verbal phrases of action, that occur in connection with them, have been reduced either to nothingness by negation or to actions performed by proxy (an agent). As a result, we find that the earl's hand has been withdrawn (by the sculptor) to hold his wife's, and 'They would not think' and 'They would not guess'. The impact of this device, together with the sound effect between the title and the poem, is to intensify certain features of the scene, building up in each stanza to the image of love in relation to time incarnated in the sculpture.

'An Arundel Tomb' shares the same technical characteristic, in developing its subject, with 'The Whitsun Weddings' and 'Dockery and Son'. It also starts with an observation; the poet observes a monument of man and his wife lying in stone and ends on a memorable line: 'What will survive of us is love'.

The special thing about the stone effigies of the medieval couple is that the husband's hand is holding his wife's:

One sees, with a sharp tender shock,
His hand withdrawn, holding her hand . . .

It is this small observation which attracts the poet's attention and provides the starting point for his meditation on the couple's relationship and life too. Not until the middle stanza does the

contemplative process on the sculpture begin as the poet leads the reader from external details to focus on its ironic significance.

The use of enjambment between the fourth and fifth stanzas provides an unbroken movement in time and enables us to sustain our concentration on the couple's 'stationary voyage' and the lapse of time which the following stanza shows:

Snow fell, undated. Light
Each summer thronged the glass. A bright
Litter of birdcalls strewed the same
Bone-riddled ground. And up the paths
The endless altered people came . . .

The phrases 'snow fell, undated' and 'Light / Each summer . . .' are terse and suggestive. Heavily stressed as each word is, together they indicate the fleetness of time, as well as the assertion of continuing time having escaped the notice of the dead couple lying in their grave. The last line of the above-mentioned stanza, with its alternating stresses, is reminiscent of the swiftness of time. About this very point, David Timms points out that this line:

. . . is one of Larkin's very rare completely regular iambic lines, where heavy stresses of equal weight alternate with light ones, again of equal weight. Here, its steady thump is like a clock's, regularly ticking the time away, suggesting the continuous stream of 'altered people', corpses and visitors, coming to the graveyard.⁶⁸

As a formidable place void of life, the graveyard scene has been depicted through collocations: the air changes into 'soundless damage'; the glass is empty yet full with light only; the birdcalls are rendered to litter that 'strewed' the ground which is already riddled with bones,

and the visitors to the place are altered people. Against such lifeless background, the sculpture and what it symbolises are set. Such combinations of words have cast doubts on the poet's mind, eventually manifested in his attitude towards love value in relation to time. For though the effigies still 'lie in stone' holding hands, their faithfulness is a mere deception and is nothing more than 'A sculptor's sweet commissioned grace'.

Whether or not they like it, they are within time's domain; time which 'has transfigured them into untruth'. This view has been suggested from the start: the earl's and countess's 'faces blurred' and vaguely show their feelings, and the earl's 'left-hand gauntlet, still / Clasped empty in the other'. In addition, the comic play on the verb 'lie' in 'lie in stone' in the first stanza and 'lie so long' in the third is, also, a hint at the deceptive gesture of the sculpture. These hints at the fragility of love in front of the wrath of time make the poet admit that the love gesture of the effigies is less than true:

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.

Through equivocation, the poet extends the theme of relinquishing the past and accepting the natural course of events in life. The equivocation is perceived by the repetition of the words 'lie' and 'almost' which allows the reader to think of two meanings building up to the

climax of the reflection on the truth of love; its vulnerability.

Love is not just inherently imperfect, but it never lasts.

The poem's significance lies largely in the textual components the poet uses; repetition, collocation, pun, metre and enjambment, which, through interaction, introduce the poem's subject and the poet's attitude towards it.

The title poem, 'The Whitsun Weddings', introduces another approach to the problem of time. Deeply rooted in the world of time, it is about marriage as a means to confront the power of time and change. Whether this attempt is successful or not is what I try to point out in the following discussion.

In this poem, the poet approaches time through realistic and not romantic treatment of marriage. From the outset, Larkin shows his concern about time:

That Whitsun, I was late getting away:
Not till about
One-twenty on the sunlit Saturday . . .

There are four words which allude to time in the above-mentioned lines, namely: 'Whitsun', 'late', 'one-twenty' and 'Saturday'. They bring into play a set of expectations which determine the interpretations we derive from the whole poem. A set of possibilities has been suggested by the opening word 'That', as it takes on a new force: it refers to social, almost religious ritual (marriage).

The descriptive style of the first two stanzas will undoubtedly bring forward an element of suspense which tempts the reader to run over them and slow down as he approaches the third stanza. What

invites such a reading is the slowness of rhythm which is created mostly by words made of one syllable: there are 82 words containing one syllable each, out of 128 words of which the first two stanzas consist. The slow rhythm is important because it arouses our expectations, which are the outcome of the opposition between the first two stanzas and the title on one hand, and connotes the movement of the train as it pulls out from the city into the countryside on the other.

The train is a frequent imagery in Larkin's poetry. The speaker of 'Like the Train's Beat' in The North Ship observes a 'Polish air-girl in the corner seat' as:

The train runs on through wilderness
Of cities. Still the hammered miles
Diversify behind her face . . .

Again, the hero of Larkin's novel Jill is also travelling to Oxford by train. Larkin seems to use the train imagery to give an account of his own experience of time. To examine its possibilities, the train imagery may be used as a defence which the speaker attempts to erect against his fear of the passage of time. Being on the train provides him with a measure of security which fixity never does. In this sequence, the train imagery operates on two levels: first, it offers the speaker the possibility of a return to the same starting point, while time always sells one-way tickets.⁶⁹

Structurally speaking, the sense of unbroken continuity through time has been maintained by the rhyme-scheme as well.⁷⁰ Rhythm,

together with rhyme effect, keeps on the continuous movement of the poem as a whole and leads the reader gently to the conclusion. This, in turn, mirrors the movement of the train and consequently the fleetingness of time. Such strongly marked rhythm which becomes a gentle undercurrent is what makes Frederick Grubb think that this poem is reminiscent of the 'aesthetic idealism' of Stephen Spender's 'The Express': 'Larkin's rhythm more than echoes the train, it prevents, as it accentuates, the tremor of resistless contingency which he sees undermine the members of the weddings'.⁷¹

As the poet approaches the third stanza, the main subject of the poem, the marriages to which the title alludes, has been introduced and the contemplative process begun. Nevertheless, our suspense never fades. A new poetic device has been employed, as from the third stanza, to this effect. The sense of the unbroken movement is reinforced by enjambment. The speaker evokes the reader's curiosity by adopting two devices: first, by securing the continuous flow of the discourse which invites the reader to join the speaker voluntarily to the end of the train trip. And second, by changing scenes as the train gathers speed and moves out of the city:

At first, I didn't notice what a noise
 The weddings made
 Each station that we stopped at: sun destroys
 The interest of what's happening in the shade,
 And down the long cool platforms whoops and skirls
 I took for porters larking with the mails,
 And went on reading. Once we started, though,
 We passed them, grinning and pomaded, girls
 In parodies of fashion, heels and veils,
 All posed irresolutely, watching us go . . .

The speaker on the train competes against time, as scenes speed by him like a moving film. Nevertheless, certain scenes are fixed in his mind. Particulars, such as 'back of houses', 'wind-screens', 'fish-dock smell', 'farms', 'fathers with broad belts', 'mothers loud and fat', have been captured by him. In doing so, the speaker seems to achieve a sort of detachment from time, and in a sense, becomes temporarily the winner.

To put it in another way, the train offers him a feeling of momentary security against time, as he is aware that he could come back home. In spite of this feeling has been introduced through motion in time (by a moving vehicle), the speaker (the poet) declines to share dreams with the romanticists in their endeavour to attain immortality through art. Colin Falck points this out when he argues that:

The fantasy-world which he has elected to share has little to do with romanticism, because it destroys the very bridge which romanticism would construct between the ideal and the world which actually exists: the poet can no longer do anything to bring our dreams into relation with reality. The ideal, for Larkin, has become inaccessible, and being inaccessible it can only throw the real world into shadow instead of lighting it up from within.⁷²

For Larkin, 'our element is time' and not the timelessness of romantic dreamers. The speaker appears to be anxious to register the impact and temporary experience of being on the train, watching 'A dozen marriages got under way', as well as the transient nature of life in general.

At first, the speaker starts as a mere observer, speaking in the first person in the first line of the first stanza. Here, the pronoun 'I' in 'I was late getting away' is a poetic construction. It derives its significance from the energy it has which enables us to abandon the external situation and to consider the general framework of linguistic relationships within the whole poem. In addition to the fact that 'I' shows the speaker's obsession with time, it is also the agent of the action of getting away and its importance depends on the expectations it raises in us as to what the consequences are of getting away. This sense of suspense is reinforced by the use of the colon at the end of the first line. It is worth while mentioning that the use of personal pronouns proclaims the meditative state the speaker is to take up in the rest of the poem:

A whole poetic tradition uses spatial, temporal and personal deictics in order to force the reader to construct a meditative persona. The poem is presented as the discourse of a speaker who, at the moment of speaking, stands before a particular scene, even if this apparent claim was biographically true it is absorbed and transformed by poetic convention so as to permit a certain kind of thematic development. The drama will be one of mind itself when faced with external stimuli, and the reader must take account of the gap between object and feeling, if only in order that the fusion which the poem may enact be taken as an achievement.⁷³

The use of 'we' instead of 'I' in the second line: 'A slow and stopping curve southward we kept', indicates the speaker's personal involvement in what he is observing from the train's window. He is

an observer no more; he is speculating on particulars of cities the train passes by. The period at the end of the second stanza marks the break down of the contemplative process and the speaker's recovery from it as he uses the first person again in the first line of the third stanza:

At first, I didn't notice what a noise
The weddings made . . .

The comma after the phrase 'at first' provides a pause in the discourse which enables the speaker to resume the second round of contemplation.⁷⁴ This time, he speculates on wedding parties and soon he gets involved in the scene and starts to study the crowds on the railway platforms outside his window. This is clearly marked by his use of the plural pronoun 'we' in the seventh line of the aforesaid stanza right to the end of the poem:

Once we started, though,
We passed them, grinning and pomaded, girls
In parodies of fashion, heels and veils . . .

The second dimension of meaning on which the train imagery operates is that it is a vehicle in motion and this implies time because time is never static; it is correlative with motion. The train trip, like life, is prefixed and passengers on the train have no control whatsoever on its destination. What puts that image into perspective is its association with the cycle of life; the three stages of human life--birth, marriage and death.

As this frail travelling coincidence comes to its end, the tone and syntax of the poem takes a new twist: the emotional accumulation of this experience, building up throughout the stanzas and felt by the speaker as well as the reader, has come to the point of eruption:

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.

One point to be noticed here, is that the rhythm is slowed down at the conclusion of the poem by the accumulation of long stressed vowels in the last three lines.⁷⁵

Meanwhile, these lines bring out the theme of death and renewal; a theme very frequently dealt with by Larkin. The showery arrows are of ambivalent values; they imply death, as well as fertility. Taken in a wider perspective, man's life is a journey which involves sexual fulfilment and the renewal of life and ultimately it ends in death. This same view of man's life can be said about nature in general and the cycle of seasons comes immediately to mind.

Such basic matters in man's life, especially those regarding sex and death summed up in the final three lines, deserve careful attention in any approach towards understanding the whole poem. As a matter of fact, this grand finale is a characteristic aspect of Larkin's poetic genius which can be noticed in most of his poems.⁷⁶ It seems to be

that he is concerned about the conclusions of his poems. This can be inferred from his observations of how other poets end their poems. Once Larkin deplores the way in which Emily Dickinson's poems conclude:

Only rarely, however, did she bring a poem to a successful conclusion: the amazing riches of originality offered by her index of first lines is belied on the page . . . too often the poem expires in a teased-out and breathless obscurity. Often the imagery is both trivial and immense.⁷⁷

The last three lines have evoked different points of view in Larkin's critics who have dealt with this well-known poem. All of them agree, more or less, on the idea that they mark a departure of the poet from the physical reality, demonstrated in the rest of the poem, to an imaginative consummation. However, in one way or another, they base their arguments on Larkin's advice, mentioned by Anthony Thwaite, on how these lines should be read:

I remember Larkin writing to tell me, when I was about to produce the first broadcast reading . . . of 'The Whitsun Weddings', that what I should aim to get from the actor was a level, even a plodding, descriptive note, until the mysterious last lines, when the poem should suddenly 'lift off the ground'.⁷⁸

To me, the lines mentioned above present the conflict between reality and imagination; between life, time and the poetic talent which strives to depict it not as it is seen but as it is felt by the poet. Larkin himself confirms this view when he asserts that:

What one is not released from is the constant struggle between mind and imagination to decide what is important enough to be written about. I suppose that most writers would say that their purpose in writing was to preserve the truth about things as they see it. Unfortunately to write well entails enjoying what you are writing, and there is not much pleasure to be got from the truth about things as anyone sees it. What one does enjoy writing--what the imagination is only too ready to help with--is in some form or other, compensation, assertion of oneself in an indifferent or hostile environment.⁷⁹

As a matter of fact, Larkin relies much on the immediate physical world. A skilful craftsman as he is, he picks up from everyday life a host of empirical experiences and sums them up in a line or two. Realistic details about the city, the countryside and people have been given in the first seven stanzas. However, what differentiates the speaker from the young couples and the crowd is the fact that, unlike them, he speculates on and feels these experiences (the marriages) as he gradually gets involved in them. It can also be noticed that, as John Wain puts it:

. . . the poet's involvement is greater than theirs; he sees and understands just what it is that each participant feels, and then puts them together to form one complete experience, felt in its directness by no one, yet present in the atmosphere and available to that imaginative contemplation that makes 'art'.⁸⁰

Towards the end of the poem, the speaker's imaginative contemplation takes the form of a delicate epiphany. It is the result of the assimilation of the poet's empirical experiences of the physical world which forms the 'centre of gravity' in this poem.

In this connection and in words reminiscent of T.S. Eliot's, in the discussion of his critical principle in literature--the relationships between the artist and tradition--cited below, Terry Whalen writes:

In what amounts to a habit of beholding visual sensitivity, Larkin aligns his art with an honoured tradition of empirically oriented poetry, one which reaches backward throughout most of the great poetry of the English speaking tradition. The centre of gravity in Larkin's poetry is the physical world as it suggestively manifests itself on the stage of his sensitive and personal imagination.⁸¹

This epiphany, arrived at by the speaker's close observation of reality, is, in more than one way, paradoxical. It is so because it works in two different ways: first, the 'rain' is associated, as usual, with fertility as a result of the consummation of love and the sexual fulfilment introduced in the last three lines. It is worth mentioning that such fulfilment has been suggested earlier in the poem in 'all cushions hot', and 'hothouse flashed', which are associated with hot-blooded newly married couples. This context does, nevertheless, spring into existence and its effectiveness is the sign of the poet's distinguished achievement.

But it should be stressed, here, that the conclusion of the poem is not an abstract summary to the rest of it. The syntax of the final lines: 'tightened brakes took hold', 'swelled', 'sense of falling', 'arrow-shower' and 'rain', breaks down the stylistic mould of the previous lines. In doing so, it creates a kind of perception

which maintains a continual surprisingness of empirical reality in the reader's conscious mind. This is a process of transformation, but not in Andrew Motion's sense when he claims that 'Larkin is released from the empirically observed world, and its attendant disappointments, into one of transcendent imaginative fulfilment.'⁸²

It is not transcendent because it is, as has already been shown, paradoxical. 'An arrow-shower' and 'falling' suggest destruction and that fertility is doomed to disappointment because the lovers cannot overcome time. Such contradiction and paradox foil any attempt to read the finishing lines as a romantic escape from the world of time because they are, to quote Martin Scofield, 'a way of rendering the surprisingness of reality, the way things and perceptions shift and change even as they are being contemplated.'⁸³ The fresh couples cannot resist the destructive force of time indicated by the word 'falling', with its religious connotation, which recalls Adam's fall from immortality (Heaven) to the mortal life on earth which is, again, in the domain of time. This idea has been reinforced early in the poem by phrases, such as '. . . empty train', 'As if out on the end of an event / Waving goodbye', '. . . the wedding-days / Were coming to an end', 'The secret like a happy funeral', 'At a religious wounding', 'Thought of the others they would never meet', and '. . . it was nearly done'.

The final lines invite further discussion and it is very much to the point that Anthony Thwaite describes them as 'mysterious'.⁸⁴ They are mysterious in the sense that they are contradictory. The

work of poetry through contradictions is a poetic device employed by poets to show the pathos of a given situation (here, the fact that the young couples are subject to time and death). Larkin himself has detected the use of this poetic device in Hardy's love poetry and associated it with poetic creation:

This kind of paradox is inseparable from poetic creation, and indeed from life altogether. At times it almost appears a sort of basic insincerity in human affection. At others it seems a flaw built deeply into the working of the emotions, creating an inevitable bias in life towards unhappiness.⁸⁵

Such being the case, it is not far from fact to assume that Larkin is aware of the paradoxical end of 'The Whitsun Weddings'. The fact of the gaiety of wedding parties, caught by the speaker's participation in its liveliness, appears in odd contradiction to the 'happy funeral' and 'a sense of falling'. But, nevertheless, it is an illumination based on a quality of perception of the idea that life is heading to an end.

On the other hand, what makes such reading of the conclusion more palatable is its ambivalent value which involves renewal and death. This point invites us to the poet's attitude towards time already discussed earlier in this chapter, and the previous two chapters, and need not be elaborated. One more point to be emphasised here is that in 'The Whitsun Weddings', the cyclic time is a recurrent course of events: birth, death and rebirth. Notwithstanding, this notion of time, tragic as it is, introduces life as

subject to death. To Larkin, the past is dead, the present is futile and the future is unknown. He has no faith in the future because his past is uneventful. And as Paul Valèry argues: 'The past as a precise idea has meaning and value for the man who is aware that he has a passion for the future.'⁸⁶

In dealing with 'The Whitsun Weddings', one cannot resist the temptation of comparing it with John Betjeman's 'The Metropolitan Railway'. But I should stress here that the aim of such a comparison is less to point out Larkin's place in tradition than to illuminate his relationship with literary tradition. This principle of literary relationship between the artist and his tradition has well been demonstrated by T.S. Eliot:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation, is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You can't value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead.⁸⁷

This principle may, at first glance, appear more applicable to Hardy than to Betjeman. Yet, it does not seem out of place for though Betjeman and Larkin are new contemporaries, Betjeman belongs to the old generation whose poetry is deeply rooted in traditional English Poetry:

More than any other contemporary's poetry, Betjeman's speaks for itself at first encounter with lambent clarity. It ranges over a wide variety of likes and dislikes proper to a sensitive personality in love with Victorianism, fascinated by people and keenly nostalgic for the private and public past.⁸⁸

Meanwhile, such a comparison seems to be fruitful and interesting especially when we know that Betjeman is one of Larkin's favourites.⁸⁹

Despite the seemingly apparent similarities between both poems, their structures are as different as their authors attitudes towards the problem of time. Below, I quote Betjeman's poem in full:

EARLY Electric! With what radiant hope
Men formed this many-branched electrolier,
Twisted the flex around the iron rope
And let the dazzling vacuum globes hang clear,
And then with hearts the rich contrivance fill'd
Of copper, beaten by the Bromsgrove Guild.

Early Electric! Sit you down and see,
'Mid this fine woodwork and a smell of dinner,
A stained-glass windmill and a pot of tea,
And sepia views of leafy lanes in PINNER,--
Then visualise, far down the shining lines,
Your parents' homestead set in murmuring pines.

Smoothly from HARROW passing PRESTON ROAD,
They saw the last green fields and misty sky,
At NEASDEN watched a workmen's train unload,
And, with the morning villas sliding by,
They felt so sure on their electric trip
That Youth and Progress were in partnership.

And all that day in murky London Wall
The thought of RUISLIP kept him warm inside;
At FARRINGDON that lunch hour at a stall
He bought a dozen plants of London Pride;
While she, in arc-lit Oxford Street adrift,
Soared through the sales by safe hydraulic lift.

Early Electric! Maybe even here
They met that evening at six-fifteen
Beneath the hearts of this electrolier
And caught the first non-stop to WILLESDEN GREEN,
Then out and on, through rural RAYNER'S LANE
To autumn-scented Middlesex again.

Cancer has killed him. Heart is killing her.
The trees are down. An Odeon flashes fire
Where stood their villa by the murmuring fir
When 'they would for their children's good conspire'.
Of all their loves and hopes on hurrying feet
Thou art the worm memorial, Baker Street.⁹⁰

Thematically, both poems deal with a love experience of newly married couples. Technically speaking, their stanzas are written in iambic pentameter with slight alternations and slightly different rhymes. Furthermore, phrases such as 'That Whitsun', 'All afternoon', 'An Odeon went past', 'A hothouse flashed uniquely', and 'through the tall heat' in 'The Whitsun Weddings', find their echoes in 'The Metropolitan Railway' in such phrases as 'Early Electric!', 'And all that day', 'An Odeon flashes fire', and 'through rural RAYNER'S LANE'.

To look at their structures more closely, the sense of continuity in Larkin's poem has been generated, as has been shown above, by the poet's full use of enjambment and rhyme-structure, as well as participles. There are thirteen participles in 'The Whitsun Weddings' against three participles only in 'The Metropolitan Railway'.⁹¹ Besides, the succession of similarly rhymed stanzas of Betjeman's poem (all ababcc) fails, also, to create that unbroken movement through time experienced by the speaker's progress on the train in 'The Whitsun Weddings'. Any stanza in Betjeman's poem forms, almost, an independent entity as it gives a complete meaning by itself and can hardly be noticed when taken out of the poem. This absence of continuity in 'The Metropolitan Railway' is also due to the fact that its speaker is not actually on the train as the speaker in 'The Whitsun Weddings'; he is watching the young couple from the window of Baker Street Station buffet. This fact results in two consequences: first, the description of particulars and details in Betjeman's poem is not as powerful as that in Larkin's. And then, as from the third

stanza, the speaker in 'The Whitsun Weddings' gets more involved in the marriages than that of 'The Metropolitan Railway' as has been demonstrated above.

Nevertheless, Betjeman's poem is also moving. It owes its poignancy to the poet's deep sense of the lovely past being replaced with the ugly present. Larkin and Betjeman are quite different in this respect. Unlike Larkin, Betjeman's source of sadness stems from his nostalgia for the past, yet both of them show preoccupation with death:

Betjeman is, above all, the poet of nostalgia, any landscape, building or social custom which has survived from his childhood or young manhood evokes in him an emotion comparable with that evoked for Proust by the madeleine dipped in tea.⁹²

In 'The Metropolitan Railway', Betjeman's regrets are recognizable objects of deep emotions that rise to the surface through the evocation of the young couple in the face of ruthless time: 'Cancer has killed him. Heart is killing her'. While Larkin has shown the powerlessness of the young couples to confront time through a paradoxical conclusion (death and rebirth), Betjeman has attained the same idea through ironical implication of the last two lines of the third stanza:

They felt so sure on their electric trip
That Youth and Progress are in partnership. . .

Larkin touches upon the same point when he makes his comments
that:

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

Such a tragic satire we encounter very often in Larkin's
poetry. In lines echoing Betjeman's above-mentioned ones, Larkin
points out how time is lurking to destroy happy moments:

Surely, to think the lion's share
Of happiness is found by couples--sheer
Inaccuracy, as far as I'm concerned. . .

Notes

¹ Philip Larkin wrote The Whitsun Weddings during the period between 1955 (the year which saw the publication of The Less Deceived) and 1964 when it was first published. Since he was born in 1922 he was, approximately, between thirty-three and forty-two years old at the time he wrote the poems in this book.

² Michael Riffaterre, Semiotics of Poetry (London, 1980), p. 100. About the significance of the 'poetic sign', see also p. 23.

³ David Timms, Philip Larkin (Edinburgh, 1973), p. 97.

⁴ Veronica Forrest-Thomson, Poetic Artifice (Manchester, 1978), p. 58.

⁵ Philip Hobsbaum, 'Where Are the War Poets?', Outposts, 61 (Summer 1964), p. 22.

⁶ Geoffrey N. Leech, A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry (London, 1980), p. 124.

⁷ Colin Falck, 'Philip Larkin', The Modern Poet, ed. Ian Hamilton (London, 1968), p. 104.

⁸ In his article, 'The Other Larkin', J.R. Watson compares Mr Bleaney with what Mircea Eliade would call 'a profane mode of being' which can be contrasted with the 'sacred as a mode of being, a state common in primitive societies' in which 'man is aware of certain times and certain places as having a special significance'. In order to arrive at a sound judgement, I find it necessary to quote the passages which Watson has already quoted from Eliade's book, The Sacred and the Profane:

Modern nonreligious man assumes a new existential situation; he regards himself solely as the subject and agent of history, and refuses all appeal to transcendence. In other words, he accepts no model for humanity outside the human condition as it can be seen in the various historical situations.

The intention that can be read in the experience of sacred space and sacred time reveals a desire to reintegrate a primordial situation--that in which the gods and the mythical ancestors were present, that is were engaged in creating the world, or in organizing it, or in revealing the foundations of civilization to man . . . the nostalgia for origins is equivalent to a religious nostalgia. Man desires to recover the active presence of the gods; he also desires to live in the world as it came from the Creator's hands, pure, and strong.

(Critical Quarterly, 17:4, Winter 1975, pp. 350-62.)

Most religions, I believe, lay emphasis on life after death; Eternity; Paradise or Hell. They stress the fact that our existence is temporal and it is just a path leading to Eternity. But at the same time, this does not mean to sit in a corner and die; rather to live one's life and seize any chance--chances often pass by in different disguises-- wherever and whenever it comes. None of the religions, as far as I know, approves the idea that man should spend his life 'waiting for Godot'. And none of them states that man should 'live in the world as it came from the Creator's hand', as M. Eliade claims. Rather, they assign man an active and positive role to perform; otherwise we would live the pre-historic period in the present time. Religions urge people to work and try all the possibilities available to create a better life on earth. Man has to live his life and be content only with what he can really do, i.e. according to his capabilities.

Complacency, in this sense, does not mean determinism. It is the self-satisfaction reached by man's attempts; the complete contentment felt upon the discovery of one's merits. Having this in mind, it seems to me that J.R. Watson contradicts himself by adopting M. Eliade's ideas about the religious and the nonreligious men.

Mr Bleaney's limited activities, digging the landlady's garden together with his summer holidays, show him to be quite satisfied with his present state and the way of life he is leading. This means (bearing in mind M. Eliade's argument) he is religious because he, again to use M. Eliade's words, 'lives in the world as it came from the Creator's hand'. He does not make or even intend to make any positive move to change the mode of his life. And since there is no explicit hint in the poem that testifies to Mr Bleaney's religiousness or nonreligiousness, so both suppositions are liable to discussion and assumption. But I should stress the idea, as illustrated above, that Mr Bleaney is religious only from J.R. Watson's point of view (which is in contradiction with his argument) and not in view of the account I have given in my discussion of religions.

On the other hand, the nonreligious man, as a matter of fact, is dissatisfied with and evermore in rebellion against religion and life as a whole. And as Mr Bleaney shows no gesture of dissatisfaction with his life, so it is quite clear that his problem is not in being religious or nonreligious. Rather, it is in being seated on the margin of life; in being a mere on-looker. What Mr Bleaney needs is to keep in touch with life; to achieve effective participation and active involvement with life through the understanding of time.

⁹ See 3, above.

¹⁰ Shakespeare: Complete Works, ed. W.J. Craig (London, 1974), p. 1088. In Act III, Scene 1, Hamlet says:

. . . who would fardels bear,
 To grunt and sweat under a weary life;
 But that the dread of something after death,--
 The undiscovered country, from whose bourn
 No traveller returns,--puzzles the will;
 And makes us rather bear those ills we have,
 Than fly to others that we know not of?
 Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;
 And thus the native hue of resolution
 Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought;
 And enterprises of great pith and moment,
 With this regard, their currents turn awry,
 And lose the name of action.

But to die or commit suicide is not bravery nor is thinking about it cowardice because thinking hard about a problem means the calculation of all its complexities. Thus, thinking too much of his surroundings, the speaker in 'Mr Bleaney' makes a serious attempt to build up confidence in himself in every step he may take in the future.

¹¹ See 3, above.

¹² Lawrence Durrell, Key to Modern Poetry (London, 1952), p. 37.

¹³ See 3, above, p. 117.

¹⁴ Besides what has been mentioned above, the hyphen at the end of the fifth line of the second stanza indicates the lack of adequacy of the explanation (its imprecision), as well as a signal that the natural process cannot be illustrated with words or be fully perceived. Probably, it can be seen in a form of vague perception. Or, it could be seen in the mind's

eye if we take 'no one' to mean 'not everyone' which means someone could see it. Conversely, vague perception implies the knowledge that change happens in life and not how it happens, and this is the 'ordinary talent' of an ordinary man. Moreover, the word 'clobber' is of special significance to the idea of 'ordinariness' of the situation involved. Slang as it is, 'clobber' (to pound mercilessly) has been endowed with a dormant power enhanced by everyday use of language.

¹⁵ T.S. Eliot, Collected Poems 1909-1962 (London, 1977), p. 190.

¹⁶ The use of a variety of verbs expressing the same action is quite obvious in 'First Sight'. The verbs 'find', 'learn' and 'grasp' are substitutions for the act of knowing (to know). This device generates a strong semantic bond by which the poem is held together as a united whole. Similarly, this device (W. Baker calls it 'catalogue' in Syntax in English Poetry 1870-1930, Berkeley University of California, 1967, p. 65.) can be used with nouns as well, and is called name substitution. D.H. Lawrence's 'Tortoise Shout' is an example:

Worse than the cry of the new-born,
A scream,
A yell,
A shout,
A paeon,
A death-agony,
A birth-cry,
A submission,
All tiny, tiny, far away, reptile under the first dawn . . .

(D.H. Lawrence, Selected Poems, ed. Keith Sagar, Middlesex, 1972, p. 152.)

¹⁷ The poem consists of seventy nine words; twenty three of them contain the sound [o] or its variations ([ɔ], [ɔː], [u:], [ou], [au]). The words are: 'walk', 'snow', 'clouds', 'know', 'nothing', 'newly', 'to', 'fro', 'all', 'outside', 'fold', 'cold', 'ewe', 'round', 'too', 'could', 'not', 'knew', 'what', 'so', 'soon', 'grow' and 'snow'. As to the rhyme-structure employed in this poem, there are eight lines out of fourteen, which the poem consists of, rhyme with words ending in long forms of the sound [o], i.e. with diphthongs [u:], [ou]. These diphthongs serve as an outlet for the sound [o], which has accumulated within the poem, to make itself felt and to establish the general effect in the whole poem--the graceful feeling of melancholy associated with lambs being held in wild weather.

¹⁸ Winifred Nowotny, The Language Poets Use (London, 1975), p. 116.

- 19 Donald Davie, Articulate Energy (London, 1955), pp. 41-2.
- 20 Anne Cluysenaar, Introduction to Literary Stylistics (London, 1976), p. 53.
- 21 Neil Powell, Tradition and Structure in Contemporary Poetry (unpublished M.Phil. thesis, University of Warwick, 1975), p. 89.
- 22 M.L. Rosenthal, The New Poets, American and British since World War II (New York, 1967), p. 243.
- 23 Andrew Motion, Philip Larkin (London, 1982), p. 68.

24 It should be stressed, here, that the speaker's dislike of the empty lives of the elderly and shabby frequenters of the park is not so much interest in work as preference. He prefers work to idleness because he gets used to it. But this preference to work does not alter the fact that both of them lead to the same end; the end of life and time's triumph. Larkin himself asserts this very point when, speaking of his position at Hull, he describes work as 'frightful' and 'grand': '. . . that nice little Shetland pony of a job you so confidently bestride in the beginning [which] suddenly grows to a frightful Grand National Winner'. (Quoted by Bruce Martin, Philip Larkin, Boston, 1978, p. 68.)

25 Ian Hamilton, 'Four Conversations', London Magazine, IV:8 (November 1964), p. 73.

26 To pursue this argument further, one might add that the dissatisfaction with idleness as a solution to the problem of time, predicted in the first two lines, though implicitly, raises our expectations and tempts us to read the poem throughout. And it is in this way that language becomes significant as Stanley E. Fish argues:

As a result we enter the story expecting to encounter a people who differ from us in important respects, and we are predisposed to attach that difference to whatever in their behaviour calls attention to itself. It is in this way that the language of 'people' becomes significant, not because it is symbolic, but because it functions in a structure of expectations, and it is in the context of that structure that a reader is moved to assign it a value.

('What is Stylistics and Why Are They Saying Such Terrible Things About It?', Essays in Modern Stylistics, ed. Donald C. Freeman, London, 1981, p. 64.)

²⁷ Harry Chambers, 'Laureate of a Fallen Landscape', Phoenix (Spring 1964), p. 38.

²⁸ Frederick Grubb, A Vision of Reality (London, 1965), p. 234.

²⁹ See 2, above, p. 26.

³⁰ For more details, see Philip Hobsbaum's interesting discussion of the vase imagery in his article on Charles Tomlinson and Philip Larkin in Lines Review, No. 82 (September 1982), pp. 19-20.

³¹ Barbara H. Smith, Poetic Closure (London, 1970), p. 13.

³² T.S. Eliot, On Poetry and Poets (Kent, 1979), p. 29.

³³ Larkin is not very much concerned with old days at St John's College, Oxford. Though the Dean's remarks in the first two lines are the chance recurrence that stirs the poet's sensation of his past, yet they do not take him outside time. Such emotions of the past are aroused in him by his brain and not his innermost self. As such, he is unable to relive or create those memories of the past. Rather, he is merely recalling them.

³⁴ This is quite justifiable because the poet is not interested in the relation of past to present and to future. As a result, his hold on the present and the future becomes uncertain and the past is already lost. This in turn explains why the poet is not after a definite solution to the question of time.

³⁵ A.K. Weatherhead argues that:

. . . there is poetic play between 'locked' at the beginning of the line and 'wide' at the end, conditions that speak respectively to middle-age and youth and their respective choices, of which this poet is consistently conscious. A similar contrast between 'known' and 'ignored' shapes the following line, and contributes to the same theme of the poet's loss of youth. ('Philip Larkin of England', ELH, 38:4, December 1971, p. 627.)

³⁶ For more details about the use of train imagery in Larkin's poetry, see my discussion of 'The Whitsun Weddings'.

37 The moon imagery is not as frequent as other natural images in Larkin's poetry. It appears in The North Ship, as full, very bright and anchorless, only in three poems, namely: 'The moon is full tonight', 'Love, we must part now: do not let it be', and 'The Dancer'. It disappears in The Less Deceived and reappears in The Whitsun Weddings, only in 'Dockery and Son'. Nevertheless, the poet uses it with accuracy. His appeal to the moon is to show that though it is high and out of reach of man, its movement, like life, has been decided and fixed.

38 A. Alvarez, ed. The New Poetry (London, 1973), p. 25.

39 See 3 above, p. 111.

40 J. Korg, Language in Modern Literature (Sussex Harvest Press, 1979), p. 172.

41 The poet does not speak about the war but through skilful handling of simple constructions of language, he depicts a fascinating image of English life in the pre-war period and foretells the condition that has ensued from the war. Thus, he introduces to the reader a past-future experience in the present. Such ability to use language ensures Larkin a distinguished status in contemporary English poetry: 'What Larkin can do better than his contemporaries is to realise the beauty latent in ugliness'. (See 30, above.) And it could be equally right to say that Larkin realises the ugliness latent in beauty as we have already noticed in this poem.

42 Ibid.

43 The lack of main verbs indicates the absence of action. In this poem, there is no need for action as the poet is not speaking about war. Moreover, the lack of action is a characteristic of the smooth, peaceful life enjoyed at that time.

44 Human values (love is one of them) are also vulnerable to decay once they are subjected to the law of causality because to think in terms of cause, effect and logic means to think in terms of time. The struggle within man's inner self is, in fact, between values and logic; values that are resistant to death or causality which depends on time. In this sense, they are out of reach of the destructive power of time. But in this poem, love becomes subordinate to physical world, so it becomes under the deterministic rules of temporality.

⁴⁵ Wind and clouds are manifestations of the unknown from which they come and to which they return. They are recurrent images in Larkin's poetry. The use of recurrent imagery is like the use of refrain in the poem; both create a musical effect in poetry. T.S. Eliot states that the traditional poetry owes a great deal of its musical structure to the use of frequent imagery and dominant imagery:

it is time for a reminder that the music of verse is not a line by line matter, but a question of the whole poem. Only with this in mind can we approach the vexed question of formal pattern and free verse. In the plays of Shakespeare a musical design can be discovered in particular scenes, and in his more perfect plays as wholes. It is a music of imagery as well as sound. (See 32, above, p. 36.)

⁴⁶ See 27, above, p. 39.

⁴⁷ Quoted by Jonathan Culler, Structuralist Poetics (London, 1980), p. 67.)

⁴⁸ Kenneth Moon, 'Cosmic Perspective', Poetry Australia, 68 (1978), p. 61.

⁴⁹ Donald Davie, Thomas Hardy and British Poetry (London, 1973), p. 3.

⁵⁰ Philip Larkin, Required Writing (London, 1983), p. 172.

⁵¹ See 3, above, p. 107.

⁵² Calvin Bedient, Eight Contemporary Poets (London, 1974), p. 79.

⁵³ See 50, above, p. 193.

⁵⁴ See 23, above, p. 37.

⁵⁵ See 3, above, p. 107.

⁵⁶ See 24, above, p. 96.

⁵⁷ See 3, above, p. 106.

58 In his recording of The Whitsun Weddings, Larkin described 'Broadcast' as 'about as near as I get in this collection to a lovesong (It's not, I'm afraid, very near)'. (See 24, above, p. 60.)

59 William Empson, Seven Types of Ambiguity (London, 1930), p. 14.

60 Ibid, p. 16.

61 Philip Hobsbaum, A Theory of Communication (London, 1970), p. 219.

62 Cascades means water and where there is water, life flourishes and love grows. But in 'Broadcast', this argument does not work as the speaker's love crumbles soon and he is left to his sorrow in utter loneliness.

63 Concerning this point, A.K. Weatherhead says: 'One of Larkin's regular recent practices is the singling out for the observation of individual items'. (See 35, above, vol. 39, p. 619.) Whereas John Wain rightly attributes to him the 'connoisseurship of the particular'. ('Engagement or Withdrawal?', Critical Quarterly, VI:2, Summer 1964, p. 175.)

64 See 5, above, p. 23.

65 See 18, above, p. 19.

66 With regard to the title of this poem, David Timms points out that:

The tomb in question, incidentally, is not at Arundel: it is a tomb belonging to the Howard family, once Earls and Countesses of Arundel, now Dukes and Duchesses of Norfolk, in Chichester Cathedral. (See 3, above, p. 107.)

67 A great deal has been written by critics on this poem, but very little has dealt with its structure and its function in introducing its subject. Calvin Bedient touches slightly on this issue in his discussion of the first stanza. He writes:

The lines rise to the ceremony of their occasion. So 'side by side', each syllable royally weighted, is balanced by the four syllables of 'their faces blurred', the two phrases equal and graceful in their partnership but immobile as the effigies they describe. (See 52, above, p. 91.)

68 See 3, above, p. 108.

69 In his comparison between Larkin's observations from windows and John Betjeman's, Francis Hope argues that the setting in The Whitsun Weddings is gloomy and that it:

. . . may be chiefly responsible for the comparison, sometimes invoked, with Betjeman. Mr Larkin's observations from trains (the train window threatens to be to him what the club window was to Galsworthy) often bring in the cheapest quick returns. ('Philip Larkin', Encounter, XXII, May 1964, p. 72.)

70 These poetic devices have been noticed by John Reibetanz in his article 'The Whitsun Weddings: Larkin's Reinterpretation of Time and Form in Keats', Contemporary Literature, 17 (1976), p. 532. Reibetanz says:

A succession of similarly rhymed stanzas (all ababdecde) leads the reader on an unbroken movement through time that mirrors the narrator's progress on the train. The unfolding of this narrative action links the stanzas into tight sequence, and this effect is furthered by Larkin's characteristic habit of running his stanzas into each other.

71 See 28, above, p. 233.

72 See 7, above, pp. 108-9.

73 See 47, above, p. 167.

74 Concerning the meditative nature of the poem in relation to time shown above, it is of especial interest to mention John Reibetanz's argument about this point. Speaking of the function of short lines in Keats and Larkin, Reibetanz writes:

The presence of a foreshortened line in each stanza would break this pattern if Larkin used it as Keats did in the 'Ode to Psyche' and 'Ode to a Nightingale'. But where Keats introduced shorter lines towards the end of his stanza, which quicken through this overturning of our expectations, Larkin shortens the second line

of every stanza. This burst of energy, offering the possibility of other directions, loses itself in the seven pentameter lines that follow; its life absorbed into the regular flow of each stanza, soft sift in an hourglass. 'A slow and stopping curve southwards we kept': Larkin's stanzas direct us to the unrelenting flow of time as surely as Keats's proclaim the remoteness of art from its course. (See 70, above, pp. 532-3.)

This very value and its role in Larkin's poetic achievement has also been pointed out by Anthony Thwaite: '. . . and notice how each ten-line stanza seems caught on the pivot of the short four-syllable second line, pushing it forward on to the next smooth run'. (Twentieth Century English Poetry, London, 1978, p. 107.)

75 Compared with their counterparts in the previous stanzas, the final three lines of the last stanza consist of twelve long vowels; all stressed, four in each line. They are: [ai], [ei], [ou], [ɔ:], and [au]. Such numbers of long stressed vowels pulls back the flow of the poem as it ushers in its conclusion. Thus, like the brakes to the train, such management of sound-structure brings the poem to the right end which coincides with the end of the journey as the train reaches its destination.

76 Larkin shows a deliberate concern in ending his poems memorably. In most of them, the conclusion is reached through a progressive thought pattern. Such conclusions are too many to cite: e.g. 'These new delighted lakes conclude / Our kneeling as cattle by all generous waters' (Wedding-Wind), 'If no one has misjudged himself. Or lied.' (Reasons for Attendance), 'What loads my hands down.' (Going), 'Nothing, like something, happens anywhere' (I Remember, I Remember), '. . . others it leaves / Nothing to be said'. (Nothing to be Said) and 'Leaving me desperate to pick out / Your hands, tiny in all that air, applauding'. (Broadcast).

77 See 50, above, p. 194.

78 Anthony Thwaite, 'The Poetry of Philip Larkin', The Survival of Poetry, ed. Martin Dodsworth (London, 1970), p. 48.

79 Philip Larkin, 'Context', London Magazine, 1:11 (February 1962), p. 32.

80 See 63, above.

⁸¹ Terry Whalen, 'Philip Larkin's Imagist Bias', Critical Quarterly, 23:2 (Summer 1981), p. 31.

⁸² See 23, above, p. 78.

⁸³ Martin Scofield, 'Edward Thomas: Syntax and Self-Consciousness', English, XXXI:139 (Spring 1982), p. 29.

⁸⁴ See 78, above.

⁸⁵ See 50, above, p. 147.

⁸⁶ Quoted by Wylie Sypher, The Ethic of Time (New York, 1976), p.6.

⁸⁷ T.S. Eliot, The Sacred Wood (Bristol, 1980), p. 49.

⁸⁸ Harry Blamires, A Short History of English Literature (London, 1974), p. 429.

⁸⁹ Answering Ian Hamilton's question about the contemporary English poets he admires most, Larkin says:

It's awfully difficult to talk about contemporaries, because quite honestly I never read them. I really don't. And my likes are really very predictable. You know I admire Betjeman, I suppose I would say that he was my favourite living poet. (See 25, above, p. 77.)

In addition, Betjeman's dependence on his personal experience of everyday life is another reason for Larkin's admiration of him. In praising Betjeman, Larkin describes his poems as being 'exclusively about things that impress, amuse, excite, anger or attract him--and this is most important--once a subject has established its claims on his attention, he never questions the legitimacy of his interest'. ('Betjeman en Bloc', Listen, III:2, Spring 1959, p. 15.)

Such a poetic principle goes in line with Larkin's own view of poetry when he says: 'A very crude difference between novels and poetry is that novels are about other people and poetry is about yourself'. (See 25, above, p. 75.)

⁹⁰ The Best of Betjeman, ed. John Murray (London, 1978), pp. 93-4.

⁹¹ Larkin's use of participles and their function in creating a sense of unbroken movement in the poetic discourse, as well as in time, have been discussed in previous chapters.

⁹² Jocelyn Brooke, Ronald Firbank and John Betjeman, (London, 1962), p. 28. Betjeman is a poet of nostalgia. Any reminder of his childhood makes him relive the past as does the madeleine to the hero of Marcel Proust's Swann's Way which enables him to create his past in Cambray. To Proust, the past is significant and can be created and experienced in the present by the 'involuntary memory'. His experience with the madeleine is well-known. Years later, he comes home on a winter day. His mother offers him tea with 'petites madeleine'. At first he declines, then accepts it. He tastes it and the effect is extraordinary:

No sooner had the warm liquid, and the crumbs with it, touched my palate than a shudder ran through my whole body, and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary changes that were taking place. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, but individual, detached, with no suggestion of its origin . . . this new sensation having had on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me, it was myself . . . What an abyss of uncertainty whenever the mind feels that some part of it has strayed beyond its own borders; when it, the seeker, is at once the dark region through which it must go seeking, where all its equipment will avail it nothing. Seek? More than that: create. (Part One, London, 1943, pp. 58-9.)

In this respect, Betjeman's view of time and particularly the past is in sharp contrast with Larkin's to whom the past is 'A valley cropped by fat neglected chances'. Thus, Larkin's visits to his birthplace in 'I Remember, I Remember' (see my Chapter Two) and to his old college in 'Dockery and Son' help him only to recall, rather than relive, the past days as he voices no interest in the past whatsoever. Instead, he embarks on contemplating on the present.

Chapter Four

HIGH WINDOWS

Strong themes, already dealt with in previous books, such as time, love and death, are approached in this book from different angles with remarkable consistency sharpened by mature experience. Now, one does not have to read far before realizing that Larkin's constant preoccupation with such concepts makes the poems of High Windows confident and sure in getting their effect. To deal with the same subjects is not a defect because what concerns us in the first place is how these subjects are approached rather than what they are. Larkin himself takes this literary principle as guidance in his poetic experience. Interviewed by Robert Phillips, he says:

I think a poet should be judged by what he does with his subjects, not by what his subjects are. Otherwise you're getting near the totalitarian attitude of wanting poems about steel production figures rather than 'Mais où sont les neiges d'antan?' Poetry isn't a kind of paint-spray you use to cover selected objects with. A good poem about failure is a success.¹

In the light of this, what occurs in this book is not the tedium of repeated themes but the pleasure of concepts couched in bright language. They, in Clive James's words, 'are being reinforced or deepened rather than repeated.'²

As to the language, it is never complex, as Larkin distrusts rhetorical language in poetry and insists on everyday language and a direct approach to subjects. However, such a statement is not in contradiction with the poet's use of paradoxical language in some poems. This is quite acceptable when we come to realize that paradox is not the language of the intellect only, but also the language of emotions. Cleanth Brooks elegantly clarifies this point by arguing that:

. . . there is a sense in which paradox is the language appropriate and inevitable to poetry. It is the scientist whose truth requires a language purged of every trace of paradox; apparently the truth which the poet utters can be approached only in terms of paradox.³

'The Trees' provides a good example on the accuracy with which Larkin tackles the concept of death and rebirth of life through the language of paradox:

The trees are coming into leaf
Like something almost being said;
The recent buds relax and spread,
Their greenness is a kind of grief . . .

The underlying idea of the poem involves a kind of paradox. The poet, here, considers the tree as an image of the dual nature of life itself and of man as being part of it. A thorough reading of the poem shows that the poet takes the concept of death and rebirth seriously. In the first line, he expresses his surprise at the hidden power of nature which manifests itself in trees putting on leaves. Meanwhile, he

evokes a feeling of awesomeness into it: the grief. What usually accompanies such an event is joy and gaiety, yet it is to be mingled with sorrow for life grows the seeds of its renewal and death too. Thus, this quality can only be conveyed by paradoxical language: 'the coming into leaf' is 'a kind of grief'.

The second stanza takes the theme in question a step further. The poet wonders at this ambivalent nature of life:

Is it that they are born again
And we grow old? No, they die too . . .

Of course, spring is a familiar event, but the poet gives its advent a new dimension. Larkin's scepticism about the idea of renewal in nature, hinted at in 'almost' in the first line of the poem, is stated here through an analogy between trees and man.⁴ Yet, their vulnerability to time is expressed by the word 'die'. The renewal of life is a mere trick. Though trees seem to renew themselves every year (they put on leaves as a lady might dress in a leisurely fashion in her dressing room), they also age as we do. Their age is recorded by the number of rings they have inside their trunks which increases yearly by one:

Their yearly trick of looking new
Is written down in rings of grain . . .

In addition to showing that life is subject to time, the analogy, here, functions as a catalyst for the poet to demonstrate the absurdity of life. He seems to be fully aware of what he is doing. He does not

want us to be misled by the one bright side of anything, because everything has two sides. This revelation appears to be startling:

Yet still the unresting castles thresh
 In fullgrown thickness every May.
 Last year is dead, they seem to say,
 Begin afresh, afresh, afresh.

Larkin never thinks of nature as static; every object is in a ceaseless motion: rivers, the wind, clouds, the sun, the heat, the trees and even the castles thresh. These natural objects are charged with life by the poet's imagination. This is why the castles are 'unresting'. This adjective, reminiscent of 'restless horses' in 'Wedding-Wind' and the 'unrest wind' in 'Talking in Bed', shows the poet's startling excitement at the process of change which is taking place everywhere around him. It is startling because it contains death as well as rebirth.

In 'The Trees', every word counts: the juxtaposition of such adjectives as 'relax', 'spread', 'new', 'unresting', 'dead', and the adverb 'afresh' evokes a balanced picture of the ambivalent quality of life.⁵ As to the rhyme-structure, it operates on the effect of the rhyme within every single stanza which is reinforced by the total effect of the rhyme of the whole poem: 'Leaf' rhymes with 'grief' and the effect is to reduce the joy and life, usually associated with 'greenness' of trees, to sorrow and pain at their death at the hands of time. A similar effect with different quality is generated by the rhyme 'said' and 'spread'. Like making anything known by announcing it, spring makes itself known by buds and greenness as they spread.

The rhyme 'again' and 'grain' (taken on its own) brings the two words into a strong semantic relationship. The grain or the seed is the source of the rebirth of plants. This is to be re-enhanced by the 'rings of grain' which bring to mind the cycle of life and, consequently, that of seasons. Thus, the analogy between nature and man is, once more, enacted for the grains and marriages keep the continuity of natural and human life respectively. In this sense, the tree imagery has been powerfully dramatized.

The final line is significant to the general rhyme effect of this poem because it fuses the idea of the renewal of life with the idea of music. It refers us back to the first line of the last stanza by the rhyme bond 'thresh'. 'Thresh' brings to our mind the time when 'grains' are beaten. Hence, it suggests the end of a season (spring) and that 'Last year is dead'. Again, the juxtaposition of what 'thresh' stands for and 'May', in the next line, introduces the notion of time through the seasonal cycle. This depiction of change in life gains its powerful effect from the concept of renewal indicated by the final line: 'Begin afresh, afresh, afresh'. The repetition of the word 'afresh' serves two purposes: first, it creates a sustained sound analogous to the chirps of birds in spring. This same device has been used in the repeated line 'It will be spring soon' in 'Coming' which enacts the singing of the thrush: 'A thrush sings'. And secondly, the repetition of the heavily stressed adverb 'afresh' asserts the certainty of spring by taking us back again to the beginning of the poem when 'The trees are coming into leaf'. Thus, like the seasonal cycle, the circle of the poem closes.

All objects in the universe are the projection of man's intellect or imagination because the universe is a fabric whose forms are revealed by reflection. In poetry, the imagination plays the leading role in such a process which is always at work in Larkin's poems.

Like 'The Trees', 'Solar' comes into the same category under the heading of poems about nature. The adjectival title indicates that the poem is about the sun. In other words, it suggests the matrix of the poem. In this case, it performs two functions: first, it generates significance represented by the relationship between the sun and the poet (man). Second, it creates a sense of unity in that it is inseparable from the general context. Meantime, functioning on two levels entails something to be wondered at. Here, it is in a form of praise or thanksgiving which is a mixture of wonder and awe, achieved mainly by the repeated construction 'How. . .':

Suspended lion face
Spilling at the centre
Of an unfurnished sky
How still you stand,
And how unaided
Single stalkless flower
You pour unrecompensed . . .

After offering the object of wonder (the sun), the language is again at work to reveal the feelings of the awed beholder (the poet). This new quality of meaning is well illustrated by the very epithets used to describe the sun. It is paradoxical: the sun is at one and

the same time a 'lion face' and a 'stalkless flower'. This usage operates on two levels: first, it gives the sun an attribute for its generosity which is, like the flower, always giving without the attention of receiving: 'unrecompensed', and second, it shows the powers of the sun: 'lion face', and its splendour are compared with the fragility of our existence and our needs which 'Climb and return like angels'.

Another characteristic of the syntax of the poem is that it fuses images drawn from traditional language, such as 'flower' and 'angels', with others drawn from science: '. . . centre / Of an unfurnished sky', to convey the idea of centrality and roundness. However, it should be stressed that these concepts are expressed not by a scientific formula but by words and images from everyday language, worked upon by the imagination. The idea of roundness of the sun is suggested by the phrase 'lion face', re-emphasised by 'head of flames' in the second stanza and transmuted into a flower in the first stanza.⁶ This very centrality of the sun serves as a method by which time is measured in the sense that the sun is the centre of the universe around which all planets revolve.

The sound-structure of 'Solar' is also crucial to the creation of its final effect. Its function is to make the reader feel what the sense of words calls up. There is an alliterative sequence in 'spilling' with 'centre', 'still' with 'stand', and 'single' with 'stalkless'. Here, it directs the reader's attention to the semantic relationship established between the alliterative lines in the first

stanza, consequently the whole poem, and the title 'Solar' which brings about the 'solar system'. Moreover, the only two ordinary rhymes in this poem are significant: first, 'hourly' rhymes with 'openly' which shows the power and the inaccessibility of the sun and man's fragility and needs:

You exist openly
Our needs hourly
Climb and return like angels . . .

Second, 'hand', in the penultimate line, returns us to 'stand', in the first stanza:

How still you stand . . .
Unclosing like a hand . . .

This connection by rhyme reinforces the idea of the prodigality of the sun mentioned above.

The scientist's rationale is sabotaged by the poet's imagination. Larkin emphasises the supremacy of imagination over intellect in poetry when he states that 'the imagination is not the servant of the intellect and the social conscience'.⁷ And by doing so, he adapts himself solely to the demands of his vocation. His sincerity in the vocation establishes his poetic genius. It is a genius which combines the effectiveness of the result (the final effect of his poems) with the brilliance of performance (the skilful use of language).

Such solidarity between performance and result is beautifully achieved in 'Sad Steps'--a poem which, also, falls into the group of poems about nature:

Groping back to bed after a piss
 I part thick curtains, and am startled by
 The rapid clouds, the moon's cleanliness.

Four o'clock: wedge-shadowed gardens lie
 Under a cavernous, a wind-picked sky.
 There's something laughable about this,

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--
 Lozenges of love! Medallion of art!
 O wolves of memory! Immensements! No,

One shivers slightly, looking up there.
 The hardness and the brightness and the plain
 Far-reaching singleness of that wide stare

Is a reminder of the strength and pain
 Of being young; that it can't come again,
 But is for others undiminished somewhere.

While 'Solar' employs the imagery of the sun, this poem employs that of the moon. And in both poems, the allusion is to the change in life and the passage of time because it is by the moon and sun that time is measured on earth. As the moon rotates round the earth and sun, the idea of the solar system of the previous poem is strongly reinforced. Though moon and clouds have appeared in the previous books, they are used here to introduce a twofold value: besides serving as reminders of the passage of time, they also draw our attention to the poet's feeling of loneliness. The moon is, as always, still viewed as a strong force: in 'Dockery and Son', it was '. . . a strong / Unhindered moon', and here, it is bright and clean. The quality of cleanliness and brightness of the moon has

been transmitted skilfully and with a delicate precision through the 'moon clouds' metaphor. As to the clouds, wherever they occur in Larkin's poems, they are in motion. In this poem, they are moving fast against the surface of the moon (seen from earth), polishing it so that it looks bright and clean.

The first point to make is that, as in most other poems, the speaker here appears solitary, as an outsider alienated from life. This feeling of loneliness stems from Larkin's awareness of the frustrations of living. It is this feeling which was aroused in him by a consciousness of things and opportunities denied to him as they can be unshared, which makes him feel cut off from the rest of the world. This sense of loneliness has been heightened by the contrast to the loneliness of the moon. So, the poet is startled first, by the 'far-reaching singleness' of the moon in 'a cavernous, a wind-picked sky' and then, by the realisation of time passing and the inevitable old age.

In this context, the moon functions as a reminder for the poet of his youth which is over. Now, as a vast empty space lies between him and the moon, so do years lie between him and his youth. Missed chances and unspent youth in Larkin's poems recall those of Hardy, his master: for example, 'The Missed Train' to which 'Sad Steps' is very much akin,⁸

Thus one time to me . . .
Dim wastes of dead years far away
Then from now. But such happenings to-day
Fall to lovers, may be!

Years, years as shoaled seas,
Truly, stretch now between! Less and less
Shrink the visions then vast in me. Yes,
Then in me: Now in these.

but they are different in bringing about their total effect. Unlike Larkin, Hardy in 'The Missed Train' does not approach the subject directly. Instead, he spends the first three stanzas telling us how he has to spend one lonely night in a station inn, and how consoled he feels by the spirit of his love. The last two stanzas introduce the poem's tonic effect. It often seems that the past has so powerful a grip on Hardy (unlike Larkin) that it invades the present, leading him to uncertainty and confusion: '. . . Less and less / Shrink the visions then vast in me--', and the result is an inability to respond to the present. On the other hand, in 'Sad Steps', the past has unregrettably been summoned up so far as to heighten the present; a process which results in a sober conclusion. The tone of Larkin's poem, self-consciously knowledgeable, is set right from the start. It is concentrated in the word 'startled' in the first stanza; a use of an instinct being shocked upon the discovery of a terrifying reality, and reinforced by 'shivers', 'hardness', and 'pain' in the following stanzas.

The dead years, or to borrow Hardy's phrase: 'shoaled seas', now stretch not just between Larkin and his own youth, but also between him and the present young generation: 'But is for others undiminished somewhere'. To part 'thick curtains' which separate him from the past, the poet gets frightened by the brilliance of

youth and the sorrow upon knowing that it can never return to him. The poem shows that his life journey, like the night at dawn: 'Four o'clock', is almost approaching its end. This thought is rather a shock as Larkin puts it. When he was asked if growing older was something that worried him, Larkin replied:

Yes, dreadfully. If you assume you're going to live to be seventy, seven decades, and think of each decade as a day of the week, starting with Sunday, then I'm on Friday afternoon now. Rather a shock, isn't it? If you asked why does it bother me, I can only say I dread endless extinction.⁹

The effect of time on him is a more personal agony than a merely general feeling of life. Or as one critic argues, it,

. . . gives the impression not simply of a man who is choosing to live his life in a certain way, but who has lived many years in that way. Where time and its pressures seem subjects of independent fascination in earlier poems, here they strike him more personally. Where earlier he looks toward the future, here he confines his attention to either his past or his present.¹⁰

'To the Sea' seems to be animated by these concerns. It fuses the themes of experiencing the seasons and recalling the past. The poem celebrates a social custom (the sea-going) and Larkin is at his best in festivals and social rituals:

To step over the low wall that divides
Road from concrete walk above the shore
Brings sharply back something known long before--
The miniature gaiety of seashores . . .

Before explicating the underlying themes, one may be attracted by the manner in which the diction and the syntactic structure help to substantiate the claim this poem makes and its final effect.¹¹ The first stanza, beginning with an infinitive: 'To step', develops into perfectly regular and straightforward sentences. The use of the infinitive fittingly sets the perpetual cycle of seasons: 'To step' can be a past, present or future action, but it is done at a certain time of year; summer. In this sense, it is charged with a power of action of cyclic occurrence. Hence, it matches the seasonal cycle: 'Coming to water clumsily undressed / Yearly . . . / . . . plainly still occurs . . .'

Meantime, 'to step' catches the eyes and takes us back to the poet's past when he used to go to the sea. There is no definite partition between past and present and to climb the 'wall' which separates us from the past needs an action. Such an action is provided by the infinitive 'To step'. In this context, stepping over the wall is similar to the parting of the curtains in 'Sad Steps'; both actions lead to new experiences: here, of recalling the past: 'The miniature gaiety of seashores'.

'To the Sea' is like Hardy's 'The Self-Unseeing' in suggesting the slow passage of time and its effects on man and things in nature:¹²

Here is the ancient floor,
Footworn and hollowed and thin,
Here was the former door
Where the dead feet walked in . . .

In these lines, one reads as much for the beauty and economy of language as for the mastery of theme. They are rhythmic and they rhyme too. The words 'ancient', 'Footworn', 'hollow', and 'thin' convey concretely and powerfully the changing quality of life. The past is recalled through the evocations of antiquity and damaging effects of time on the 'floor'. The poet leads us in the privacy of his past. We walked in 'the former door' as did 'the dead feet' (presumably those of his first dead wife, Emma). As he remembers her smile and the place where she used to sit, he becomes in full possession of the glamour of that past. Hardy seems as if he closes that door to enjoy past memories. He abandons the present and all of a sudden:

Childlike, I danced in a dream;
 Blessings emblazoned that day;
 Everything glowed with a gleam;
 Yet we were looking away!

Unlike Hardy, Larkin is not obsessed with the past. It may evoke in him 'the miniature gaiety of seashores' but only for a short while. He may feel 'happy' but he never 'dances':

. . . happy at being on my own,
 I searched the sand for Famous Cricketers,
 Or, farther back, my parents, listeners
 To the same seaside quack, first became known . . .

While Hardy seems unwilling to abandon the happy memories of his past, despite his awareness that they will eventually be spoilt by time: 'Yet we were looking away!', Larkin moves swiftly to put an abrupt

end to his excursion in the past: 'Strange to it now, I watch the cloudless scene . . .'

Syntactically, 'To the Sea' develops in successive statements packed with details typical of the descriptive catalogue in which all stanzas are engaged.¹³ They set the mood of the poem; it is of delight and happiness at the yearly occurrence of such a ritual. But this same annual pleasure is soon to be spoilt by the poet's awareness of its transience. It reminds him of youth, now gone, and a cloud of melancholy shrouds his view of life: 'A white steamer stuck in the afternoon . . . / The white steamer has gone . . .'

The repetition of the 'white steamer' functions on two levels: first, it can be taken as a symbol of the poet's youth remembered now, in his middle-age, which I take 'afternoon' to symbolise, and second, it suggests the pain the poet feels for the loss of his youth through the passage of time. This impression is to be strengthened by the suggestion of an irresistible impact which underlies the phrase: 'strange to it now'. This shows that he is not only distant from youth, but also from the people around him on the beach. Thus, a sense of the poet's loneliness has been created expelling him from the world of people to the world of nature and a man-made world:

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 . . .

In addition, the sea image has obviously an evocative value. Paradoxically, it represents death and eternity.¹⁴ On the other hand, the seaside represents the brevity of the life of summer and man. Being fully aware of this reality, the poet tries his best to block, even though temporarily, the flow of time through the celebration of recurrent events in nature and in human life. Such preoccupation with rituals, as Alan Brownjohn has pointed out, is 'something which Larkin increasingly uses as a method of affirming; a more direct way of holding back "the coming dark" [death]'.¹⁵

Above all, in 'Show Saturday', the poet sees a kind of meaning and 'half an annual pleasure' in a recurrent 'half a rite'; the show. The first seven stanzas of the poem take us on a tour of the components of the show and the activities performed in it. The detailed description of the show is meant to keep it in focus as an object of attention. It is so vivid that it makes the poem a success.¹⁶ And as we approach the conclusion, we realize that there is an idea behind this description, which we get used to in Larkin, which contributes much to its vividness. This annual event (the show) is, to a certain extent, like the 'yearly trick of looking new' of the trees. For, as the show comes to an end, people disperse; 'Back now, all of them, to their local lives':

To winter coming, as the dismantled Show
 Itself dies back into the area of work.
 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.

As a matter of fact, the key phrase in this stanza is 'Regenerate union'. It embodies a moment of epiphany. The epiphany comes in the form of a revelation based on a close observation of ever changing life and the unending flow of time: '. . . time's rolling smithy-smoke'. The show ends and so does summer. Now there comes autumn. The word 'back' in 'Back now to autumn . . .' suggests the seasonal cycle in that it refers us to a familiar season we have experienced before. Nevertheless, it is the time of harvest, yet, it is not clear whether Larkin's autumn is generous and prodigal or not.

In the meantime, winter marks the death of nature as well as of the show: 'To winter coming'. Now we are in the real world; a world which dies and grows again in an undisturbable course. Here, Larkin uses a contradictory statement for the sake of likeness. By application, though the show dies, it just stays there hidden like the 'strength' of nature. This hidden strength here recalls 'the power / That being changed can give . . .' in 'The Whitsun Weddings'. This is a complete acceptance of the inevitability of change in life. However, it is not without joy; the joy which the 'Regenerate union' brings every summer.

Larkin seems quite sure that beneath his wish: 'Let it stay . . .' and other people's activities lies the fear of the idea of extinction. So, when the show dies back into the ordinariness of everyday life, the poet is left in utter loneliness. Is it then that he feels consoled on such occasions as marriages, sea-going, the rebirth of nature

and shows that he likes such 'ancestral activity' to be done yearly?

The answer might lie, as Alan Brownjohn points out, in

Larkin's lack of hope or expectations for individual men [which] is partly compensated for by the strength inherent in some communal rituals, performed regularly in the same place and perpetuated by the will of men in general.¹⁷

Anyway, this is a claim on our part and a mere wish on Larkin's. It gains its authority from Larkin's interpretation of social customs and rituals, which are usually associated with the passing of time, as evasions from this fact. It is the perpetual source of man's agony. The impossibility for the individual to confront time may urge him to seek a joint effort such as that provided by social gatherings, even though it is a funeral as in 'Dublinesque':

Down stucco sidestreets,
Where light is pewter
And afternoon mist
Brings lights on in shops
Above race-guides and rosaries,
A funeral passes . . .

There is an air of friendliness; a sense of solidarity among the crowd. Meanwhile, the poet is aware of the fact that this does not alter the course of time. And this is why the marriages come to an end and the show dies, so do the trees and human beings. However, such rituals do provide a sort of substitute for the answer to the problem of time. At the centre of the poem lies the idea of the recognition of the unchanged flow of time mixed with a beautiful yet intensely sad quality of feeling which sets the general mood of the

poem. John Bayley says that 'The peculiar intensities of the poetry of arrest are all internal--total reality focussed by the intent gaze of imagination.'¹⁸

In this poem, the work of the imagination cannot pass unnoticed. Details of everyday life in Dublin, as well as of Dubliners, are the outcome of such an 'imaginative gaze':

The hearse is ahead,
But after there follows
A troop of streetwalkers
In wide flowered hats,
Leg-of-mutton sleeves,
And ankle-length dresses

Such Proust-like description of the particulars, rich and dense as it is, gives place, now, to a personal view of life: the passage of time and subsequent death. There is a sense of sorrow evoked upon the realisation of this truth. The first stanza sets the general background of the poem: transparent melancholy as it casts light over a wide range of ideas introduced through well used language.

To begin with, the words 'stucco' and 'pewter' depict the grey atmosphere of a city shrouded in mist. Ironically, 'mist' sounds like 'missed' and could be taken to mean that people are missing Katy as she is dead now. Then 'rosaries' adds a religious flavour to the occasion as well as bringing the idea of the cycle into focus, deeply integrated with the seasonal rhythms and the unending three-fold rhythm of birth, growth and death. Indeed, what gives this poem so much of its effect is the concise development of its subject. It moves from natural aspects of the scene in the first stanza to the

mourners in the two middle verses and finally to an emotional song in the last stanza, bringing about a strong sense of closure; a sense which has the effect of a revelation:

And of great sadness also.
As they wend away
A voice is heard singing
Of Kitty, or Katy,
As if the name meant once
All love, all beauty.

The epiphany comes in the form of a song: 'A voice is heard singing / Of Kitty, or Katy . . .', a song which, as Terry Whalen puts it:

. . . rises as a very Irish version of a Wordsworthian 'still, sad music of humanity'; one which is as poignantly beautiful as it is also energetic. Larkin's respect for it shows in a rising tone of praise which turns the epiphany to song.¹⁹

It may, of course, be of interest that what makes such a closural epiphany powerful is the only rhyme in the poem: 'beauty' and 'Katy'. The last stanza introduces a song and at the first sight we think of 'Kitty, or Katy' as its refrain. As such, we run over the following line expecting it to reappear again and again. And all of a sudden, the word 'beauty', in the final line of the poem, catches the eye by obstructing our advance, carrying us back to 'Katy' in the fourth line of the same stanza. The rhyme along with the period announced the end of the song and the poem as well. Thus, the wave of expectancy, raised by 'Katy', has come to a halt or the word 'beauty' in Winifred Nowotny's words, 'resolves all the remaining expectations of the poem in a simultaneous fulfilment.'²⁰

This unexpected rhyme is a deviation from a norm. The norm is the non-existence of the rhyme in the first three stanzas. Hence, it establishes a formal structure which creates tension that leads the reader to a noncontinuation.²¹ In this respect, the closural effect of the last stanza has been strengthened not only by the fact that the song is a very appropriate device with which to finish a funeral ceremony, but also by the poet's assertion of bitterness and anger at the loss of Katy (who stands as a symbol for mankind) and at the ambiguous nature of time; the fact that it is running on.

This bitterness over time passing and subsequent death is rendered into 'a great sigh' in 'The Building'. The hospital serves as a symbol for the sigh of all the patients which amounts to a desperate cry in the face of death. So it appears:

Higher than the handsomest hotel
The lucent comb shows up for miles, but see,
All round it close-ribbed streets rise and fall
Like a great sigh out of the last century . . .

The place is that of death and an atmosphere of fear is evoked by such bleak yet precise details as: a frightening smell hangs in the hall, there are paperbacks, people sit tamely on rows of steel chairs, faces are restless and resigned, and there are seats for dropped gloves or cards. The starkness of the place has been established by a speaking voice which is fully conscious of its surroundings. The people, here, are of a different age, sharing the same lot; they are victims of time, either by illness or old age:

. . . some are young,
 Some old, but most at that vague age that claims
 The end of choice, the last of hope; and all

Here to confess that something has gone wrong . . .

Most significant is that the dreariness of the place has been heightened by the way the syntax works. The poet asks the reader directly to join him in his experience; to enter the scene and to be as conscious of its components as the poet himself. This has been achieved by the use of verbs of request, such as '. . . but see, / All round it . . .', 'For see how many floors . . .', 'See the time . . .', '. . . see, as they climb . . .', 'For the moment, wait, / Look down at the yard'. The repetition of the verb 'see', in particular, serves as an invitation to the reader to get involved in an experience scrutinised by a close intensive look. It also shows the poet's emphasis on the significance of not only the objects described, but of what is behind them; death. Terry Whalen draws attention to this point in Larkin when he notices that:

The speakers often beckon the reader into a beholding physical world . . . This kind of invitation to witness is not simply an accident of form in Larkin's work, it is the result of an epistemological conviction that the truth--as Larkin sees it--is inseparable from an empirical alertness of mind.²²

Time is like a dream of whose passage we are unconscious till we discover its effect on us. We only realise that many moments have gone and one moment has begun when we wake up to this reality which comes as a surprise:

. . . O world,
 Your loves, your chances, are beyond the stretch
 Of any hand from here! And so, unreal,
 A touching dream to which we all are lulled
 But wake from separately. In it, conceits
 And self-protecting ignorance congeal
 To carry life, collapsing only when

 Called to these corridors . . .

The effect of the first five lines, mentioned above, is generated by the power of their rhythm. One even marvels that such music is produced by a sequence of such simple monosyllabic words consisting of short vowels.²³ After the fourth line, the rhythm changes; it becomes quicker and more intense than before, conveyed by words having more than one syllable with heavily stressed vowels. They function as an alarm-clock for the speaker in the preceding lines. They wake him up to the real world. Hence, the verse, to borrow William Butler Yeats's words, has 'already become full of pattern and rhythm. Subject pictures no longer interest us.'²⁴ Here, the sound-structure creates a new value; it is the fleetness of time and the unreality of the dream. It is this 'half-true' quality of life which Larkin, now and then, points out; the 'not-untrue' and the 'almost-true' nature of things in life.

This idea, after all, takes some of its force from the poet's, as well as the reader's, awareness of the terrifying ambience where death seems to be the absolute master. However, an attempt has been made by the poet to evade this place of sickness when he looks out at the seemingly free exterior:

For the moment, wait,
 Look down at the yard. Outside seems old enough:
 Red brick, lagged pipes, and someone walking by it
 Out to the car park, free. Then, past the gate,
 Traffic; a locked church; short terraced streets
 Where kids chalk games, and girls with hair-dos fetch

Their separates from the cleaners . . .

It will be best first to note that to look out through a window of a building or a compartment at the surroundings is a leitmotiv in Larkin's work.²⁵ However, 'The Building' marks a distinct departure, in this respect, from the previous poems. It is different in that it is the first time in which Larkin concentrates on man and the man-made world only to the exclusion of the world of nature. So, outside we see 'lagged pipes', 'cars', 'a locked church' and 'kids'. I believe that there are two reasons for doing so: firstly, because the poem is mainly about the visitors to the hospital; inside, there are sick young and old people, whereas outside seems old enough. Secondly, by deliberately ignoring the world of nature, the poet wants to show the weakness of the sick by cutting them off from the rest of the world, leaving them alone with no sympathy from nature, waiting helplessly for 'The coming dark'. Perhaps, they know why they are there; possibly they do not know that they,

. . . have come to join
 The unseen congregations whose white rows
 Lie set apart above--Women, men;
 Old, young; crude facets of the only coin

This place accepts. All know they are going to die.
 Not yet, perhaps not here, but in the end,
 And somewhere like this. That is what it means,
 This clean-sliced cliff; a struggle to transcend

The thought of dying, for unless its powers
 Outbuild cathedrals nothing contravenes
 The coming dark, though crowds each evening try

With wasteful, weak, propitiatory flowers.

Once more, the appearance of the image of the church, with its implications in this stanza, calls back the same image in 'Church Going'. Here, the hospital seems to take over the function of the church. Going to the hospital is a struggle to transcend the idea of death, yet it does not deny its inevitability. The hospital is to be seen as a symbol for man's birth or death. So, to go to the hospital is either to die or to extend one's life for some time, i.e. to wait for death. On the other hand, the church stands for the three stages of man's life--birth, marriage and death. However, the hospital can only transcend time if 'its powers outbuild cathedrals.' In this poem, there is a church, but it is locked. The poet does not show interest in this church, unlike that which he visited in 'Church Going'. Conversely, man here is left alone and even God has deserted him.²⁶

Now, the equation of the hospital with the church is recorded in: '. . . for unless its powers / Outbuild cathedrals . . .', and as the church fails to transcend time, so does the hospital. This idea is strongly enhanced by the flower imagery in the last line of the poem. For Larkin, flowers cannot bring ecstasy or peace; on the contrary, his association of man with them shows man's weakness in front of the destructive power of time and death. Flowers, like hospitals and churches, are too weak to contravene 'The coming dark'.²⁷

The subject of old age is powerfully dramatized in 'The Old Fools'. One may observe, here, that age is treated with an acute sense of immediacy, expressed through a wide range of perceptions of life and man's worries about its brevity. Such discomfort with the present reality is mirrored by the harsh and brutal opening:

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?

What is immediately conspicuous, here, is the barrage of bold and astonishing questions. The length of most of them makes us pant to grasp the concepts they introduce, yet these concepts are made prominent because they are couched in vigorous language. The verse draws our response by strong syntactical units: 'What do they . . .', 'Do they . . .', 'Or that . . .', 'Or went . . . or sloped . . .', 'Or do they . . .', 'Or sat . . .', 'Why aren't they screaming'. The repetition of such powerful syntactical structures helps to establish the required effect and enables us to understand the poet's anger at the puzzle of aging. His reaction to life's insult to man comes in blunt child-like expressions: the old fools are like children, 'more grown-up'. The stanza offers no apparent answer to the questions raised.

The failure of the old fools to know what 'has happened' to them makes the poet shift to the second personal pronoun 'you' in the second stanza. As from 'At death' on, the harsh voice of the first verse, virtually leaves its shrillness to give way to grim speculations on death, conducted by the imagination; a kind of imagination which, as Emerson says, is a sort of seeing that comes by 'the intellect being where and what it sees'.²⁸

At death you break up: the bits that were you
 Start speeding away from each other for ever
 With no one to see. It's only oblivion, true:
 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 . . .

These lines exhibit one of Larkin's most successful techniques, that is, enjambment. Enjambment, both between lines and between stanzas, is a poetic device used to lead the reader to focus on and develop the highest perception of the given text.²⁹ The movement of these lines is extremely beautiful, showing a balanced swing from one state of affairs to another: they take us from the general concrete present to the figurative state centred around the word 'oblivion'. The force of 'for ever / With no one to see' is, after all, in the discovered object of 'to see'. Because the first two lines are not closed, 'see' is heightened by its object in the first line: to see 'the bits that were you'. In the meantime, our attention is irresistibly dragged by the force of continuing syntax which moves to a climax in 'oblivion'. The flow of the discourse in 'for ever / With no one to see' is paced

and eventually slowed down by stressed monosyllables and maintained in this way to enact a life dissolving in 'oblivion'. The fugitive image of life sliding down to oblivion is both continuous and unseen. There is a sense that, as Larkin states in 'Nothing to be said', 'life is slow dying'.

No doubt, what makes this image effectively powerful and frightening is not the bitterness evoked by the idea of 'oblivion', but by the premonition of the approaching death it suggests. It is this power latent in the image which dissolves and blends with other poetic devices to create the final effect of the poem, and which Wallace Stevens describes as 'pheasant disappearing in the brush'.³⁰ The poet's argument continues, till finally he identifies himself with the old fools:

Perhaps being old is having lighted rooms
 Inside your head, and people in them, acting.
 People you know, yet can't quite name; each looms
 Like a deep loss restored, from known doors turning,
 Setting down a lamp, smiling from a stair, extracting
 A known book from the shelves; or sometimes only
 The rooms themselves, chairs and a fire burning,
 The blown bush at the window, or the sun's
 Faint friendliness on the wall some lonely
 Rain-ceased midsummer evening. That is where they live:
 Not here and now, but where all happened once . . .

Thus, the problem is not the old fools' only; it is his too. The idea of living 'Where all happened once' is strengthened by our knowledge that Larkin is really living there where suffering is not only his but that of everyone. And even when, as Dan Jacobson puts it,

. . . we occasionally feel that he is inclined to sell life short--out of resentment at its instability, because he knows it will not last, because it is so utterly exposed to time's abrasion and waste. More often we feel that those are exactly the reasons why he cherishes it so greatly. His grief at the brevity and changeableness of life is balanced by his pleasure in all its varying forms and appetites; his anger by his tenderness towards that which is so soon going to be lost, his despair by compassion.³¹

This is the horror of the moment of truth when the desire to live turns to the fear of the end of there being any choice in the matter. At this point, the poem ends with four frantic questions and a curt statement:

Can they never tell
What is dragging them back, and how it will end? Not
at night?
Not when the strangers come? Never, throughout
The whole hideous inverted childhood? Well,
We shall find out.

Now, the rebellious voice calms down, giving way to an acceptance of the concept of oblivion after revealing to us so much about how life actually goes on. Nevertheless, this obsession with time, and patience with half-truths is not to delude us into the false conclusion that Larkin is a pessimistic or an optimistic poet. I feel he is stoical; he is just realistic to himself and the experience on the one hand, and to his reader on the other. Thus, the focal point, as Andrew Motion argues, is,

. . . to expose the typical structure of his poem as a debate between hope and hopelessness, between fulfilment and disappointment. It is this argument that Larkin's use of symbolist techniques helps to dramatise.³²

Instead of brooding on oblivion and death 'The Explosion'
deals with their aftermath:

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.

The meaning of the poem operates on two dimensions: first, there is tension between opposites; between life and death: the dead husbands walk towards their wives. It is momentary freedom, fleeting but assured, which lasts only for a second. Larkin himself is disillusioned with this idea because it is wrapped with a religious numbness. This is clearly suggested in the sixth stanza which is nothing more than a familiar verse one finds in religious texts or fairy tales. The audience of wives with men is preceded by the same effect which precedes the eruption of a volcano (it is said that animals and birds know about the eruption of a volcano some time before it happens):

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

What helps to introduce such a volcanic effect is the rhythm of the poem. It starts with a regular flow which is suddenly obstructed by the use of pauses and the changing of emphasis at the point when the explosion takes place.

The second dimension gains its force from the symbol of the 'eggs'--they are 'unbroken'. The implication behind this is that death takes life not to dissolution only but to a rebirth; it is the theme of renewal and paradox I discussed earlier in the present chapter. The unbroken eggs are a symbol of fertility and renewal. Notwithstanding that the symbol is potentially rich, it does not ensure him an absolute escape from the tyranny of time. However, it does show that a sort of meaning in life can be found; such a glimpse of hope, to borrow Andrew Motion's phrase, is 'a measure of Larkin's commitment to life.'³³

Yet it is important to bear in mind that the acceptance of harsh reality is not defeatism in Larkin. He, very often, tries different approaches to the question of time. An excursion in the past could be a fruitful engagement which might release the pressure of the present and give a chance to think of the future. 'Forget What Did' is an attempt to reconstruct time:

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

But, time's values are viewed according to our own idea about them rather than to the diary. By stopping his diary entries, the poet tries to forget his past³⁴--maybe some aspects of it--on the one hand, and to reorganise his life on the other:

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

I wanted them over,
Hurried to burial . . .

The words 'diary' 'stun' and 'cicatrized' are sufficiently moralised to evoke the general meaning of the poem; a meaning which has been heightened by the syntactical shift in the poem from decorative statements, ending in a question in the first thirteen lines, to a conditional sentence in the rest. This grammatical shift breaks the regularity of the rhythm, creating a state of tension between the poet's empty present and his forgettable past symbolised by the diary. Thus, the diary, in this sense like the clock, is a reminder of time passing. And the poet's desire to ignore this fact is shown in his effort to stop the diary and to draw a thick curtain over his past. But to ignore the past does not mean its denial, because time never stops:

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.

'Empty pages' and 'celestial recurrences' are of special significance in understanding the poet's new shift of time. After excluding the past from his mind (his diary) and realising the emptiness of the present, he looks at the future 'the empty pages' with a relatively optimistic outlook. The frail faith in future pleasure takes its legitimacy from the cyclic recurrences in life: day and night; the seasonal cycle and the consequent changes in nature when '. . . the flowers come and birds go'. Meanwhile, the poet admits that the past could be enjoyed by young people. In his case the abolition of his

own past has been imposed on him by time; he is no longer young.

In 'How Distant', the poet makes it clear that youth has deserted him and the time of adventure is over. And though the experience of being young is now remote from him, he considers its various possibilities:

How distant, the departure of young men
Down valleys, or watching
The green shore past the salt-white cordage
Rising and falling . . .

Although these measures of enjoyment were denied to him in his youth, they are accessible to the young at all times:

This is being young,
Assumption of the startled century

Like new store clothes,
The huge decisions printed out by feet
Inventing where they tread,
The random windows conjuring a street.

This is a faithful depiction of the poet's agonised feeling of being at the 'vague age' and the 'end of choice', as well as a celebration of the many opportunities which are for the young 'undiminished somewhere'. This balanced treatment of time is, in Andrew Motion's words, what prevents the poem 'from lapsing into the security of settled melancholy.'³⁵

There is a remarkable touch of syntactical management here which keeps pace with the total meaning of the poem. The irregular metre goes in line with the alternating lines; the long lines alternate with the short ones except the last six lines where the sequence is

reversed. This change serves as a syntactical signal for the conclusion of the poem. In the meantime, this irregularity helps to evoke the image of a ship 'Rising and falling' in the sea 'under the differently-swung stars' as it is rocked by the waves: '. . . fraying cliffs of water'; an image which is analogous to man's voyage in the river of time:

On tiny decks past fraying cliffs of water
Or late at night
Sweet under the different-swung stars,
When the chance sight

Of a girl doing her laundry in the steerage
Ramifies endlessly . . .

This strong relationship between the irregularity of the lines and metre and the meaning of the whole poem has been shrewdly spotted by Bruce K. Martin:

Larkin offers a series of four-line stanzas with irregular line-length and metre except for the fourth and fourteenth lines, where pairs of dactyls--'Rising and falling' and 'Ramifies endlessly'--help to suggest the rocking of the sea, and the final three lines, where iambic irregularity calls attention to the striking conclusion by the speaker, as well as the witty images in which it is cast.³⁶

How this balanced sense of time in relation to man has been achieved is crucial to the general meaning of the poem. 'Fraying cliffs of water', 'Ramifies endlessly', and 'huge decisions' are of massive importance in this respect. The poet's youth--the time of 'huge decisions', when promises and aspirations ramify--is now

worn out by time, just as are the rocks of the shore by waves:
'fraying cliffs of water'.

It is, of course, no accident that Larkin approaches grand and serious themes, such as love and time, through comedy. In fact, this is considered to be one of his outstanding characteristics. Once more, Larkin sets himself to exploit the potentials of satirical verse in order to transmit his feelings and concepts about different aspects of human life. The result is a number of witty satirical poems which outnumber their counterparts in The Whitsun Weddings.³⁷ The funniest, perhaps the most serious, of them is 'Vers de Soci  t  '. It tackles the problem of age through the struggle in him, between the wish to be alone and sociability, evoked by an invitation to a party:

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 . . .

The satirical tone of the first three lines above is generated by a beautiful equilibrium between the colloquial discourse and the use of rhymed couplets which is very typical of satirical verse. Nevertheless, this tone is also acid as it slides down to a meditation on the theme of loneliness in the light of the evocations of a dark evening.³⁸

The second stanza introduces the central idea of the poem: 'Funny how hard it is to be alone'. This idea of being alone is strengthened by the imagery of a windy evening in the third stanza which is already

hinted at in the second half of the first stanza:

Just think of all the spare time that has flown
 Straight into nothingness by being filled
 With forks and faces, rather than repaid
 Under a lamp, hearing the noise of wind,
 And looking out to see the moon thinned
 To an air-sharpened blade . . .

The employment of the external effects, here, helps to accelerate the process of meditation. The 'wind' and 'the moon', sufficiently defined in themselves, intensify the poet's harassment by time and magnify the bleakness of being alone, forcing him to come to the conclusion that 'All solitude is selfish' and 'virtue is social'. But is it sociability which makes the poet 'Whispering Dear Warlock-Williams: Why, of course--' or something else? To the poet, the acceptance of the invitation (though he knows very well it will be a boring party) is out of fear and uncertainty of being alone in a treacherous dark:

The time is shorter now for company,
 And sitting by a lamp more often brings
 Not peace, but other things.
 Beyond the light stand failure and remorse . . .

Precisely, the fluctuation of the poet's attitude towards life has resulted from the ceaseless hope and frustration brought about by time. It is a sort of tension which gives Larkin's poetry its liveliness and power.

There is no victor in this struggle between the individual and society; a struggle which is dramatised, in 'Annus Mirabilis', by

the wide gap between them still getting wider and wider:

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 . . .

Paralysed by time, the poet loses any drive to enjoy the sexual freedom of the young. A sense of ironic detachment can be detected here; a sense which is re-enhanced by the rhyme words: 'began' and 'ban'. Thus, the difference in the rhyming parts of speech ('began' is a verb and 'ban' is a noun) produces a difference in meaning:³⁹ while the sexual freedom is enjoyed by the young, it is inaccessible to the poet. However, this freedom is never an effective means of confronting time:⁴⁰

Then all at once the quarrel sank:
 Everyone felt the same,
 And every life became
 A brilliant breaking of the bank,
 A quite unlosable game . . .

At this point of our argument, it should become clear that the poet's attitude towards the sexual freedom the young enjoy is not, in any case, the outcome of his jealousy, but rather, of his full awareness that happiness can never be achieved in life. And the effect of sex in this sense is nothing more than that of the boring party in the previous poem: 'So life was never better than / In nineteen sixty-three'.

Larkin's obsession with time and its effect is shown by such references as 'nineteen sixty-three', 'Chatterley ban', and 'the

Beatles' first LP'. This effect has been further heightened by the repetition of the phrase: 'too late for me'. It will be best to note that Larkin employs, for the first and only time in this volume, a formal device which is mostly used in songs, i.e. repetition, though with slight modification, of the whole first stanza at the end of the poem. This device helps to cement the structure of the poem by bringing it to an effective end. It does so, as Barbara H. Smith argues:

. . . because, as in music, it reproduces a familiar group of sounds. This is not in itself a sufficient condition for a closure, but its force is strengthened by the fact that the first stanza constituted an integral formal structure in its own right. Consequently, any part of it, when it reappears, will cause the reader to expect the rest to follow; and when it does follow, closure will be strengthened. (Any minor deviation from exact repetition will only heighten the reader's tension; it will not destroy the system of expectations).⁴¹

Once and for all, in addition to terminating the continuity of the discourse, the repetition of the first stanza at the end of the poem changes the general tone of the poem from the ironic, slightly envious tone of the outset of the poem to a sense of stability and confidence at the end of it. This is achieved by the poet's realisation, built up by the medial stanzas, that though the sexual freedom of the young is 'A brilliant breaking of the bank, / A quite unlosable game', 'life was never better than / In nineteen sixty-three' because it is just too late for him.

Almost the same tone has been adopted in the title poem,
'High Windows':

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 . . .

'The poem's perceptions are carried initially by the verbs "see", "guess" and "know". The subject of the poem is less the governing "I" than it is the mental pattern established by these verbs.'⁴²
The first four stanzas of the poem are, more or less, a meditation on the gulf between him and the young. Here, his argument attains a state of balance, as the past religious freedom is set against the present sexual freedom and by the shift in the poet's attitude from envying them, to the supposition that he might have been envied in his youth:

I wonder if
Any one 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 . . .

The change of social conventions through time receives a satirical treatment. However, to brand this poem a satire could be open to argument and one should be careful with one's terminology. Actually, I feel that Larkin is as serious in satirical poems as in grand ones. Asked if he considers himself a satirist, Larkin says:

No I shouldn't call myself a satirist, or any other sort of -ist. The poems (that are considered satirical) were conceived in the same way as the rest. That is to say, as poems. To be a satirist, you have to think you know better than everyone else. I've never done that.⁴³

The poet suggests that sexual intercourse is paradisiac: 'fucking her / . . . is paradise'. There is too much praise of sex here but to draw such a conclusion might be misleading, as it damages the general meaning of the poem. Indeed, the satire operates through irony and the satirist is necessarily ironic. In this respect, Alvin B. Kernan writes:

The satirist seems always to pretend to praise what he is in fact blaming, or merely to describe in the most objective manner possible the abominations he encounters; and though we all recognise the game for what it is, know that the blame is intensified by the pretended praise, such irony still seems necessary.⁴⁴

An aggressive feeling mingled in an ironic tone can be detected in this poem. The slightly satirical effect is achieved through paradox and contrast. 'And everyone young going down the long slide / To happiness' is paradoxical: to achieve happiness is an ascending and not a descending process. We should go up, and not down, to attain heavenly pleasure. This farcical implication is to be reinforced by a contrasting one in the fourth stanza: 'Like free bloody birds', the young one going downward. This idea of the meaninglessness of life has already been suggested by reducing life to merely

sexual activities in the first stanza, as well as by the slight shift in diction from the colloquial language of the first four stanzas to an elevated style in the final verse, which intensifies the poetic discourse:

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.

This is a memorable ending which is typically Larkinesque. Andrew Motion argues that 'The most obvious reward of this "thought" is that it removes him from the context of actual human fallibility. It is an exalted imaginative alternative--in secular terms--to the false "paradise" of sexual freedom and godless independence promised on earth.'⁴⁵

Furthermore, this very 'thought' shows the emptiness of life and the vulnerability of man in an 'unfenced existence'. So, the poet's temporal escape, through language, from the mundane preoccupations only emphasises his trap in the cycle of time because what is really behind that blue air is an endless nothingness, as it leads nowhere. In this sense, being humorous is not risky, nor is Larkin afraid of it; it is only to be 'more serious': 'One uses humour to make people laugh. In my case, I don't know whether they in fact do. The trouble is, it makes them think you aren't being serious. That's the risk you take.'⁴⁶

All in all, 'High Windows', a beautiful piece of verse as it is, owes much of its effect to the integration of both colloquial

and sublime language and to the continued rhythmic movement which is maintained mainly by the use of monosyllables and reinforced by internal assonance (like, combine, side, life and lot, long). This effect is, also re-enhanced by the poet's presence in the poem which is both exact and powerful. He enters the scene right from the outset of the poem: 'When I see a couple of kids'. It is well to remember, when talking about Larkin's relation to his poem, that he does not seem to concern himself much with what T.S. Eliot calls: 'The Three Voices of Poetry',⁴⁷ even when he speaks through speakers. It might be right that Larkin appears in some poems as an outsider, but soon he gets involved in the experience. He often assimilates himself into any experience he tends to preserve and the effect is always self-consciously calculated. It is so because personal involvement with the experience is a very basic component of Larkin's literary principle, because for him, 'poetry is emotional in nature and theatrical in operation, a skilled recreation of emotion in other people, and that, conversely, a bad poem is one that never succeeds in doing so.'⁴⁸

The brilliance of Larkin's masterly use of colloquial language to capture the real dimensions of his experience is evident in a poem I quote in entirety, 'The Card-Players':

Jan van Hogspeuw staggers to the door
 And pisses at the dark. Outside, the rain
 Courses in cart-ruts down the deep mud lane.
 Inside, Dirk Dogstoerd pours himself some more,
 And holds a cinder to his clay with tongs,
 Belching out smoke. Old Prijck snores with the gale,

His skull face firelit; someone behind drinks ale,
 And opens mussels, and croaks scraps of songs
 Towards the ham-hung rafters about love.
 Dirk deals the cards. Wet century-wide trees
 Clash in surrounding starlessness above
 This lamplit cave, where Jan turns back and farts,
 Gobs at the grate, and hits the queen of hearts.
 Rain, wind and fire! The secret, bestial peace!

'The Card-Players' is a wonderful sonnet-like poem.⁴⁹ It is a verbal imitation of a Dutch genre painting but it is more vibrant with sound and action than a painting.⁵⁰ The composition of this poem is brilliantly handled through light and sound. And what helps much to illuminate the figures individually is the use of a coarse language. Psychological and physical realities are shown by the potentialities that are latent in the words themselves. This is characteristic of the everyday language of common people used for practical purposes in which, as Michael Riffaterre thinks:

. . . focus is usually upon the situational context, the mental or physical reality referred to; sometimes the focus is upon the code used in transmitting the message, that is, upon language itself, if there seems to be some block in the addressee's understanding, and so forth.⁵¹

Larkin's composition consists of a tavern lit by a lamp and three men (Jan, Dirk and Old Prijck) sitting at a table drinking and playing cards. Unlike that of the painting, the illumination of this verbal one is achieved by putting its components in motion, by describing crude details, particularly sounds. Such movement is conveyed by an army of verbs of action in addition to one present participle:⁵²

'Belching' which, also, has the quality of action. However, the dominant figure in the scene is Jan, who performs many gestures: he 'staggers to the door / And pisses at the dark', then 'turns back and farts, / Gobs at the grate', while Dirk pours himself more drink and lights his pipe and has a puff at it; whereas Old Prijck, whose skull face is firelit, snores with the gale. It can be seen, then, that these figures shine through the vitality and richness of their action in a semi-darkness which reigns in the inn. Yet, in the background of the scene, there appears another figure, almost as an afterthought against such dramatic details, opening mussels and singing scraps of a love song. Every part of this carefully balanced scene contributes to the general effect of the poem which shows people who are fascinating even in their vulgarity. This is what Seamus Heaney celebrates in Larkin: 'He is as true to the streak of vulgarity in the civilisation as he is sensitive to its most delicious refinements'.⁵³

The poem is a display of Larkin's virtuosity: the people are never motionless and their actions are spontaneous, yet controlled and directed by the poet towards a dramatic unification of the entire scene. The psychological accuracy of the poem is compelling, transmitted by the medium of colloquial word order which suggests that Larkin, to borrow William E. Baker's words, 'imitates the assimilation of immediate sense data, the spontaneous formation of thoughts to be uttered, and the coalescing of mental images, that is, the first product of emotional forces underlying consciousness.'⁵⁴

It is worth noting that the whole scene is depicted through the evocations of dark, rain, wind and light, presumably coming from the tavern: 'Outside, the rain / Courses in cart-ruts down the deep mud lane', 'Wet century-wide trees / Clash in surrounding starlessness'. One more point to be made here is that the alliteration of 'surrounding starlessness', together with the abundance of the sound [s], produce a sound which enacts the sound of the wind blowing outside. The same sound value is, also, created by the word 'clash'. The sound [k], which is produced by the trap and release of the breath, and the sound [ʃ], which has the same quality of evocation of the sound [s], enact the stormy and rainy night. In fact, these are not, after all, simple descriptions of nature, rather, they are a careful rendering of a certain condition which gives peculiar intensities of arrest to the scene: dim light is allowed from the tavern to light up, though vaguely, a dim outline of rain flowing through cart-ruts and wet trees clashing in the dark.

At this stage of our discussion, a question may be raised as to what this balance between the interior and the exterior is for. On the one hand, considering Larkin's constant preoccupation with time and its relation to man in his poetry, the balanced man-nature state is part and parcel of his general attitude towards this problem, which always lies at the back of his mind. Hence, a parallel is set up between human actions and natural ones. Here, the natural particulars outside prove to be analogical not only to action but also to the intensity to the particulars of the interior; 'a parallel

unflattering to human beings is being drawn between their actions and the natural world: Jan "pisses" and outside it rains; Old Prijck "snores" and Jan "farts" against the wind in the trees.⁵⁵ Such parallelism represents another measure of exploring life by pointing out the strong and genuine relationship between art and reality which Larkin likes most: Larkin once expressed to Ian Hamilton his dislike of 'the false relation between art and life.'⁵⁶

On the other hand, it is true that the poem shows the men's animal nature, but then, does their animality provide the 'bestial peace' or a protection from the ravages of time? The answer, in my opinion, is negative. To begin with, the scene of the men performing such actions brings an echo of man's life in very early times. Such a notion is reinforced in the poem twice: first, by phrases, such as 'cart-ruts', 'mud lane', 'fire-place' and 'lamplit cave', which give the scene described a flavour of antiquity which is very interesting to the reader, as it is now over. Second, before the making of civilisation, man's life was shaped by rain, wind and fire, as has been summed up in the last line of the poem: man of that period was leading a 'bestial' life but he was lacking the 'bestial' peace as he was subject to cruel elements of nature and their destructive power. The implication, here, is that even in trying to live that, peace remains a remote wish. What strengthens this reading is the poet's use of the exclamation marks in the concluding line. Whatever life-style we may adopt is an unsuccessful attempt to ignore time. Larkin is so much aware of this idea that

one might take his 'Probably' to mean 'certainly' when he confidently said it to Robert Phillips:

I suppose everyone tries to ignore the passing time: some people by doing a lot, being in California one year and Japan the next, or there's my way--making every day and every year exactly the same. Probably neither works.⁵⁷

Notes

¹ Philip Larkin, Required Writing (London, 1983), p. 74.

² Clive James, 'Wolves of Memory', Encounter, 42 (June 1974), p. 65.

³ Cleanth Brooks, The Well Wrought Urn (London, 1968), p. 1.

⁴ The words 'almost' and its synonym 'nearly' are frequent in Larkin's poetry, e.g. 'Our almost-instinct almost true' ('An Arundel Tomb'), 'it was nearly done' ('The Whitsun Weddings'). Both words are used to bring about a quality of incompleteness and imperfection, as well as a negation of a given situation. Here, 'almost' is meant to introduce the relativity of things in life. It draws the reader's attention to spring which has been brought into focus at the outset of the poem through the evocation of rebirth in nature; trees put on leaves. It also implies constant change and motion in life. So, it could be a clever articulation, so to speak, of the untruthfulness of the truth. In the meantime it casts doubt on the vitality of the natural process to challenge time by upsetting the balance between the possibility of its amplitude and its deceptive nature: 'Their yearly trick of looking new'. Charged with such power, 'almost' is used accurately to convey this paradox.

⁵ In 'The Trees', the paradoxical quality of nature has been shown through the analogy between man and nature unlike the poet's treatment of the same subject in previous poems, such as 'Coming' or 'Spring'. (See previous chapters.)

⁶ It could be a sunflower. This is not a groundless claim: first of all, like the sun, the sunflower is round. Second, in painting, the sun, spilling light, is usually painted as a sunflower. This reading is to be reinforced by the phrase 'Your petalled head of flames' in the second stanza which fits the definition of the sun as a 'Single stalkless flower' and ultimately as a 'coin'.

⁷ Philip Larkin, 'The Writer in His Age', London Magazine, IV:5 (May 1957), p. 47.

⁸ The Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy, ed. James Gibson (London, 1979), p. 787.

⁹ See 1, above, p. 55.

¹⁰ Bruce K. Martin, Philip Larkin (Boston, 1978), p. 134.

¹¹ Clive James points out some technical aspects of this poem by wondering:

Aren't we long used to that massive four-stanza form, that conjectural opening ('To step over the low wall . . .') in the infinitive? Actually we aren't: he's never used them before. (See 2, above, p. 66.)

¹² See 8, above, pp. 166-7.

¹³ The account of the particulars the poet gives of the seaside is reminiscent of that in 'Here' and 'The Whitsun Weddings'; details, such as 'blue water', 'towels', 'red bathing caps', 'yellow sand', 'transistors', 'seaside quack', 'smoothed pebbles', 'trebles', 'cheap cigars', 'chocolate-papers', 'tea-leaves', 'rocks' and 'rusting soup-tins'. The familiarity of these details invites the reader to enter the poet's landscape of sun, people and water. However, despite the transparency of the language throughout the poem, some strokes of elevated diction can be noticed. They start with 'A white steamer stuck in the afternoon--' and 'grasping at enormous air' building up to a sententious conclusion:

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.

¹⁴ The extent of the image of water, which the sea stands for, has been suggested in a poem entitled 'Water' in The Less Deceived:

If I were called in
To construct a religion
I should make use of water . . .

These lines recall Arthur C. Benson who, in 1915, wrote: 'If I could make a religion, I should make water its symbol--so pure and cool, so capable of being fouled and spoilt, and yet capable again of laying all its filth aside'. (Quoted by David Newsome, On the Edge of Paradise, London, 1979, p. 167.)

¹⁵ Alan Brownjohn, Philip Larkin (London, 1975), p. 21.

¹⁶ The detailed description of the show takes on certain distinctly terrestrial hues. In this poem, Larkin displays a remarkable capacity in handling the details of the show:

. . . dogs
(Set their legs back, hold out their tails) and ponies (manes
Repeatedly smoothed, to calm heads); over there, sheep
(Cheviot and blackface); by the hedge squealing logs
(Chain Saw Competition). Each has its own keen crowd . . .

Such an accumulation of concrete details gains its force and poignancy from the poet's ability to create a sense of intimacy and union between the objects of the scene described; a wedding which approximates fusion:

The wrestling starts, late; a wide ring of people; then cars;
Then trees; then pale sky. Two young men in acrobats' tights
And embroidered trunks hug each other; rock over the grass,
Stiff-legged, in a two-man scrum. One falls: they shake hands . . .

The components of the show are quite distinguishable because they are accurate observations of a patient observer who invests them with significance. As is always the case with Larkin, the panorama starts with an observation and soon he gets involved in it. This is the pleasurable communication between the poet and the reader which is established, as Larkin believes, in 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. The stages are interdependent and all necessary. (See 1, above, p. 80.)

It is this involvement in the experience which makes Larkin admire John Betjeman. In his article 'The Blending of Betjeman', Larkin points out that:

Betjeman, though an original, is not egoist; rather, he is that rare thing, an extrovert sensitive, not interested in himself but in the experiences being himself enables him to savour, including that of being himself . . . and time and again in scenes where interest might be expected to focus on the author's feelings we find it instead shifting to the details. (Ibid, p. 130.)

¹⁷ See 15, above, p. 22.

¹⁸ John Bayley, 'Too Good for this World', TLS, 21 June 1974, p. 654.

¹⁹ Terry Whalen, 'Philip Larkin's Imagist Bias', Critical Quarterly, 23:2 (Summer 1981), p. 39.

²⁰ Winifred Nowotny, The Language Poets Use (London, 1975), p. 12.

²¹ I am indebted to Barbara H. Smith for her valuable discussion of rhyme deviation in George Herbert's 'Vertue':

The bridall of the earth and skie . . .
For thou must die . . .

Bids the rash gazer wipe his eye . . .
And thou must die . . .

A box where sweets compacted lie . . .
And all must die . . .

Like season'd timber, never gives . . .
Then chiefly lives.

Concerning the rhyme structure of this poem, she writes:

Most effective in this respect is the new rhyme-sound in the second line [gives]. As a deviation from the expected [ai] of 'skie', 'eye', and 'lie', it creates a momentary breakdown of the formal structure established through the first three stanzas, and consequently causes a heightening of tension, which is resolved only at the last word, 'lives'. This word not only allows a relaxation of tension by providing the resolving rhyme for 'gives', but also, as a radical modification of the 'refrain', constitutes a strong force for noncontinuation.

(Poetic Closure, Chicago, 1970, pp. 67-70.)

²² See 19, above, p. 30.

²³ These lines can be taken on T.S. Eliot's terms. Talking about the music in Swinburne, he writes: 'This is not merely "music"; it is effective because it appears to be a tremendous statement, like statements made in our dreams'. So, when we wake up separately, we discover that they are 'unreal' and that all our values in life collapse at the threshold of 'the building'. (The Sacred Wood, Bristol, 1980, p. 148.)

²⁴ Quoted by Roman Jakobson, Selected Writings, ed. Stephen Rudy, 5 vols (New York, 1981), iii, p. 601.

²⁵ There are many poems in which the speaker watches the surroundings through a window or listens to the natural elements outside a building. The following are some examples: 'Dawn', 'Like the Train's Beat', 'Waiting for Breakfast, While She Brushed her Hair' from The North Ship; 'Wedding-Wind' from The Less Deceived; 'Here', 'Mr Bleaney', 'Broadcast', 'The Whitsun Weddings', 'Talking in Bed', 'Dockery and Son' from The Whitsun Weddings; and 'Livings', 'The Card Players', 'Sad Steps', 'Vers de Soci  t  ' from High Windows. The frequent use of this device is not accidental. In my opinion, it provides the poet or the speaker with some measure of security and then it sharpens his observations and heightens the situations created through the contrast between the almost static, more or less silent, interior and the moving, usually noisy, exterior.

²⁶ It has been made clear in the discussion of 'Mr Bleaney' in the previous chapter that Larkin is not interested in religion as a solution to the question of time. Here, the locked church, void of any meaning, is already dead because the church in 'Church Going',

though it abounds with sentiments and images which find a mirror
in every mind, is also dead:

But superstition, like belief, must die,
And what remains when disbelief has gone?
Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky . . .

And although the church,

A serious house on serious earth it is,
. . . someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious . . .

It is a hunger to be 'more serious' rather than 'religious'. Larkin himself was irritated by an American who described 'Church Going' as a religious poem: 'It isn't religious at all . . . Ah no, it's a great religious poem, he knows better than me--trust the tale and not the teller, and all that stuff'. (Ian Hamilton, 'Four Conversations', London Magazine, IV:8, November 1964, p. 73.)

²⁷ Clive James argues that 'nothing contravenes / The coming dark . . .' is,

an inherently less interesting proposition than its opposite, and a poet forced to elevate his creative effort to embodying it has only a small amount of space to work in. Nor, within the space, is he free from the paradox that his poems will be part of life, not death. From that paradox, we gain. The desperation of 'The Building' is like the desperation of Leopardi, disconsolate yet doomed to being beautiful. (See 2, above, p. 69.)

Meanwhile, it should be stressed, here, that to find solutions to the problem of time is none of Larkin's concern for he is neither a transcendentalist nor is he a philosophical poet. His only interest is in reality transmitted by his imagination through a direct contact with life. And in this sequence, I see Larkin at his best when he works with paradox as has been shown earlier in this chapter.

²⁸ Quoted by Calvin Bedient, Eight Contemporary Poets (London, 1974), p. 86.

²⁹ The enjambment is a grammatical overflow in which, as Dan Jacobson points out:

. . . stanzas have been allowed to run on into one another in the work of many poets, from Chaucer onwards--either accidentally, so to speak, or on purpose. But I know of no one else who has used the device so frequently, so deliberately and to such a variety of effects [as Larkin]. ('Profile 3: Philip Larkin', The New Review, 1:3, June 1974, p. 28.)

Jacobson draws our attention to the work of the enjambment between stanzas mainly in 'Dockery and Son'. However, there are many other poems, in this book, in which enjambment can be detected, such as 'The Building'. My major concern, here, is to show the work of enjambment between the lines of the stanza in question in 'The Old Fools'.

³⁰ Quoted by Terry Whalen, see 19, above, p. 40.

³¹ See 29, above.

³² Andrew Motion, Philip Larkin (London, 1982), p. 72.

³³ Ibid, p. 70.

³⁴ About what Larkin thinks of his childhood and the past in general, see Chapters Two and Three.

³⁵ See 32, above, p. 71.

³⁶ See 10, above, p. 106.

³⁷ Larkin's use of satire first appears in 'I Remember, I Remember' in The Less Deceived. And the only satirical poems in The Whitsun Weddings are 'Naturally the Foundation will bear your Expenses' and 'Take One Home for the Kiddies'. However, it is worthwhile to mention that Larkin's remarkable blend of fun and seriousness is not entirely a novelty; it is already implicit in the work of many writers from different literary periods. It can be detected in the early T.S. Eliot to cite one example from this century. But what is really peculiar to Larkin is his surprising ability to pin down and codify the ambivalent state of mind, and to express it in very precise terms which are easily intelligible to a wide public.

38 In these lines, the feeling of loneliness, created by the image of a man (the poet) in the evening sitting in a room while 'The gas fire breathes', is reinforced by rhythm and rhyme and heightened by external objects: 'the trees darkly swayed'. This state of mind is reminiscent of the poet's mood on an autumnal evening in 'Broadcast', The Whitsun Weddings, when he was left on his own, watching the day coming to an end:

Here it goes quickly dark; I lose
All but the outline of the still and withering

Leaves on half-emptied trees . . .

39 W.K. Wimsatt, discussing the relationship between rhyme and reason, sums up:

It may be said, broadly, that difference in meaning of rhyme words can be recognised in difference of parts of speech and in difference of functions of the same part of speech, and that both of these differences will be qualified by the degree of parallel or of obliquity appearing between the two whole lines of a rhyming pair. (The Verbal Icon, Lexington, 1981, p. 157.)

40 Larkin's poems deal with the failure of time to fulfil man's desires including sex. It is interesting to note that the idea of this poem might have been prompted by a 'captioned montage' Harry Chambers noticed in Larkin's flat:

Also I was most impressed by a montage in the bathroom juxtaposing Blake's 'Union of Body and Soul' with a Punch-type cartoon of the front and back legs of a pantomime horse pulling in opposite directions against one another and captioned 'Ah, at last I've found you!' (It struck me later that this sort of caption has much in common with Larkin's technique of titling for a certain kind of poems, e.g. 'Annus Mirabilis', 'This Be the Verse', 'Self's the Man' and 'Naturally the Foundation will Bear Your Expenses'; also that Our Old Friend Dualism seems to be a truthful enough gatekeeper to the world of Philip Larkin's poems. ('Meeting Philip Larkin', Larkin at Sixty, ed. Anthony Thwaite, London, 1982, p. 62.)

41 See 21, above, p. 66.

42 Simon Petch, The Art of Philip Larkin (Sydney University Press, 1981), p. 97.

43 See 1, above, p. 73.

44 Literary Theory and Structure, eds F. Brady, J. Palmer and M. Price (London, 1973), p. 123.

45 See 32, above, p. 81.

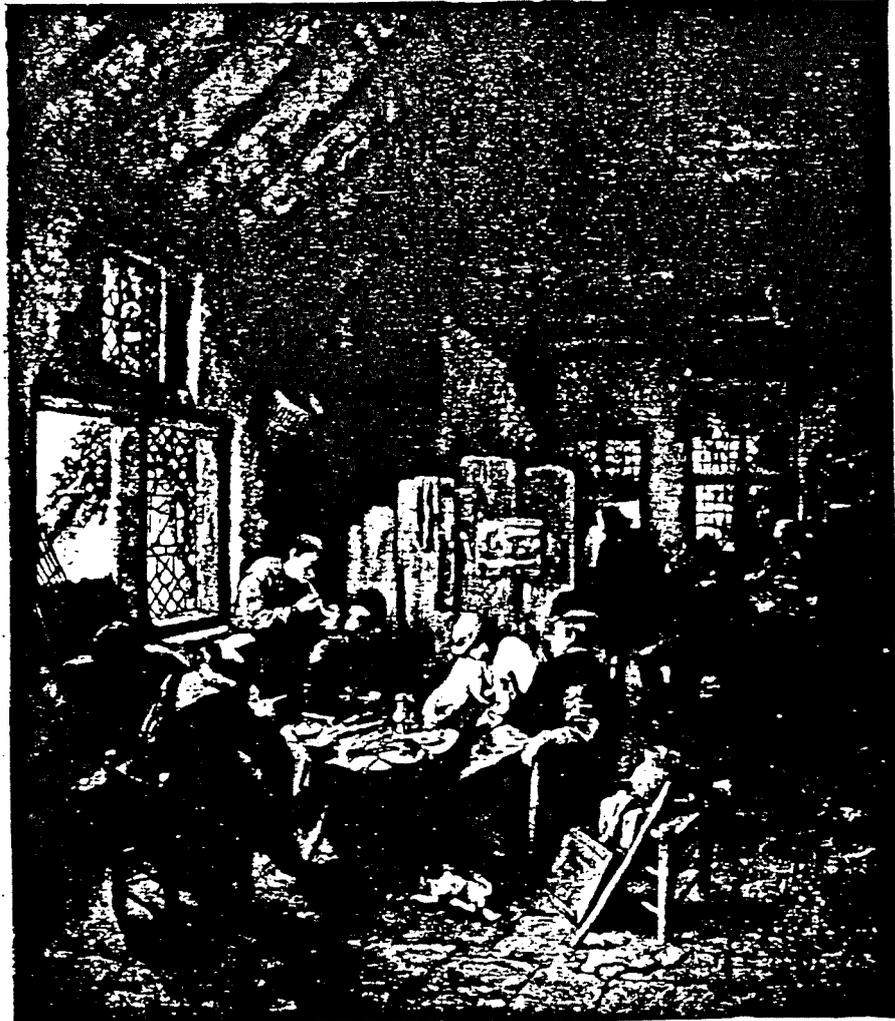
46 See 1, above, p. 73.

47 In an essay entitled 'The Three Voices of Poetry', T.S. Eliot draws a distinction between these three voices considering them important in the making of poetry:

The first is the voice of the poet talking to himself or to nobody. The second is the voice of the poet addressing an audience, whether large or small. The third is the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse; when he is saying not what he would say in his own person, but only what he can say within the limits of one imaginary character addressing another imaginary character. (On Poetry and Poets, Kent, 1979, p. 89.)

48 See 1, above, p. 80.

49 Though designed around the traditional sonnet form, 'The Card-Players' is not quite the same. Like the sonnet, this poem consists of fourteen lines with a slight difference in rhyme scheme. In the meantime, unlike it, the traditional sonnet is divided into three quatrains, each with its own alternate rhymes, and a final couplet. Again, in this poem, the final line functions in the same way as does the couplet in the sonnet, in that it sums up the preceding idea. Bruce K. Martin draws the attention to some technical qualities of this poem:



Dresden Gallery

Bruckmann Photo

Plate 91. ADRIAEN VAN OSTADE. 'Peasants at an Inn Table'

Larkin's penchant for working irregularity against pattern, to produce a technical tension in keeping with his ideological complexity, is perhaps no more forcefully revealed than in those few poems designed around a traditional fixed sonnet form . . . in 'The Card-Players', he supports the surreal quality of the picture he paints by undercutting the poem's tight rhyme scheme with numerous departures from iambic pentameter and pauses within lines, thus hiding his poem's resemblance to the traditional sonnet. (See 10, above, pp. 106-7.)

50 R.H. Wilenski defines 'Dutch Art' as 'the painting produced in Holland between approximately the year 1580 and approximately the year 1700'. (An Introduction to Dutch Art, London, 1928, p. xvii.) What actually concerns us in this respect is the school of low-life painting which was founded then by painters, such as Adrian Brouwer, Adrian Van Ostade, Jan Steen and others. The main characteristic of this group of painters is that their paintings are down-to-earth depictions of daily life of the common people. Hence, they concern themselves with scenes of ordinary taverns where peasants--old, middle-aged and invariably ill-mannered--sit at a table drinking and smoking their pipes.

In the meantime, I am aware that a comparison between a poem and a painting is less satisfactory than a comparison between two items from the same genre. But I have found that 'The Card-Players', in many instances, has recalled to me details of composition that could be found in Adrian Van Ostade's painting 'Peasants at an Inn Table': both of them depict the immediate environment which is so dashing in movement and so powerful that one cannot fail to spot the definite architectural relation of their figures to the surrounding space, i.e. the relation between the interior and the exterior. And while Ostade leaves the windows of the inn open to indicate the exterior, Larkin uses a lamp and fire to light up his figures, as well as to indicate the space beyond the interior depicted: 'Outside, the rain / Courses in cart-ruts . . .'

51 Michael Riffaterre, 'Describing Poetic Structures: Two Approaches to Baudelaire's "Les Chats"', Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post Structuralism, ed. Jane P. Tompkins (London, 1980), p. 26.

⁵² In all Larkin's books, there is no other poem of the same length as 'The Card-Players' which contains such a number of verbs. This poem contains fifteen verbs in the present simple tense namely: 'staggers', 'pisses', 'courses', 'pours', 'holds', 'snores', 'drinks', 'opens', 'croaks', 'deals', 'clash', 'turns', 'farts', 'gobs' and 'hits'. Somewhere in the previous chapters I have pointed out Larkin's dependence on the participles to convey a continued sense of the experience. However, the use of the simple present tense in this poem gives a sense of immediacy and movement to the verbal painting the poet depicts.

⁵³ Seamus Heaney, Preoccupations (London, 1980), p. 166.

⁵⁴ William E. Baker, Syntax in English Poetry 1870-1930 (Berkeley University of California Press, 1967), p. 140.

⁵⁵ Roger Day, Philip Larkin (Open University Press, 1976), p. 34.

⁵⁶ See 26, above, p. 75.

⁵⁷ See 1, above, pp. 57-8.

PART TWO

LARKIN AND THE MOVEMENT

Chapter Five

THOM GUNN

It is, perhaps, in place to say that any assessment of contemporary English poetry would be helped by comparing Larkin with some of his contemporaries, such as Thom Gunn and other poets, who are loosely classed along with him as Movement poets.¹ At one time, it might be suggested that they share certain qualities, yet every one of them has his own poetic character which results from his especial approach to his subjects. As it becomes clear later in this part, the differences between these poets are more substantial than the similarities because they involve the very process of the making of their poetry. As a matter of fact, their poetic strategies are the outcome of their individual attitudes towards experience, tradition, and life in general.

To start with, both Larkin and Gunn set themselves to explore almost the same themes but their emphasis on them is different. What concerns us in the first place is their treatment of the theme of time. Needless to say that it is central in Larkin: going to church, marriages, a trip to the seaside, a couple in bed, a walk in the park and many other experiences from

everyday life constitute his emotional spectrum and evoke in him the concept of the wasteful passage of time. While he takes life as it is, this is not the case with Gunn. Gunn accepts the challenge with life and this is why the people in his poems are often at odds with moderation and ordinariness. While Larkin seems to G.S. Fraser 'to be repeatedly saying in many of his best poems is that a sensible man settles for second-bests',² Gunn seems to me to say 'Man, you gotta go'. For him, life is an endless race against the endless flow of time. 'On the Move'³ provides a good example of how Gunn deals with the problem of time:

The blue jay scuffling in the bushes follows
 Some hidden purpose, and the gust of birds
 That spurts across the field, the wheeling swallows,
 Have nested in the trees and undergrowth.
 Seeking their instinct, or their poise, or both,
 One moves with an uncertain violence
 Under the dust thrown by a baffled sense
 Or the dull thunder of approximate words.

On motorcycles, up the road, they come:
 Small, black, as flies hanging in heat, the Boys,
 Until the distance throws them forth, their hum
 Bulges to thunder held by calf and thigh.
 In goggles, donned impersonality,
 In gleaming jackets trophied with the dust,
 They strap in doubt--by hiding it, robust--
 And almost hear a meaning in their noise.

Exact conclusion of their hardiness
 Has no shape yet, but from known whereabouts
 They ride, direction where the tires press.
 They scare a flight of birds across the field:
 Much that is natural, to the will must yield.
 Men manufacture both machine and soul,
 And use what they imperfectly control
 To dare a future from the taken routes.

It is a part solution, after all.
 One is not necessarily discord
 On earth; or damned because, half animal,
 One lacks direct instinct, because one wakes
 Afloat on movement that divides and breaks.
 One joins the movement in a valueless world,
 Choosing it, till, both hurler and the hurled,
 One moves as well, always toward, toward.

A minute holds them, who have come to go:
 The self-defined, astride the created will
 They burst away; the towns they travel through
 Are home for neither bird nor holiness,
 For birds and saints complete their purposes.
 At worst, one is in motion; and at best,
 Reaching no absolute, in which to rest,
 One is always nearer by not keeping still.

What the poet is engaged in here is the celebration of the act of the will and the violent spirit of combat in life. The centre of this poem may be found in the following lines of the last three stanzas:⁴

Much that is natural, to the will must yield.
 Men manufacture both machine and soul,
 And use what they imperfectly control . . .

One lacks direct instinct, because one wakes
 Afloat on movement that divides and breaks . . .

At worst, one is in motion; and at best,
 Reaching no absolute, in which to rest,
 One is always nearer by not keeping still.

However, the first stanza consists of careful and accurate details which describe, as well as explain, the main idea of the whole poem: the blue jay follows some hidden purpose and swallows are in search of their instinct. The sense of restlessness mingled with fear is remarkably evoked by two compact and suggestive lines:

One moves with an uncertain violence
Under the dust thrown by a baffled sense . . .

These lines also anticipate the distant motorcyclists who are introduced directly in the first line of the second stanza. The boys burst through and away from towns which accommodate neither birds nor saints. In the meantime, they are rebels without a cause. They may revolt against themselves or against the world; the 'valueless world' which Larkin accepts not in a negative passivity but out of a sober awareness of its transience and the recognition of man's limitations. It should be stressed here that the reference to saints and holiness does not substantiate any claim of piety to Gunn. Like Larkin, he does not try to solve the question of time by religion. Gunn is not religious: 'I am for ever grateful', he writes, 'that my brother and I were brought up in no religion at all'.⁵

Gunn looks for the truth of man and things that have the human imprint on them. He is in love with the bare fact of the man-made world: 'It's a liking for the man-made, for the massive, for something that has the human imprint on it, rather than for the deserted, the provincial. The liking for buildings more than mountains',⁶ he has told Ian Hamilton. The concrete objects in this poem, like birds, bushes, sand and boys, constitute the raw material for the experience he sets himself to explore: it is the truth of man's potential which he learns during his work under Yvor Winters whom he describes as:

. . . a man of great personal warmth with deeper love for poetry than I have ever met in anybody else. The love was behind his increasingly strict conception of what a poem should and should not be. It would have seemed to him an insult to the poem that it could be used as a gymnasium for the ego. Poetry was an instrument for exploring the truth of things, as far as human beings can explore it, and it can do so with a greater verbal exactitude than prose can manage.⁷

Gunn tries his best not to 'insult' 'On the Move', though with little success however. Apparently, the above-mentioned objects are the means at his disposal for exploring the truth of man's attitude towards life. What the boys do is, perhaps, a defiant gesture against life: it is an attempt to impose man's will and choice on time. The result, however, is only a momentary disturbance of the unstoppable flow of the river of time rather than a substantial stoppage of its flux. Moreover, these objects, including man himself, are parts of nature. And since nature is finite and subject to time and thus to change, so the motorcyclists' act consequently falls under the destructive power of time. This result has been brought about firstly, by the aimlessness and lack of purpose of the boys' act. This, in turn, has been shown through an implicit contrast between birds which have a goal to achieve: 'Seeking their instinct, or their poise, or both', and the motorcyclists who are 'Reaching no absolute, in which to rest'. The poem falls short of specifying the boys' goal: is it just a drive? And if it is so, what for? In this respect Gunn's boys differ considerably from Keats's in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn':

What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
 What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
 What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

The young people depicted on the urn are in a moment of sensuous ecstasy and wild joy; men pursuing women amid the music of pipes and timbrels. Unlike Gunn's, Keats's boys have an objective: to kiss their lovers, though this is never achieved; they are forever 'winning near the goal'. Thus, like the flow of time, their quest is perpetual.

Secondly, 'On the Move' runs to abstraction and lapses easily into rhetorical generalisations. So, instead of avoiding abstractness by searching out, to borrow Wallace Stevens' phrase, 'instinctively things that express the abstract and yet are not in themselves abstractions',⁸ Gunn upsets the balance between what is described and what is willed by dressing up his idea in clothes of rather tawdry rhetoric and baffling phrases, such as 'uncertain violence', 'their instinct', 'baffled sense' and 'meaning in their noise'. This baffled sense of the poem is the result of Gunn's struggle to express such philosophical concepts as: 'Will', 'choice', and 'man manufactures his soul'. These concepts dramatise the relationship between man and time through Sartre's existential measure that man creates his self (soul) by seemingly free and arbitrary choice. Gunn is fascinated by the word 'will', and this is why it is very frequent in his poems, especially those of The Sense of Movement. He borrows it from Sartre but he uses it in a different way:

The Sense of Movement, then, was a much more sophisticated book than my first collection had been, but a much less independent one. There is a lot of Winters in it, a fair amount of Yeats, and a great deal of raw Sartre (strange bedfellows!). It was really a second work of apprenticeship. The poems make much use of the word 'will'. It was a favourite word of Sartre's, and one that Winters appreciated, but they each meant something very different by it, and would have understood but not admitted the other's use of it. What I meant by it was, ultimately, a mere Yeatsian Wilfulness.⁹

In theme, 'On the Move' makes a remarkable contrast with Larkin's poem entitled 'At Grass'. Each is one of the best poems its author wrote. On one hand, Larkin's recreation of the experience of the retired race horses shows them as social creatures which have established their reputation on the race-course by winning Cups and now they are enjoying their retirement. The first two lines of 'At Grass' firmly and powerfully introduce the experience the poet is depicting:

The eye can hardly pick them out
From the cold shade they shelter in . . .

There is a metaphor here, compelling in its richness and suggestiveness. It is so because the reader may treat it as though it runs: the horses may stand too still and motionless to attract the poet's eye; or the shade in which they shelter may be too thick and dark for him to see them; or this metaphor may suggest the gradual yet steady disappearance of the horses as they are, to borrow Larkin's phrase, 'going down the long slide' to oblivion and subsequent death: 'They have slipped their names'. Moreover, the same metaphor may recall their earlier days when they were running too fast for the

crowds to see them without using fieldglasses. This is to be reinforced by:

. . . faint afternoons
Of Cups and Stakes and Handicaps,
Whereby their names were artificed . . .

Thus, Larkin's metaphor, with its literal as well as figurative references, enables him to bring about various shades of meaning by a simple linguistic construction (one simple statement) because 'with a metaphor', Winifred Nowotny writes, 'one can make a complex statement without complicating the grammatical construction of the sentence that carries the statement . . . it [the metaphor] directs us to the "sense", not to the exact term'.¹⁰

By comparison, the superiority of Larkin's metaphor on Gunn's simile stands clearly:

On motorcycles, up the road, they come:
Small, black, as flies hanging in heat . . .

Here, the simile, 'the very distant boys, driving motorcycles, are small and black like flies hanging in heat', is very much less suggestive than Larkin's metaphor because in Gunn's lines the linguistic machinery is used to mark a similitude, that is, it does not exceed the likeliness or the analogy it conveys. This disparity between Larkin's picture and Gunn's is actually the difference between the poetry which suggests and that which says as is clearly shown by the difference between the metaphor and simile pointed out by Winifred Nowotny: 'In a simile, there is no "X" (i.e. there is

no other meaning beyond the literal meaning of the given text). In metaphor, where there is an "X", the reader must supply from his own store a concept or image of "X".¹¹

On the other hand, 'At Grass' is more controlled than 'On the Move', in that it is confident in asserting its subject and its final effect. The last stanza makes it clear that the retired horses are seen by:

Only the groom, and the groom's boy,
With bridles in the evening come.

The implication here is death which has been anticipated earlier in the poem by 'the cold shade' and implied by the word 'evening' in the concluding line. 'Evening' implies darkness and thus death because Larkin frequently speaks of death in terms of darkness in his poetry: 'nothing contravenes / The coming dark'. As to Gunn's poem, it does not make its point firmly, instead it ends in a rambling conclusion, vaguely pressing upon the idea of motion in time: 'One is always nearer by not keeping still'.

Syntactically speaking, 'On the Move' is a success. The verse flow continues to be fully alive at every point sustained by a careful management of syntax. The movement of the poem matches the high speed of the cyclists which is transmitted firstly, by the employment of twenty-six verbs in the simple present form and two present participles. This helps to create an immediate and continued action. Secondly, by the vitality of words, such as 'spurts', 'gust', 'thunder', 'hum', 'bulges', 'divides and breaks'. These words are harsh enough

and there is evidently energy at work amongst them. And finally, by the potential of decasyllabic metre in which the poem is written.¹² This metre gives a combination of flexibility with precision in the verse movement. G.S. Fraser points out that: 'The one obvious aesthetic advantage of pure syllabic metrics over the traditional kinds seems to me to be the impression it can convey of a very flat and dry, but also very painstaking, precision.'¹³ So, it is this powerful energy latent in the syntax and the sense of fierce feelings held down by the weight of the final three lines of each stanza which give this poem its theatrical triumph and its rhetorical feature an equestrian authority.

'On the Move' is urgent and the boys have a strong presence and impending fierceness brought about by sharp details and violent gestures. The boys have an impending air because they are stunned by the uncertainty of their violent move which leads nowhere:

In gleaming jackets trophied with the dust,
They strap in doubt . . .

Similarly, it can be said that the lack of definite assertion of what is to be articulated illustrates fairly the weakness of 'Elvis Presley'.¹⁴ Gunn takes Presley's pose as a stance; as a posture for combat:

Whether he poses or is real, no cat
Bothers to say: the pose held is a stance,
Which, generation of the very chance
It wars on, may be posture for combat.

However, 'Combat against what, we ask? What is the real significance of Presley? Or is the poet off on some erotic sidetrack, a piece of disguised butch-ery?', John Fuller wonders at the ambiguous quality of the poem. He thinks that Gunn 'does not seem to be plainly enough saying what he wants to say'.¹⁵

The trouble with this poem is not so much in the suddenness of the defiant posture but in its relationship to the present and to the poet as well. It seems that Gunn is obsessed with the concept of violence in life for the sake of violence which is very frequent in his writings. However, this violence is not enough to constitute a definite and clear philosophy despite the philosophical argument it is couched in. Perhaps, Gunn's love for travelling and his interest in different life styles give him a wide range of experience.¹⁶ However, his experience, most often, is not as deep as Larkin's. Gunn's admiration for the toughs and his interest in their violent stance not only express the uncertainty of life but reflect his struggle to find a way out of uncertainty. Yet, to understand the motive that is behind such a stance and such a movement is an intricate problem for him.

In 'Merlin in the Cave: He Speculates without a Book',¹⁷ the poet admits his inability to solve it:

Pressing my head between two slopes of stone
I peer at what I do not understand,
The movement: clouds, and separate rocks blown
Back on their flight . . .

The problem of finding the real purpose of the movement in life (of man and birds) is part of man's perpetual search for the true core of reality which is ultimately connected with the experience of time. In this fiasco, the struggle is essentially between the concept of motion and that of motionlessness:

Knowing the end to movement, I will shrink
 From movement not for its own wilful sake.
 --How can a man live, and not act or think
 Without an end? But I must act, and make
 The meaning in each movement that I take.
 Rook, bee, you are the whole and not a part.
 This is an end, and yet another start.

Similar to the last stanza of 'On the Move', the only commitment to life this stanza can make is to urge us to be in motion and not to keep still. It is worth noting here that what is important is not so much the perception of the absurdity of man's act as how he conducts himself after making such perception which this poem falls short of stating. Man's existence in time is marked by change and the transient nature of life makes it difficult for him to believe in a tangible reality. Thus, Gunn is really left with little to choose between the illusion of reality and the reality of illusion. His, as Samuel French Morse describes it, 'is more likely to be a struggle to avoid repetition and self-parody.'¹⁸

Unlike Larkin, Gunn does not burn the bridges to the past. He maintains the relationship between the present and the past; between the poetic experience and tradition. On various occasions, Larkin expresses his mistrust in tradition and mythology or what he calls

the 'myth-kitty' and the 'dead spots': '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.'¹⁹ And somewhere else, he takes it 'as a guiding principle to believe that every poem must be its own sole freshly-created universe, and therefore [to] have no belief in "tradition" or a common myth-kitty or casual allusions in poems to poems or poets.'²⁰

On the other hand, Gunn tries to explore the potentials of the mythic experience through the medium of poetry, especially in poems like 'Jesus and his Mother' and 'Helen's Rape'²¹ which I quote below:

Hers was the last authentic rape:
From forced content of common breeder
Bringing the violent dreamed escape
Which came to her in different shape
Than to Europa, Danae, Leda:

Paris. He was a man. And yet
That Aphrodite brought this want
Found too implausible to admit:
And so against this story set
The story of a stolen aunt.

Trust man to prevaricate and disguise
A real event when it takes place:
And Romans stifling Sabine cries
To multiply and vulgarise
What even Trojans did with grace.

Helen herself could not through flesh
Abandon flesh; she felt surround
Her absent body, never fresh
The mortal context, and the mesh
Of the continual battle's sound.

The central idea of this poem is the recalling of a past mythic incident of primitive sex violence. Helen, a housewife (common breeder) has been raped by Paris. She likes her abduction to be as divine as her mother's, Leda.

'Helen's Rape' recalls to mind Yeats's 'Leda and the Swan'.²²

These are the first four lines:

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast . . .

Like many poets, Gunn also fell to Yeats. He was influenced by his mannerisms: 'Yeats was too hypnotic an influence, and my poetry became awash with his mannerisms'.²³ However, he fails to achieve in 'Helen's Rape' what his mentor does in 'Leda and the Swan', that is, the exploration of the present by a mythic experience. In 'Leda and the Swan', the genius and authentic voice of the poet are unmistakably present, selecting and regrouping the story according to a freshly conceived structure. The poem carries the weight of Yeats's religious myth. The rape of Leda symbolises the conflict between power and beauty which produces 'Helen'. The violent sex is the major factor in the historical process in that time past and time present are engendered in the orgasm.²⁴ Thus, unlike Gunn, Yeats uses the myth to explain not the past but the present situation.

Though the real Helen who was wafted to Egypt (only her simulacrum was taken to Troy) could feel the grief she brought on Troy, the reader could not feel so. This is because of the ambiguity of the final stanza as G.S. Fraser argues:

The puzzles of such stanza suggest that though Gunn is learnedly lucid he is never likely to be a popular writer. The reader of this short poem is expected to have a very detailed knowledge of Greek mythology, as the reader of the one about Elizabethan poetry needs a detailed knowledge of Elizabethan literature and history.²⁵

The implication of Fraser's point is that Gunn introduces the myth as a mere narrative structure. It does not enter into the life-blood of the poem in the sense that it is not related to the poem organically. The poem focusses on the past and does not explain the present. The result of that is the inability to introduce the strong feeling of the past violent experience (the rape) into the present. In other words, the reader cannot sympathise with Helen because the continuity of her rape experience through time is not sustained.

'Helen's Rape' makes a sharp contrast to Larkin's 'Deceptions' in which he remarkably makes a past experience (also rape) felt strongly in the present. The first stanza is this:

Even so distant, I can taste the grief,
 Bitter and sharp with stalks, he made you gulp.
 The sun's occasional print, the brisk brief
 Worry of wheels along the street outside
 Where bridal London bows the other way,
 And light, unanswerable and tall and wide,
 Forbids the scar to heal, and drives
 Shame out of hiding. All the unhurried day
 Your mind lay open like a drawer of knives . . .

Larkin learns from Hardy the priority of feeling in writing: 'Hardy taught one to feel rather than to write.'²⁶ The language, generally simple and pure, is worked out to its fullest potential. Larkin

feels strongly the agony of the wronged girl by speaking directly to her back through the years; 'I can taste the grief'. The bitterness of this grief is evoked, firstly, by the sharp contrast carried out between the raped girl and the bridal London through the alliterated [w] which, as David Timms puts it, 'creates the rush of the carriage wheels, all ignoring the raped girl who is the subject of the poem; the repeated [b] suggests the sound of the bells booming ironically across London for a wedding.'²⁷ Secondly, by the simile of the drawer of knives. It is an image which is savage enough to stand as a symbol for the scar that never heals; for the ruined innocence in life. And then psychologically, by the phrase 'the unhurried day' which suggests the slow passage of time for the girl who grieves over her ruined self. Time does not eliminate the taste of her grief:

Slums, years, have buried you. I would not dare
Console you if I could . . .

Larkin, here, extends his as well as the reader's sympathies with the girl over a span of history.

Although both poets deal with past events which they read or heard about, Larkin, unlike Gunn, persuades his readers to rally round his girl through his faithfulness to the experience which Gunn underestimates: 'When I came to write a poem', writes Gunn, 'it was all-important that I should be true to those feelings [about any subject]--even, paradoxically, at the risk of distorting the experience.'²⁸ Gunn's argument is fallacious because it is

the experience, represented by an object, that motivates the feelings. In other words, since the experience generates the feelings so any distortion of the experience causes damage to the feelings themselves.

Moreover, Gunn's point mentioned above is debatable for it brings into focus the question of memory and its role in the experience of time in his and Larkin's poetry. Stephen Spender says that 'The poet, above all else, is a person who never forgets certain sense-impressions which he has experienced and which he can re-live again and again as though with all their original freshness.'²⁹ Memories are deeply rooted in one's own past. And while Larkin rejects the past altogether,

And on another day will be the past,
A valley cropped by fat neglected chances . . .

Gunn considers the past as an inexhaustible source of happy memories from a happy childhood: 'I had a happy childhood'.³⁰ The past invades Gunn's present continually. Anything coming from the memory makes him review his past and scrutinize his own actions and relation to other people. On his return to London in 1964, Gunn lived for a year 'on Talbot Road, a few blocks from my friend Tony White, in a large room on the second floor of a handsome Victorian house that has since been torn down'.³¹

After years of absence in America, Talbot Road evokes the past and the time past and time present become curiously fused in his mind, and soon it is the triumph of the past that maintains its strong grip on him:

A London returned to after twelve years.
 On a long passage between two streets
 I met my past self lingering there
 or so he seemed
 a youth of about nineteen glaring at me
 from a turn of desire. He held his look
 as if shielding it from wind.
 Our eyes parleyed, then we touched
 in the conversation of bodies.
 Standing together on asphalt openly,
 we gradually loosened into a shared laughter.
 This was the year, the year of reconciliation
 to whatever it was I had come from,
 the prickly heat of adolescent emotion,
 premature staleness and self-contempt.
 In my hilarity, in my luck,
 I forgave myself for having had a youth.

I started to heap up pardons
 even in anticipation. On Hampstead Heath
 I knew every sudden path from childhood,
 the crooks of every climbable tree . . . 32

Gunn's return to London puts him in touch with a reality he no longer experiences. It enables him to recapture a certain moment; to regain what may otherwise be irrevocably lost. Meanwhile, this visit also involves a confrontation with those parts of his life which he has lived there. He meets the other Gunn: 'a youth of about nineteen glaring at me'. This encounter gives a new actuality to the past. Such a new actuality has been recorded by concrete details, such as 'Hampstead Heath',³³ 'path', 'tree' and 'tents of branch and bush'.

Syntactically, the encounter turns out to be palatable. One distinctive tendency, detected here, is Gunn's attempt to exploit the rhythms of direct speech and free verse. The sense of unutterable weariness, suggested by the word 'lingering', is conveyed by heavily

accented consonantal noise of the first two lines. They are packed with difficult consonants and heavy alliteration in the opening line. Thus, they produce an effect of a slow flow of the verse to match the movement of the poet's lingering self, leading ultimately to their meeting.

It is through the act of memory that the past is relived and the intensity of its presence is heightened. Gunn says: 'Memory is a means of renewal.'³⁴ The elements of time are remarkably fused in this poem: the past is the continuation of the present: 'On a long passage between two streets'. The image is almost flat and commonplace, yet it is sharp and powerful. The two streets could be the poet's past and present, now joined by 'a long passage' in the moment of the meeting. Furthermore, this fusion of the past and the present has been intensified by the poet's almost sensuous meeting with his past self. There are sexual connotations in the account he gives of that encounter:³⁵ his past self is 'glaring at me / from a turn of desire', 'Our eyes parleyed, then we touched / in the conversation of bodies'.

Larkin's idea that the past is dead and the present is futile cannot be applied to Gunn. To Gunn, the present is a continuous movement and energy. Even the balcony he steps to through the window of his room on Talbot Road gives him an access to a lively panorama:

. . . to air, to street, to friendship:
for, from it, I could see, blocks away,
the window where Tony, my old friend,
toiled at translation. I too tried
to render obscure passages into clear English,
as I try now . . .

Unlike Larkin, Gunn seems to enjoy life whenever and wherever he is: 'If England is my parent and San Francisco is my lover, then New York is my own dear old whore, all flash and vitality and history.'³⁶ His visit to London turns out to be, above all, a reunion with his past:

. . . we gradually loosened into a shared laughter.
This was the year, the year of reconciliation
to whatever it was I had come from . . .

Here, the reconciliation between the present and the past is completely integrated. To the poet, the reconciliation approximates to an understanding. It is not a riddle to him as it is to Larkin in 'Coming':

And I . . .
Feel like a child
Who comes on a scene
Of adult reconciling,
And can understand nothing . . .

Gunn uses the distant personal past to express the emotional significance of a situation in the present: his feelings evoked by the visit. While experiencing happiness, as expressed in the first part of the poem, his mind switches over to the past. This helps considerably to illuminate the present through the remembrance of the past. It is evident that Gunn's commitment to the present is not, after all, a protection against the heavy burden of the past or the temptation to dig for what once was and no longer is because he has no old feelings he wants to escape: 'I forgave myself for having had a youth'.

By comparison, in 'I Remember I Remember', Larkin's visit to his birth place (Coventry) is basically not motivated by the search for his roots. As he is approaching the city, Larkin gives the impression of recalling things past compulsively or has hardly ever allowed himself to think about them:

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

I leant far out, and squinnied for a sign
That this was still the town that had been 'mine'
So long, but found I wasn't even clear
Which side was which . . .

This is so because he has no past. His childhood is 'a forgotten boredom' and his birth place is 'only where my childhood was unspent'.

There are many undeveloped ideas in Gunn's poetry and the seemingly philosophical generalities, marginally detected in most of his books, do not constitute a clear-cut philosophy towards the question of time because they are mostly borrowed: 'I am however a rather derivative poet. I learn what I can from whom I can, mostly consciously. I borrow heavily from my reading because I take my reading seriously.'³⁷

However, the only ostensible attitude Gunn has adopted in life is that he always pictures the individual in terms of energy and a non-static condition. This sort of attitude amounts, more or less, to Larkin's 'take life as it is'.

Notes

¹ The birth, so to speak, of the Movement was first announced by Anthony Hartley. In an anonymous article, Hartley, for better or worse, wrote: 'We are now in the presence of the only considerable movement in English poetry since the Thirties'. And he went on to give his account of the characteristics of this movement:

It is bored by the despair of the Forties, not much interested in suffering, and extremely impatient of poetic sensibility, especially poetic sensibility about 'the writer and society'. So it's goodbye to all those rather sad little discussions about 'how the writer ought to live', and it's goodbye to the Little Magazine and 'experimental writing'. 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 its going to be changed much by a couple of handfuls of young English writers. ('In the Movement', Spectator, 1 October 1954, p. 400.)

There is a certain naivete about Hartley's communique, and indeed, it could be rather dangerous if taken literally. The danger lurks in its oversimplified generalisation: it takes for granted that this group of poets, who were later included in Robert Conquest's anthology, New Lines (1956) namely: D.J. Enright, Kingsley Amis, Robert Conquest, Donald Davie, John Holloway, Elizabeth Jennings, Philip Larkin, John Wain and Thom Gunn, are sharing a similar set of poetic rules and tendencies.

Nevertheless, Robert Conquest seems to be aware of Hartley's mistake by choosing not to run such a risk in his anthology which, as Ian Hamilton describes, 'was not to inaugurate a Movement, but to stop the rot by sifting the senior members from the mass of imitators and disciples'. ('The Making of the Movement', New Statesman, 23 April 1971, p. 570.) In his introduction to New Lines, Conquest writes: 'It will be seen at once that these poets do not have as much in common as they would if they were a group of doctrine-saddled writers forming a definite school complete with programme and rules'. This is a fair and almost precise judgement. It brings in the whole question of differences as well as similarities in the work of these poets.

² G.S. Fraser, 'The Poetry of Thom Gunn', Critical Quarterly, 3:4 (Winter 1961), p. 359.

³ Thom Gunn, The Sense of Movement (London, 1969), pp. 11-12.

⁴ Originally, the concept of the centre of any literary work was introduced into the literary criticism by Russian Formalists. They called it the dominant which is 'the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components. It is the dominant which generates the integrity to the structure'. (Roman Jakobson, Selected Writings, ed. Stephen Rudy, 5 vols, New York, 1981, iii, p. 751.) And Philip Hobsbaum defines the centre of any poem as 'that which essentially gives the poem its identity. In any work, some parts are more crucial than others, and there usually is a climactic point when one has to say "If anywhere, it is on this that the poem depends"'. (Essentials of Literary Criticism, London, 1983, p. 19.)

⁵ Thom Gunn, The Occasions of Poetry, ed. Clive Wilmer (London, 1982), p. 170.

⁶ Ian Hamilton, 'Four Conversations' London Magazine, IV:8 (November 1964), p. 66.

⁷ See 5, above, p. 176.

⁸ Literary Theory and Structure: Essays in Honour of William K. Wimsatt, eds F. Brady, J. Palmer and M. Price (London, 1973), p. 396.

⁹ See 5, above, pp. 176-7.

¹⁰ Winifred Nowotny, The Language Poets Use (London, 1975), pp. 56, 59.

¹¹ Ibid, pp. 59-60.

¹² Blake Morrison also points out that:

The strictness of metre and rhyme-scheme; the speaker's admiration for the motorcyclists' exertion of control; the tentative, self-qualifying, explanatory tone-of-voice, the fact that the poem is written from the point of view of a stationary observer, not of an active participant: all these features of the poem give it a movement quality. (The Movement, London, 1980, p. 186.)

And Gunn himself seems to be aware of the effect that is achieved by writing in syllabics. In an interview with Ian Hamilton, Gunn tells him:

I find in writing syllabics that I can get certain free verse effects which I certainly can't get in metrical verse. There is a great danger in syllabics, that it will just fall into a mass of prose written differently, but I don't think good syllabics should do this any more than good free verse. I think one has got to be very open-minded about this and judge it by the end effect of each poem. In my own case, I find that in syllabics I can much more easily record the casual perception, whereas with metrical verse I very often become committed to a particular kind of rather taut emotion, a rather clenched kind of emotion.

It is worth remarking in this context that Larkin, in the same interview, appears to be content to write in traditional metrics and shows no interest in syllabics:

I've never tried syllabics; I'm not sure I fully understand them. I think one would have to be very sure of oneself to dispense with the help that metre and rhyme give and I doubt really if I could operate without them. I have occasionally, some of my favourite poems have not rhymed or had any metre, but it's rarely been premeditated. (See 6, above, pp. 65, 73.)

¹³ G.S. Fraser, Metre, Rhyme and Free Verse (London, 1970), p. 52.

¹⁴ See 3, above, p. 31.

¹⁵ The Modern Poet, ed. Ian Hamilton (London, 1968), p. 19.

¹⁶ In his foreword to A Rumoured City: New Poets from Hull, Larkin writes: 'Poetry, like prose, happens anywhere . . . For a place cannot produce poems: it can only not prevent them'. (Ed. Douglas Dunn, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1982.) And when he associates travels with misery, undoubtedly, he has in mind the fact that most distinguished English poets throughout ages never went beyond the borders of British islands, yet their poetry is still enjoyed in Britain and abroad. Larkin's remark also highlights one of the basic

differences between poetry and other literary genres, particularly the novel. Speaking to Miriam Gross, Larkin says:

. . . the further one gets from home the greater the misery . . . I'm not proud of this, but I'm singularly incurious about other places. I think travelling is very much a novelist's thing. I don't think it is necessary for poets. The poet is really engaged in creating the familiar, he's not committed to introducing the unfamiliar.
(Required Writing, London, 1983, p. 55.)

It seems as though curiosity about other places is not as helpful for Gunn as is incuriosity for Larkin. Gunn himself expresses doubts about its validity:

I was just curious to travel as much as I could and then I stayed on [in America]. I'm not sure what effect it has had on my poetry, really. Obviously one's subject matter does largely come from the place one lives in but I am not sure that the subject matter of America is that different nowadays from the subject matter of England. To take that rather over-famous poem of mine about Elvis Presley, one could just as easily have written that poem from England or France, or Finland. I'm not sure whether it is important that I have lived in America. (See 6, above, p. 67.)

¹⁷ See 3, above, p. 56.

¹⁸ S.F. Morse, 'A Transatlantic View', Poetry, XCII:5 (August 1958), p. 329.

¹⁹ See 6, above, p. 72.

²⁰ D.J. Enright, Poets of the 1950s (Tokyo, 1955), pp. 77-78.

²¹ G.S. Fraser, Poetry Now (London, mcmlvi), p. 80.

²² The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats, eds Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (New York, 1957), p. 441.

²³ See 5, above, p. 175.

²⁴ In 'Leda and the Swan', Yeats is far more precise than Gunn in achieving a mythical expression of time conceived as a system of symbols. Morton Irving Seiden points out that:

The principle subject of the poem, nevertheless, is actually not that of generated and resolved antinomies. Yeats's main concern is centred on the historical process. In A Vision, he explains that every two-thousand-year period of our civilization is ushered into being not only by a supernatural influx but also by an act of sexual violence. Hence, in 'Leda and the Swan', the primal embrace of god and mortal, as he writes of it, both contained and originated the whole rise and fall of classical antiquity. History can be reduced to biography; biography can be reduced to the sex act; and the sex act can be reduced to the source of every human power:

A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead . . .

Past and present are embodied in the orgasm. (William Butler Yeats: The Poet as a Mythmaker 1865-1939, Michigan State University Press, 1962, p. 237.)

About his experience with myths, Gunn writes: 'Returning to Hampstead at thirteen I read some Greek myths and wrote a poem about a peony, which started:

O peony you smell
Like the heavenly nectar Hebe spilt
On luxurious Olympus.' (See 5, above, p. 153.)

Perhaps these early readings are not enough for Gunn to understand the historical dimensions of myths and thus it could be responsible for the lack of integration between the past and present in 'Helen's Rape'.

²⁵ See 2, above, p. 362.

²⁶ See 16, above, p. 175.

²⁷ David Timms, Philip Larkin (Edinburgh, 1973), p. 57.

²⁸ See 5, above, p. 152.

²⁹ Stephen Spender, 'The Making of a Poem', Critiques and Essays in Criticism 1920-1948, ed. R.W. Stallman (New York, 1949), p. 24.

³⁰ See 5, above, p. 171.

³¹ See 5, above, p. 180.

³² Thom Gunn, The Passage of Joy (London, 1982), p. 84.

³³ Hampstead is the area in which Gunn spent most of his childhood:

Because of changes in my father's job, we moved around the country a lot at first, but finally we settled down in Hampstead, not then nearly as wealthy a place as it now is. It was quiet and rather old-fashioned. I played with my friends on the Heath, fording streams or skirmishing with strange children. (See 5, above, p. 171.)

³⁴ In an important article on William Carlos Williams, entitled 'A New World: The Poetry of William Carlos Williams', Gunn admires what he calls 'the re-creation achieved by memory' in his poetry:

. . . and for Williams anything that renews is an instrument for the exploration and definition of the new world, which he labours both to 'possess' and be part of. For possession of the details is achieved not through the recording of them, but through the record's adherence to his feeling for them. The process is not of accumulation but of self-renewal. (See 5, above, p. 34.)

It is worth noting, here, that Gunn is very much influenced by Williams whom he was introduced to by Yvor Winters. Gunn himself acknowledges what he owes Williams: 'I was consciously borrowing what I could from William Carlos Williams, trying as it were to anglicize him'. (See 5, above, p. 181.)

³⁵ This meeting is actually between the young and mature Gunn. The sexual overtones it has are to be reinforced by Gunn's recognition of his homosexual tendencies: 'Now anyone [is] aware that I am homosexual. . .' and when he left London in 1954 for San Francisco: 'A

straight couple took me to my first gay bar, The Black Cat. It excited me so much that the next night I returned there on my own'. (See 5, above, pp. 188 and 176 respectively.)

³⁶ See 5, above, p. 178.

³⁷ See 5, above, p. 186.

Chapter Six

D.J. ENRIGHT

Only one subject to write about: pity.
 Self-pity: the only subject to avoid.
 How difficult to observe both conditions!¹

This is a far cooler confrontation than Gunn's and is more or less a Larkinesque conscious acceptance of life. What Enright embarks on here is to celebrate, in verse, common humanity and to judge things in life on human grounds. His sympathy with man's plight is seen as an extension of his own. To feel pity is not to patronize; rather, it is to support others in their struggle against the cruelties of life. It is this solidarity which he expresses in his poems with man against the ravages of time that makes him denounce W.H. Auden's cynicism:

Auden's political hopes were, therefore, nullified at the outset by the contempt which he usually displays when he comes to deal with an individual human. His reaction against Eliot's cynicism failed simply because he too was cynical, though in a less assured and thoughtful way.²

There is, certainly, nothing particularly novel about Enright's attempt to adopt a human stance in life. This has been a persistent

endeavour of poets from earlier times, usually deriving from traditional views provided by religion and social conventions throughout history. What interests us in this respect is his personal approach to his subject and the effectiveness and power with which he speaks of others' sufferings and their hard experiences. His is a continued attempt to bridge the gap between poetry and ordinary life.³ The poem 'On the Death of a Child'⁴ illustrates Enright's mild protest against the force of destruction in life and displays his controlled emotion:

The greatest griefs shall find themselves inside the
smallest cage.

It's only then that we can hope to tame their rage,

The monsters we must live with. For it will not do
To hiss humanity because one human threw
Us out of heart and home. Or part

At odds with life because one baby failed to live.
Indeed, as little as its subject, is the wreath we give--

The big words fail to fit. Like giant boxes
Round small bodies. Taking up improper room,
Where so much withering is, and so much bloom.

There is a sense of dignity and tenderness about the unrhetorical celebration of the self-control shown on the untimely death of the child. This sense is finely conveyed by the concreteness of the sonic texture of the opening of the poem. The first two lines are prominent owing to the lack of polysyllables and the abundance of long vowels and diphthongs. The words in these lines carry primary stresses which pull back the movement of the verse to enact the sorrow felt on such an occasion.

The poet's anguish is well established: the griefs are wild monsters and the poet struggles to tame them. The rhyme of the first couplet (cage and rage) helps in bolstering such an attempt: the monstrous rage is contained inside the smallest cage, i.e. the poet's heart. The recognition of suffering in life overcomes the desirability of releasing the emotion. The poet, here, expresses his own view of life by stating man's need for an understanding of reality amid the confrontations of life. It is to reconcile rather than to be at odds with life: to live means to give (again the rhyming pattern enacts the meaning).

In his poetry, Enright, 'with his disabused, unsentimental impressions of much sentimentalized'⁵ events like death, has adopted the low-key idiom to catch the modish air of sincerity to the experience without lapsing into the abyss of sentimentality. 'On the Death of a Child' shows a strongly felt resistance to any excess of emotion. The words are allowed to determine their own intense and tightly bound system of relationships: the intellect takes control of the situation. It is this lack of 'thought' in poetry for which Enright and other Movement poets criticise Dylan Thomas.⁶ With this conviction in mind, 'On the Death of a Child' is consciously meant to be a 'revision' of Thomas's 'A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London',⁷ which I quote complete:

Never until the mankind making
 Bird beast and flower
 Fathering and all humbling darkness
 Tells with silence the last light breaking
 And the still hour
 Is come of the sea tumbling in harness

And I must enter again the round
 Zion of the water bead
 And the synagogue of the ear of corn
 Shall I let pray the shadow of a sound
 Or sow my salt seed
 In the least valley of sackcloth to mourn

The majesty and burning of the child's death.
 I shall not murder
 The mankind of her going with a grave truth
 Nor blaspheme down the stations of the breath
 With any further
 Elegy of innocence and youth.

Deep with the first dead lies London's daughter,
 Robed in the long friends,
 The grains beyond age, the dark veins of her mother,
 Secret by the unmourning water
 Of the riding Thames.
 After the first death, there is no other.

Structurally, 'On the Death of a Child' counteracts 'A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London'. The latter is a more elaborate experiment in syntax and imagery than the former.⁸

While Enright's poem consists of short stanzas and short sentences (the first line constitutes one simple sentence), Thomas's opening sentence stretches for fourteen lines:

Between the introductory negative adverb never and the inverted auxiliary element shall, Thomas puts in our way as stumbling blocks a triple set of conjoined included sentences with three subjects and three predicates, two of which themselves contain conjoined structures: 'the darkness tells with silence', 'the still hour is come of the sea tumbling in harness', and 'I must enter again the round Zion of the water bead . . .'⁹

This complexity of the syntactic structure together with the rich and rhetorical imagery with which the poem is crammed help to give way to the poet's unashamed openness of feeling.¹⁰

Thomas also treats the child's death with dignity. But unlike Enright, he depends on a host of images and religious language:¹¹ 'darkness', 'mankind making', 'bead', 'synagogue of the ear', 'pray', 'water', 'corn . . .'. The simple linguistic construction of Enright's poem fits its subject very well. Its simplicity is meant to enact the innocence of the dead baby-girl. While suggesting that death is inevitable, both poems imply rebirth through the paradox with which they end. However, it is more neatly expressed in Enright's concluding self-contained stanza than in Thomas's. William Empson says that 'The general theme is that Dylan Thomas at death, no less than the burned girl, must be absorbed into the Nature from which further life may mysteriously be born.'¹² The implication of this statement is that Thomas's paradoxical idea that death suggests rebirth has been rhetorically and, to some extent, ambiguously expressed by religious references throughout the whole poem. For him, life is a Biblical rhythm of birth, death and regeneration epitomized in the Bible. As for Enright, he considers life simply as an endless cycle of birth and death; light and dark; 'Where so much withering is, and so much bloom.'

Enright's genuine grief is palliated not by impatience with or revolt against life but by the thought that though the ruthless power of time is inescapable, life bears the seed of its renewal within itself. Such a view of life takes him closer to Larkin than any other poet within or outside the Movement. Being married with a child, Enright's experience in 'On the Death of a Child' is deeper and more

touching than Larkin's in 'Dublinesque' which is also about the death of a young girl.¹³ Like Enright's poem, 'Dublinesque' is about the idea that death and suffering are the consequences of time passing and are common to all:

There is an air of great friendliness,
 As if they were honouring
 One they were fond of;
 Some caper a few steps,
 Skirts held skilfully
 (Someone claps time),

And of great sadness also.
 As they wend away
 A voice is heard singing
 Of Kitty, or Katy,
 As if the name meant once
 All love, all beauty.

Here, we haven't the puzzles about details or the bewildering associative growth of imagery which confront us in Dylan Thomas's poem. The language structure is plain and economical. The feelings are real as they are not exaggerated. As in 'On the Death of a Child', the emotions in 'Dublinesque' are contained by the simple but tight syntax: short lines and a simple sentence structure. The idea expressed does not depend so much on the richness of the imagery as on the thought that life has to go on despite the vicissitudes of time and death.

It should be pointed out that in spite of the fact that 'Dublinesque' does not end with the same paradox which 'On the Death of a Child' or 'A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London' end with, however, the same quality of the meaning of that paradox (i.e. life goes on) can be detected in it: some of the 'troop of streetwalkers /

In wide flowered hats' caper a few steps and 'Someone claps time'. There are both an understanding of and a reconciliation with time and an acknowledgement of death and a faith in the continuation of life. In other words, 'Dublinesque' does suggest the ambivalent nature of our life where there is 'so much withering and so much bloom'.

As time passes, Enright can be grim and he may even contemplate suicide but he doesn't speculate the idea of abandoning hope in life. And while 'Tottering on the brink of death, as he likes to imagine, [he] maintains a zest for living, endlessly fascinated by all the sad and lovely contradictions of human life.'¹⁴ His aspirations are very modest as he is more interested in living than in life itself: to settle for the bare survival:

The puffing vendor, surer than a trumpet,
Tells us we are not alone.
Each night that same frail midnight tune
Squeezed from a bogus flute,
Under the noise of war, after war's noise,
It mourns the fallen, every night,
It celebrates survival--
In real cities, real houses, real time.¹⁵

In stressing reality by underemphasising the terrible in life, Enright manages to reach a compromise with time: 'Man sometimes does contrive to face fact and not fall flat on his face, even to live not without honour, so that on balance,

It is his virtue needs explaining,
Not his failing.
Away, melancholy,
Away with it, let it go.'¹⁶

It is this reconciliation between the poet and suffering which helps him to achieve a kind of rhythm within himself that is shiningly present in 'Children Killed in War' which I quote in full:¹⁷

A still day here,
Trees standing like a lantern show,
Cicadas, those sparse eaters, at their song,
The eye of silence, lost in soundlessness.

And then, no warning given,
Or if foreseen, then not to be escaped,
A well-aimed wind explodes,
And limbs of trees, which cannot run away,
May only hide behind each other.

Grant their death came promptly there,
Who died too soon,
That pain of parting was not long,
Roots ready to let fall their leaves.

The wind burns out,
The trees, what's left, resume their stand,
The singers stilled, an iron comb
Wrenched roughly through their lives.

While you, your thinking blown off course,
Design some simple windless heaven
Of special treats and toys,
Like picnic snapshots,
Like a magic-lantern show.

A good sentiment is conveyed by a calm and a confident tone. The poem is, after all, straightforward but never shallow. The sense of impending stillness is evoked by the heavily stressed syllables of the words of the first stanza. This, in turn, slows down the rhythm of the first verse by slowing down its flow. In the meantime the lack of verbs results in a lack of action which matches the state of motionlessness and silence. The treachery of the silence shows itself in the form of an explosion in the second stanza carried out through the

verb of action, 'explodes', which is in the present tense. The phrase 'limbs of trees' suggests the fragility and innocence of the children who are also subjected to the atrocities of time implied by the phrase: 'A well-aimed wind'. Such a spontaneous mobility of the verse and the well calculated effect of the imagery remind one of William Blake's statement that:

. . . the great and golden rule of art, as well as of life, is this: That the more distinct, sharp, and wiry the bounding line, the more perfect the work of art; and the less keen and sharp, the greater is the evidence of weak imitation, plagiarism, and bungling . . . The want of this determinate and bounding form evidences the want of idea in the artist's mind.¹⁸

The third stanza develops what Robert Conquest terms as 'the intellectual backbone' of the poem; the conscious meaning which helps to curb excessive passion: it 'takes up the reasoning, balancing mode of discourse and the quiet, concessionary "Grant their death came promptly" and "That pain of parting was not long" offer the calm of a mind just held in desperate balance.'¹⁹ The strong syntax, the heavy rhythm and the difficult sounds of 'an iron comb / Wrenched roughly through their lives' suggest the ferocity of the event inflicted upon the children.

However, soon after the air-raid, things go back to normal:

The wind burns out,
The trees, what's left, resume their stand . . .

Surely, with such an understatement that life has to go on despite cruelty and misfortunes, 'Children Killed in War' is a very serious poem carrying a strong reminiscence of Larkin's 'The Explosion':

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 . . .

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

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.

There are many resemblances between this poem and Enright's poem. The stanced stillness which precedes the explosion, evoked by the 'tremor; cows / Stopped chewing' and the 'sun, / Scarfed as in a heat-haze, dimmed', finds its counterpart in the first stanza of 'Children Killed in War'. Both Larkin's 'freshened silence' and Enright's 'lantern show' are threatened by the imminent evil which cannot be escaped. The 'well-aimed wind' plays havoc with the 'limbs of trees, which cannot run away' as does the explosion with the miners. The phrase, 'Shadows pointed towards the pithead', predicts as well as suggests the on-coming death

as the shadows abduct the light of the sun, producing a powerful sense of menace reinforced by the natural and animal acts in the fifth stanza. At the same time, shadows can be ominous as they suggest darkness which Larkin always associates with death. In both poems, the rhythm is held back at the beginning and then released. It accelerates at the point when the explosion takes place and the well-aimed wind 'explodes'. This is to act out the conditions prevailing before and during both events. Once more, 'Children Killed in War' and 'The Explosion' express a recognition, however sad but contained, of the fact of human limitations and imprisonment in time. Their images, 'trees and eggs', are concrete enough to accommodate connotations of vitality as well as of decay: they connote the continuity of life while they figure death.

The simplicity and the clarity of the figuration of both 'Children Killed in War': 'lantern show', 'the eye of silence', 'well-aimed wind', 'iron comb', and 'magic-lantern show' and of 'The Explosion': 'pointed shadows', 'freshened silence', 'lark's eggs', 'scarfed sun', and 'unbroken eggs', is well calculated and impressive in its honesty.²⁰ There is a strongly felt resistance to excessive emotion and by the same token to confront the violent death with hysteric reaction. Here, poetry, as Enright remarks, orders rather than merely imitates the experience of violence:

Art is not an outbreak of violence--something readily come by elsewhere--or a mere imitation of it, but an ordering of experience, however precarious-seeming, of internal and external events, which enacts and interprets disorder more firmly

and poignantly than anything else can do, even while containing it. Howard Nemerov has said, 'There is no thought so secret or so unique, so wicked or shameful or sublime, that the same has not quietly occurred to many others. Poetry is a realm in which such thoughts, such feelings may be tested without imprecating disaster as a consequence in the practical realm; hence its subversive character is highly civilized and civilizing.'²¹

It is this civility as against gentility which characterizes Enright's poetry.²² And although living is a constant struggle with reality, a reality in which lies dress the best, he displays a full awareness of the problem of time rather than a naive acceptance of the inevitable. He may consider the delicacy of the chicken in 'The Chicken's Foot' as a symbol of man's vulnerability to the ravages of time:²³

At the end of this little street, unnamed, unfamed,
 a street that one might take
 Unseeingly, to cheat the wind or to avoid one's friends,
 A street like others, unduly ravaged by the tempest's tail,
 Vulnerable to nature's riots though inured to man's--
 At the bottom of this fluttered street, flat in the choked
 gutter,
 I saw the neat claws, the precise foot, of a chicken--
 Bright yellow leggings, precious lucid nails, washed by
 the waters,
 Victim of our bellies, memorable sermon, oh murdered singing
 throat,
 Confronting the battered traveller, fingers spread in
 admonition.

The wind howled louder in derision: oh literary pedestrian,
 Small bankrupt moralist, oh scavenger of the obvious symbol!
 But entering the huge house, where the wind's scattered
 voices,
 Hot with insidious history, chill with foreboding, surged.
 through my body,
 The chicken's foot, naked and thin, still held my mind
 between its claws--
 The cleanest thing, most innocent, most living, of that
 morning.

The movement of this passage is from a simple visual effect (the neat claws, the precise foot) to personification of its source (the chicken) as an agent of innocence in life: the cleanest, most innocent and most living of things. The run of the verse is smooth and lucid sustained first, by words of colour and quality, such as 'neat claws', 'precise foot', 'bright yellow leggings', 'precious lucid nails', 'naked and thin foot', 'clean', 'innocent' and 'living'; second, by the fluency of the discourse and the characteristic flow of rhythm which create an effect of musicality throughout the whole poem. This is because Enright, as Donald Davie remarks, 'always remembers that the poem is an artefact, not just a sample section of animated conversation.'²⁴

The rhythm is most appropriate for the feelings Enright intends to articulate. He gives a fascinating picture of his subject (the chicken) and in the meantime he uses it as an occasion of intellectual speculation. In this respect, 'The Chicken's Foot' provides an interesting contrast with Lawrence's 'Baby Running Barefoot':²⁵

When the white feet of the baby beat across the grass
 The little white feet nod like white flowers in a wind,
 They poise and run like puffs of wind that pass
 Over water where the weeds are thinned.

And the sight of their white playing in the grass
 Is winsome as a robin's song, so fluttering;
 Or like two butterflies that settle on a glass
 Cup for a moment, soft little wing-beats uttering.

And I wish that the baby would tack across here to me
 Like a wind-shadow running on a pond, so she could stand
 With two little bare white feet upon my knee
 And I could feel her feet in either hand

Cool as syringa buds in morning hours,
 Or firm and silken as young peony flowers.

As in Enright's poem, in this poem there is an original expression of a wonderful sensitivity to the physical actuality of the baby's feet. James Reeves suggests that 'there is an acute realisation of physical impressions based on the purest possible observation. It is in this sense that [Lawrence's] poems are valuable for their originality.'²⁶ The baby's feet are like white flowers or puffs of wind or two butterflies or buds in the morning. Like the chicken's foot, they have a very strong presence brought about by 'the hectic run of imagery [which] keeps pace with the high-spirited theme.'²⁷ Further, like the active baby, the poem is full of action. Its movement is conveyed by employing ten verbs in the present simple tense and two present participles.

Lawrence shows the baby's innocence by the repetition of the word 'white' and by associating the baby with such fragile objects as 'flowers', 'butterflies' and a 'robin'. And while he lets the baby's feet beat across the grass to generate a wonderful landscape (flowers, butterflies, a robin singing and puffs of wind pass over the water of a pond), Enright shows the chicken struggling in a deserted street peopled only by storms: 'nature's riots'. The sense of its innocence and fragility has been heightened by man's brutality (the chicken is the victim of our bellies) and by the wind which 'howls' like starved foxes preying on chickens. In this sense, Enright's chicken is as powerless as Larkin's lambs:

Lambs that learn to walk in snow
 When their bleating clouds the air
 Meet a vast unwelcome, know
 Nothing but a sunless glare.
 Newly stumbling to and fro
 All they find, outside the fold,
 Is a wretched width of cold . . .

Here, the imagery of the lambs, like that of the chicken, is invested with a new quality: it is the acknowledgement of the devastating power of time and man's helplessness (the lambs meet a vast unwelcome and a wretched width of cold).

The realisation that man is a victim of time makes Enright more considerate and more sympathetic than Larkin in treating aged people. When the elderly Chinese gentleman leaves the restaurant:

A daughter or granddaughter opens the door for him,
 And he thanks her.
 It has been a satisfying evening. Tomorrow
 Will be a satisfying morning. In between he will
 sleep satisfactorily.
 I guess that for him it is peace in his time.
 It would be agreeable to be this Chinese gentleman.²⁸

Larkin calls them old fools. Bold and harsh questions are showered upon them:

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?

Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that as time goes by, Enright shows a growing concern about life. He speaks of death with an increasing authority and depth which, on occasions, leads him, as in 'The Abyss',²⁹ to speculate about suicide:

He walks towards the abyss . . .

This is a challenge to be met . . .

So he retraces that boring stretch of road . . .
 And here at last is the end of the road . . .
 No use hanging about. He'll come back later.

Apart from these grand themes, like Larkin, Enright also writes humorous verse. He expresses seriousness through humour. In 'Monkey',³⁰ he treats serious views flippantly:

Monkeys are like poets--more than human.
 Which is why they do not take us very seriously.
 Not to be taken seriously is rather painful . . .

He himself admires C.P. Cavafy's combination of irony with cool confrontation of disaster in his poetry:

Cavafy's charm, so hard to analyse, speaks best for itself, his poems are the only description of themselves. The combination of tenderness with irony, the cool confrontation of disaster, the gift of nimbly enlarging a specific historical incident into general applicability.³¹

It is this historical sense which differentiates Enright from Larkin. In his latest books, Paradise Illustrated and A Faust Book, the tendency is to retreat to history and myth to deal with the present. He uses the Fall of Adam and Eve and the legend of Faust as mythic experiences to explain present situations.

To recapitulate: the credibility of the poetry of both Enright and Larkin depends largely on their faithfulness to the experience of real things worked upon by a lively imagination which both of them celebrate. In his introduction to The Oxford Book of Contemporary

Verse, Enright admires the poets who:

. . . are writing out of and about the nature of our species and our time, about real things rather than 'literary' confections--and in my own dealings I must hope I have not interpreted the concepts real and unreal in an unduly narrow sense (an element of fantasy has found its way in, I now see, though not the sort that is quaintly called 'free'), for the imagination is both discoverer and inventor, moving at ease between the existent and the inexistent, tempering or transmuting both.³²

This view about poetry stems from the two poets' belief in the meaningful relationship between the writer and life: from Larkin's 'dislike to the false relationship between art and life' and Enright's view, quoting the note of the young Ottilie of Goethe's Elective Affinities, that 'the surest way of delivering yourself from the world is through art; and so is the surest way of binding yourself to it.'³³

Notes

¹ D.J. Enright, Bread Rather than Blossoms (London, 1956), p. 71.

² D.J. Enright, Poets of the 1950s (Tokyo, 1955), p. 5.

³ In the preface to his poetic contribution to the Poets of the 1950s, Enright has pointed out what poetry ought to be: 'Even so it seems to me that, particularly at the present time, we do need poetry that is about something, poetry that is about people--preferably other people'. (Ibid, p. 103.) One of the many assumptions underlying this statement is that all of us are liable to suffer under the tyranny of time. Here, Enright seems to take refuge in sharing with others their cares and griefs, as does Larkin in social rituals.

⁴ Ibid, p. 112.

⁵ G.S. Fraser, The Modern Writer and his World (London, 1964), p. 348.

⁶ Enright stresses the importance of thought in poetry. He explains that Dylan Thomas's poetry is wilfully obscure and deficient in intellectual conviction:

Perhaps the kind of admiration which Thomas received encouraged him to leave 'thinking' to the New Verse poets; but poetry is like the human body in needing bones as well as flesh and blood. Poetry must possess (and honour) its own kind of logic, however elusive it may be; and Welsh rhetoric seems a deadly enemy to all varieties of logic, even the poetic. (See 2, above, pp. 8-9.)

Also, in his introduction to New Lines, Robert Conquest expresses a similar view. He calls for a renewed attention to the 'necessary intellectual component' in poetry, viewed from a commonsense standpoint. 'Great systems of theoretical constructs' and the 'agglomeration of unconscious commands' are to be rejected in favour of 'reverence for the real person or event':

The most glaring fault awaiting correction when the new period opened was the omission of the necessary intellectual component from poetry. It cannot be denied that this has led, to some extent, to a tendency to over-intellectualise. Some years ago Mr John Wain advocated the methods of Mr William Empson in poetry. Other writers revived eighteenth-century forms. And soon a number of young poets were following Empsonian and similar academic principles and often producing verse of notable aridity. As a starting-point for Mr Wain and others this was a not unreasonable way of learning the first lesson-- that a poem needs an intellectual backbone. But that it became merely a fashionable formula among the young is unfortunate. Intellectual frameworks can be filled out with bad materials as well as good, and Empsonianism has been almost as much a vehicle for unpleasant exhibitionism and sentimentality as the trends it was designed to correct. The second lesson, that an intellectual skeleton is not worth much unless it is given the flesh of humanity, irony, passion or sanity, was not always learnt. (London, 1956, pp. xvi-xvii.)

⁷ Dylan Thomas, Collected Poems 1934-1952 (London, 1952), p. 101.

⁸ For a general discussion of the performance of syntax and the structure of imagery in this poem, see Donald C. Freeman, 'The Strategy of Fusion: Dylan Thomas's Syntax', in Style and Structure in Literature: Essays in the New Stylistics, ed. Roger Fowler (Oxford, 1975), pp. 30-39.

⁹ Ibid, p. 31.

¹⁰ Unlike Enright, Thomas's feelings are unleashed. This is the kind of disenchantment which Enright feels about Thomas's poetry:

Thomas's distinction lay in the fact that he did not have to force his imagination; his problem was rather to control it. The rich and brilliant imagery in which his work abounds almost blind the critic to its deficiency in intellectual conviction. (See 2, above, p. 8.)

Donald Davie also deplores the absence of control and intelligibility in Thomas's poetry:

. . . a sonnet by Dylan Thomas is unacceptable even on Hulme's terms. When concrete images are crowded upon each other, they lose their concreteness. The milk is soured by the magic, the bread has lost its tang and the cloud its volume. The things will not stand still, but fluctuate and swim like weeds in a stream. A poem, it seems, can give way under the weight of the 'things' that are crowded into it. Broken-backed, the poem can then no longer move; it can only twitch and flounder. (Articulate Energy, London, 1955, pp. 127-8.)

¹¹ For more details about the work of the religious language in 'A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London', see William Empson's important article entitled: 'How to Read a Modern Poem', Modern Poetry: Essays in Criticism, ed. John Hollander (London, 1968), pp. 244-7.

¹² Ibid, p. 246.

¹³ On reading Larkin, one does not come across even a single poem that deals with or talks about children. Probably, the lack of the feeling of fatherhood accounts for what he told Miriam Gross: 'Well, I didn't much like children . . . Children are very horrible, aren't they? Selfish, noisy, cruel, vulgar little brutes'. (Required Writing, London, 1983, p. 48.) Nevertheless, it seems to be that in not writing about children, Larkin expresses an adherence to his poetic principle: it is to exclude all artificial feelings and stick only to those which are strongly felt by him.

¹⁴ D.J. Enright, Conspirators and Poets (London, 1966), p. 174.

¹⁵ D.J. Enright, Some Men are Brothers (London, 1960), p. 47.

¹⁶ D.J. Enright, Man is an Onion: Reviews and Essays (London, 1972), p. 145.

¹⁷ Penguin Modern Poets 26: Dannie Abse, Michael Longley, D.J. Enright, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London, 1975), p. 74.

18 The Complete Writings of William Blake, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London, 1968), p. 585.

19 William Walsh, D.J. Enright: Poet of Humanism (London, 1974), p. 98.

20 Enright emphasizes the clarity of 'thought' and denounces the ambiguity of 'thinking':

Our instinct should also enable us to recognize the pursuit of the outré in various shapes and sizes by those who . . . because they cannot think to much effect, assure themselves that thought (sometimes given the dirtier names of 'rationality', 'logic', 'intellectuality') plays no part in poetry. (The Oxford Book of Contemporary Verse 1945-1980, Oxford, 1980, p. xxix.)

21 Ibid, p. xxvii.

22 The most cogent arguments about the Movement are summed up by A. Alvarez in his introduction to The New Poetry. And when he describes Larkin's 'At Grass' as 'elegant and unpretentious and rather beautiful in its gentle way', he is in fact associating the poets of the Movement with gentility. He writes:

The upper-middle class, or Tory, ideal-- presented in its pure crystalline form by John Betjeman--may have given way to the predominantly lower-middle class, or Labour, ideal of the Movement and the Angries, but the concept of gentility still reigns supreme. And gentility is a belief that life is always more or less orderly, people always more or less polite, their emotions and habits more or less controllable; that God, in short, is more or less good. (London, 1973, p. 25.)

However, gentility as defined by Alvarez cannot be attributed to all the poets of the Movement because they differ one from the other. Thus, Enright questions the validity of Alvarez's diagnosis and says:

I doubt that any poet will be found in this volume who believes all of those things simultaneously--though he may believe some of them and wish he could believe others. Civility is an apple off another tree, and not to be confused with gentility; in my early experience gentility would never dream of writing poetry at all. (See 20, above, p. xxvi-xxvii.)

- ²³ Quoted by William Walsh, see 19, above, p. 25.
- ²⁴ Donald Davie, The Poet in the Imaginary Museum (Manchester, 1977), p. 43.
- ²⁵ Selected Poems of D.H. Lawrence, ed. James Reeves (London, 1974), p. 23.
- ²⁶ Ibid, p. 3.
- ²⁷ Philip Hobsbaum, A Reader's Guide to D.H. Lawrence (London, 1981), p. 12.
- ²⁸ D.J. Enright, Addictions (London, 1962), p. 20.
- ²⁹ Ibid, pp. 70-71.
- ³⁰ See 15, above, p. 51.
- ³¹ See 16, above, p. 116.
- ³² See 20, above, pp. xxxi-xxxii.
- ³³ Ibid.

Chapter Seven

KINGSLEY AMIS

In the preface to his poetic contribution to Poets of the 1950s, Kingsley Amis wrote:

. . . nobody wants any more poems on the grander themes for a few years, but at the same time nobody wants any more poems about philosophers or paintings or novelists or art galleries or mythology or foreign cities or other poems. At least I hope nobody wants them.¹

In essence, this is reminiscent of the statement Larkin contributed to the above-mentioned anthology.² It represents clearly Amis's literary principle and his view of the function of poetry. It urges the modern poet to do away with the world of dreams and to concentrate instead on earth's realities. Similarly, the poet should also stop lingering in the mythical past and cling to the present and ordinary things around him. This literary principle is restated and defined, even further, in his poems and novels alike. In a relatively early poem, 'Sonnet from Orpheus', Amis is enraged by those writers who use the mythical character of Orpheus as a subject-matter for their writings:

And now I'm tired of being the trade-name
 on boxes of assorted junk; tired of
 conscription as the mouthpiece of your brash
 theories, of jiggling to your symbol-crash.
 Speak for yourselves, or not at all; this game
 is up--your mannikin has had enough.

This certainly is an invitation for a real world; a world which contains all or most of the elements of everyday human life: man's experiences, sufferings and limitations. Amis celebrates real places and real time. He deplores what he calls 'the world of the imagination' in Keats's poetry: 'Even in his best poems Keats devotes himself too uncritically to "the world of the imagination". Even the "Ode to a Nightingale", though containing passages which must delight the most jaded, is full of frigidities, of appeals to the remote and merely fanciful'.³

Such a statement brings the problem of 'real time' and change into focus. Amis ponders the nature of time and its flight in his work. His sense of life is marked by a strong awareness of its transience. A good demonstration of Amis's ideas is 'Against Romanticism':⁴

A traveller who walks a temperate zone
 --Woods devoid of beasts, roads that please the foot--
 Finds that its decent surface grows too thin:
 Something unperceived fumbles at his nerves.
 To please an ingrown taste for anarchy
 Torrid images circle in the wood,
 And sweat for recognition up the road,
 Cramming close the air with their bookish cries.
 All senses then are glad to grasp: the eye
 Smeared with garish paints, tickled up with ghosts
 That brandish warnings or an abstract noun;
 Melodies from shards, memories from coal,

Or saws from powdered tombstones thump the ear;
 Bodies rich with heat wriggle to the touch,
 And verbal scents made real spellbind the nose;
 Incense, frankincense; legendary the taste
 Of drinks or fruits or tongues laid on the tongue.
 Over all, a grand meaning fills the scene,
 And sets the brain raging with prophecy,
 Raging to discard real time and place;
 Raging to build a better time and place
 Than the ones which give prophecy its field
 The work, the calm material for its rage,
 And the context which makes it prophecy.
 Better, of course, if images were plain,
 Warnings clearly said, shapes put down quite still
 Within the fingers' reach, or else nowhere;
 But complexities crowd the simplest thing,
 And flaw the surface that they cannot break.
 Let us make at least visions that we need:
 Let mine be pallid, so that it cannot
 Force a single glance, form a single word;
 And afternoon long-drawn and silent, with
 Buildings free from all grime of history,
 The people total strangers, the grass cut,
 Not long, voluble swooning wilderness,
 And green, not parched or soured by frantic suns
 Doubling the commands of a rout of gods,
 Nor trampled by the drivelling unicorn;
 Let the sky be clean of officious birds
 Punctiliously flying on the left;
 Let there be a path leading out of sight,
 And at its other end a temperate zone:
 Woods devoid of beasts, roads that please the foot.

The poem is quite self-contained and a serious comment on poetry through mockery. The reader is hurried up throughout the poem by the rhythm which enacts the speaker's impatience with the unreal in poetry. The structural basis of the poem is clearly the contrast between the world of fantasy (where time and space are eternal and which Amis ridicules) and the world of reality in which we live. This contrast is emphasized by the repetition of the 'let . . . ' construction: 'Let mine . . . ', 'Let us make . . . ', 'Let the sky . . . ',

'Let there be . . .'. Here, Amis is a satirical observer.⁵ He is mocking the romantic absurdity and mysterious knowledge. The poem essentially depicts a world that is not 'trampled by the drivelling unicorn'; a world where things are quite simply what they are. It is the failure of the Romantic poet to coexist with everyday life that makes him 'discard real time and place' for, in Amis's phrase, 'nightmarish reveries'.⁶ This is set against Amis's realism: his insistence on the poet's duty to real time and place: 'Let us make at least visions that we need'. In this sense, 'Against Romanticism' is 'a poem of answers not questions', as Patrick Swinden puts it.⁷ Amis is a common poet talking to common people. He expresses a distaste for metaphysics--'an abstract noun; / . . . melodies from coal / Or saws from powdered tombstones thump the ear', and above all for religion: 'Over all, a grand meaning fills the scene'.

Certainly, Amis's attack on myth and tradition is not to be found strange by other poets of the Movement, mainly D.J. Enright and Philip Larkin. Enright in 'The Noodle-Vendor's Flute', calls for 'real cities, real houses, real time', but in his late work, he retreats to myth and legend as has been shown earlier in the sixth chapter. Larkin also celebrates the 'truth' in life; a word which is very frequent in his poetry. In 'Send No Money', he emphasises the true nature of things: 'Tell me the truth', the true words in 'Talking in Bed', and the true love in 'The Large Coal Store' as against the unearthly love and its conceits which are created by

'our young unreal wishes'. Enright's, Larkin's and Amis's tendency reveals, as Malcolm Bradbury argues, 'a common and shareable reality'⁸ which they set themselves to explore in common life all around us. This insistence on such a reality involves the recognition of the cycle of life: birth, growth and decay. Hence, they express the daily experiences, the frustrations and potentialities of the people next door and of things we all know.

Surely, Amis would like the 'real time and place' which he calls for in 'Against Romanticism' and Larkin depicts in 'Here':

Swerving east, from rich industrial shadows
 And traffic all night north; swerving through fields
 Too thin and thistled to be called meadows,
 And now and then a harsh-named halt, that shields
 Workmen at dawn; swerving to solitude
 Of skies and scarecrows, haystacks, hares and pheasants,
 And the widening river's slow presence,
 The piled gold clouds . . .

It is, after all, a world of fields, hares and pheasants, not of unicorns. The scene depicted here is in motion. It is the product of the poet's moving eye in a rushing car. The rhythms, marked by line breaks, reflect the way his eyes shift as the vehicle keeps on changing direction. The movement of the car is remarkably enacted by the way the ingredients of the landscape are piled up. This explains the lack of verbs of action in the above-mentioned lines as the poet has not enough time to focus on particulars. In addition, it sustains the continuity of the poet's thought:

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

The implication here is the vulnerability of life. Man is exposed mercilessly to the power of time. Here, one would feel the same half-comic transport of desire and be left with a sense of loss and a kindred feeling of promises not quite fulfilled.

This very kind of reality is also admired by Robert Graves in 'An English Wood'.⁹ Graves depicts a natural scene devoid of mythical beasts:

Here nothing is that harms--
 No bulls with lungs of brass . . .
 No mount of glass . . .
 Only, the lawns are soft,
 The tree-stems, grave and old;
 Slow branches sway aloft,
 The evening air comes cold,
 The sunset scatters gold . . .

This verse is more like Larkin's than Amis's. Its temperate tone is in sharp contrast with the urgency of Amis's poem. 'An English Wood' describes a familiar natural place, whereas 'Against Romanticism' draws attention to what poetry should be: 'Let us make at least visions that we need / Let the sky be clean of officious birds'.¹⁰

Unlike Larkin, Amis presents his ideas about poetry as a set of rules in verse-form. While Larkin describes things as they are, Amis seems to investigate how these things work. Thus, in 'The Garden',¹¹ Amis speaks of the way memory operates:

Memory, mixing near with far,
 Fabricates links where no links are:
 Perhaps, we now contrive,
 A person did arrive . . .

It is through the power of memory that the past states of existence are picked up and framed in the present. However, memory needs to be aroused by a certain reminder of that past (an object, a certain feeling or even a word) in order to start the process of recollection. In 'The Sources of the Past',¹² Amis elaborates on this point:

A broken flower-stem, a broken vase,
 A matchbox torn in two and thrown
 Among the scraps of glass:
 At a last meeting, these alone
 Record its ruptures, bound its violence,
 And make a specious promise to retain
 This charted look of permanence
 In the first moment's pain . . .

These lines are evocative and certainly rooted in time. They reveal a rupture between the poet's present and dismal past. This rupture is further dramatised by the ruins of the concrete objects of that past in the first three lines. They are powerful images and their force comes from the fact that they are simple and domestic. They picture a scene of destruction and disappointment. Here, time, constantly in motion, is measured and felt by the change it brings on things. In the meantime, to reproduce the past experience is not an easy task; it is a real challenge for the poet. The process is not altogether photographic:

And memory will soon prefer
 That polished set of symbols, glass and rose
 (By slight revision), to the real mess
 Of stumbling, arguing, yells, blows:
 To real distress . . .

Memory is the mother of poetry. It brings the past to the fore no matter whether it is nice or ugly, happy or sad. It is true that memory prefers the 'polished symbols to the real mess' only if their source comes from within the poet himself, and not from his response to outside things (the broken flower-stem, vase, and glass). The loss of contact with the past as time passes creates the difficulty of recording it faithfully. For Amis, the wider the gap between the present and the past, the more difficult the recording of that past becomes: 'I remember these things not as facts, but as little mental films with a complete set of sound effects'.¹³ What remains of the bygone experience is the only agent by which it is evoked. And if we take 'real mess' and 'real distress' to mean that of the present, then those broken objects are there to provide the poet with a means of escape from the difficulties of everyday life to the past as 'they grub it up from lapse of time'.

The strength of 'The Sources of the Past' depends on an explanation of how the memory works, rather than on the results of its work. The difference here is actually between the poetry which explains and that which suggests. Of course, the latter is the best. Consequently, Amis's use of his imagery deprives it of force and richness as it ultimately degenerates into lack of attachment to the actual experience.

By contrast, Larkin's imagery of the bleached albums and the vase in 'Love Songs in Age' is more suggestive and powerful than Amis's:

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 . . .

The imagery is energetic and controlled with a remarkable care. The sequence of the structural repetition, 'One bleached . . .', 'One marked . . .' and 'One mended . . .', is significant. Though it is a little idiosyncratic, it helps to give the reader an impression of the effect of time. It also suggests that in spite of the fact that the covers do show signs of decay, their potency is not yet wholly stifled by the onset of age. Such verse brings a wide range of connotations because the phrases 'bleached from lying in a sunny place', and 'marked in circles' have 'a scale and resonance that [do] not entirely throttle down to the restrictions imposed by [their] immediate context'.¹⁴

Both poems are moving. The effect they make depends on a sense of what, both linguistically and thematically, is to be expected. The first stanza of each depicts a desolate scene: memories of the past generate a sense of malaise and distress in the present. This sense comes from the disordering of the relation of present to past. In the next stanzas, the memory leads both poets to try to face this feeling down directly. In Amis's poem, the memory intervenes to counteract those feelings of 'real mess' and 'real distress'. The final stanza displays a controlled emotion as it rationalizes the actual experience:

All fragments of the past, near and far,
 Come down to us framed in a calm
 No contemplations jar;
 But they grub it up from lapse of time
 And, could we strip that bland order away,
 What vulgar agitation would be shown:
 What aimless hauntings behind clay,
 What fussing behind stone?

There is no reconciliation whatsoever between the present and the past. The poem ends with just what it begins with: the same rupture. The poet refuses to be misled by the 'aimless hauntings behind the clay'.

Thematically, Larkin's poem develops in a similar way. The depressed feeling which the widow has fallen into, in the first stanza, gives way to a happier, rather childish feeling in the middle stanza. And all at once, she is driven into a vision so intense that:

. . . the unfailing sense of being young
 Spread out like a spring-woken tree, wherein
 That hidden freshness sung . . .

But soon after, she ends her excursion into the past and dwells on the present. She realises the fruitless effort of confronting time and change:

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

Like Larkin, Amis shows the powerlessness of man before the passage of time. For him, to inhabit the real world is to come within

the domain of time. His work, especially that of the last twenty years, shows an increasing obsession with death. His men are often haunted with the idea of death even when they are fully involved in life. They may indulge their sexual desires in an attempt to evade, though momentarily, such an idea. This combination of sex with death can clearly be seen in 'Fforestfawr'.¹⁵ Soon after the burial ceremony of his father, Evans contacts his mistress:

Hallo, Pet. Alone? Good. It's me.
 Ah now, who did you think it was?
 Well, come down the Bush and find out.
 You'll know me easy, because
 I'm wearing a black tie, love!

This sudden shift in Evans's thinking reflects the horror of death which he fears. The association of man's desires with death is a clear reference to the temporal life as it suggests that nothing is always the same and that everything is subjected to change. Nevertheless, it should be noted here that sex is implicit and not explicit. And though they are impatient about sex, Amis's characters say little about it.¹⁶

Such a treatment of the subject of sex is entirely different from that of Gunn: 'Why pretend / Love must accompany erection'. Gunn assumes the heroic attitude which he considers as the source of notable poetry. As has been shown earlier in Chapter Six, life for Gunn is a nonstoppable movement. As on sex, his stance is tough and straightforward. In 'Carnal Knowledge', he urges his mistress to:

Abandon me to stammering, and go;
 If you have tears, prepare to cry elsewhere--
 I know of no emotion we can share . . .

There is no regret at any failure in love for there can be other chances in life to try. This, however, constitutes one of Gunn's major themes; 'the idea that sexual love can rarely, whether or not this is a good thing, break down, or merge, the essential separateness of two people.'¹⁷

Perhaps, what Gunn shares both with Larkin and Amis is their comic treatment of this subject. Gunn's pun on the 'other muscle' in 'Lofty in the Palais de Danse', is both a crude and a shocking joke:

You praise my strength. The muscle on my arm.
 Yes, now the other. Yes, about the same.
 I've got another muscle you can feel . . .

But at the end of the same poem, sex appears not to be a mere pleasure as it is associated with death. Sex, to use Larkin's phrase, cannot 'contravene the coming dark':

Your body is a good one, not without
 Earlier performance, but in this repeat
 The pictures are unwilling that I see bob
 Out of the dark, and you can't turn them out.

On the other hand, Larkin's approach to the subject of sex in relation to time is also funny but not tough as Gunn's. A salient example is his ironic allusion to it as paradisiac in 'High Windows':

I know this is paradise
 Everyone old has dreamed of all their lives . . .

Like Amis's, Larkin's characters are not too fussy about sex and there is not much discussion about it. For them, it is not an undiminished pleasure. It falls short of fulfilment. John Kemp, the hero of Jill, is silently tormented for long by his love for Jill. Finally, he manages to extract only a forced kiss from her. And only when she walks away from him, at the end of the novel, does he realise that his love for her is nothing more than a vanity which is now dead, as it crumbles in misunderstanding and humiliation.

The same point has been expressed in A Girl in Winter. Like John's love, Robin's and Katherine's dreams:

. . . were going in orderly slow procession, moving from darkness further into darkness, allowing no suggestion that their order should be broken, or that one day, however many years distant, the darkness would begin to give place to light.

Yet their passage was not saddening. Unsatisfied dreams rose and fell about them, crying out against their implacability, but in the end glad that such order, such destiny, existed. Against this knowledge, the heart, the will, and all that made for protest, could at last sleep.¹⁸

Nothing to be expected from life seems to be the hard lesson Larkin's characters learn because life changes and they have no control over it. The passage of time is a big problem for them of which they even do not like to be reminded. It is for this reason that Robin cannot bear the ticking of Katherine's watch. It is this obsession with time Larkin shows in his work which underlies Anthony Thwaite's suggestion that "The Music of Time" might be an appropriate title for his work as a whole.¹⁹

Likewise, time passing and the thought of death create an agonizing feeling and uneasiness in Amis's men. Such a feeling constantly spoils the life of Patrick Standish of Take a Girl Like You, and turns it into hell:

His breathing quickened and deepened as at the outset of sexual excitement, but this was not his condition. He felt his heart speeding up again and becoming irregular, like a bird making shorter and longer hops. There was a faint, hollow rolling and grinding in his ears, while a tepid prickling spread over his skin from a point midway between his shoulderblades. Nothing in his thoughts or his situation accounted for these symptoms which, the accompaniments of terror, stirred in him more than one kind of terror, as they had recently been doing every other night or so while he lay awake in bed. This was the first time they had come on in the day . . . At this point his own vision of death, refined and extended nightly for years, was directly before him . . . a gradual loss of consciousness followed by dreams of water and mud and the struggle to breathe, dreams superseded by identical dreams, a death prolonged for ever.²⁰

While Amis is deeply concerned with the combination of life with death in Take a Girl Like You, the corresponding emphasis in Ending Up is centred on the combination of old age with boredom and death. This novel dramatizes the terror of aging as it features old and sick people who are 'at that vague age that claims / The end of choice, the last of hope':

'Do you think, er,' said Keith, '. . . do you think they spend all their time thinking about it [death] or merely nearly all their time?'

'Quite possibly not as much time as all that,' answered Trevor, urinating as he spoke, for the two stood now in the upstairs lavatory. 'If you live with something, you may end up with it not

meaning as much to you as if it only turned up now and then. You know, like background noise.'

'Like who was that bugger in mythology that the grapes were always swinging up out of reach and the stream sank whenever he bent down and tried to drink out of it . . .'²¹

Their fear of old age is in fact a fear of what will finally happen to them. This is because life is uncertain. There are no fixed objects by which they can find a meaningful context to live in. For them, the only certainty in life is death. This eventually results in utter boredom, both with life and with each other. From such a milieu Amis draws his subject-matter:

. . . I live in a sort of commune with various ages running from 30-odd to 70-odd, and it just occurred to me that this was an abstract idea one could take and apply to other circumstances--a situation where everybody was old, everybody had got to the end of their lives, and everybody had been there for a good long time, so that they all knew how boring one another was, and exactly the areas where one another was most vulnerable. I thought that boredom is one of my great subjects, and often something that is interesting can emerge out of boredom.²²

Such a world of common people with their aspirations and sufferings is Amis's to which he promises a full commitment. It is this commitment which makes him deplore William Golding's Pincher Martin: 'I hope Mr Golding will forgive me if I ask him to turn his gifts of originality, of intransigence, and above all of passion, to the world where we have to live.'²³

Notes

- ¹ D.J. Enright, Poets of the 1950s (Tokyo, 1955), pp. 17-18.
- ² See Chapter Five, pp. 217-8.
- ³ Kingsley Amis, What Became of Jane Austen? And Other Questions (London, 1970), p. 22.
- ⁴ Kingsley Amis, Collected Poems 1944-1979 (London, 1979), p. 35.

⁵ There can be no doubt that Amis is a funny writer. More important is that he is a convincing comedian. The comic spirit presides in his novels and poems alike. It tends to ridicule in order to show the real value of any given situation. Such a gift has been spotted in Amis early in his life by his friends. In the introduction to his novel Jill, Philip Larkin describes his reaction after his first meeting with Amis in Oxford:

I stood silent. For the first time I felt myself in the presence of a talent greater than my own.

No one who knew Kingsley at that time would deny that what chiefly distinguished him was this genius for imaginative mimicry. It was not a BBC Variety Hour knack of 'imitations' . . . rather, he used it as the quickest way of convincing you that something was horrible or boring or absurd-- (London, 1981, p. 15)

Amis seems to be fully conscious of this genius. It is a means by which he communicates successfully his ideas and passions. He himself thinks that 'To be accepted you had only to be amiable; to be liked you needed pre-eminently to be able to raise a laugh occasionally-- but here the most rapid clowning served as well as wit'. (See 3, above, p. 137.)

- ⁶ See 3, above, p. 55.
- ⁷ Patrick Swinden, 'English Poetry', The Twentieth-Century Mind: History, Ideas and Literature in Britain, eds C.B. Cox and A.E. Dyson, 3 vols (London, 1972), iii, p. 388.

⁸ Quoted by Blake Morrison, The Movement (London, 1980), p. 163.

⁹ Robert Graves, Collected Poems 1914-1947 (London, 1948), p. 25.

¹⁰ In this sense 'Against Romanticism' recalls F.W. Bateson's 'The Anti-Romantics' with which he prefaces his book English Poetry: A Critical Introduction. This is the first stanza:

So we are the music-unmakers, it seems--
Of Pastoral Park disinfecting your dreams,
At La Belle Sauvage the sardonic irregulars,
Of skylarks the scarers, the nobblers of Pegasus . . .

Both poems explicitly criticise the romantic world and demand more control on imagination. Speaking of the difference between Romantic poets and the modern poets, Bateson writes:

Our symbols are often identical with theirs,
but the synthesis is not between the subconscious
mind and the non-human physical world but between
the two parts of the mind, the consciousness and
the subconsciousness. We are struggling towards
the recovery of an integrated personality. Modern
poetry is the record of that struggle; its warnings
are of the dangers of a relapse. (London, 1950, p. 127.)

¹¹ See 4, above, p. 63.

¹² Ibid, p. 43.

¹³ See 3, above, p. 138.

¹⁴ A stimulating attempt to explore the work of language and the use of imagery in 'Love Song in Age' is Philip Hobsbaum's article, 'Charles Tomlinson and Philip Larkin'. He points out that:

This is a creative, not an obsessional, use of language. Philip Larkin works through collocation rather than juxtaposition. A sense of the particular is achieved by compounding experiences, notionally disparate, into a single entity--'One bleached from lying in a sunny place . . .'. Two different dimensions are interfused here. The connotations of 'lying in a sunny place' as a phrase on its own suggest a body being sunned; more, the suggestion

is that of ease and relaxation, as of lovers on holiday. The context, of course, indicates that the tan has faded. Nevertheless, the phrase 'a sunny place' retains many of its overtones.

(Lines Review, No. 82, September 1982, p. 19.)

¹⁵ See 4, above, p. 112.

¹⁶ About whether increased permissiveness helped him to write more of what he wanted to write, Amis told Melvyn Bragg:

I still think that the whole thing is unsolved. I can't imagine myself writing a serious sex scene which was totally explicit. I think it would be very unfair on the reader, and it would be quite wrong on the part of the novelist, to leave the reader in doubt as to what has actually occurred. But in terms of explicit sex, I don't think that the novelist has been helped at all by the onset of permissiveness. It is still a very difficult subject to describe except in comic terms or, possibly, in horrific terms or pessimistic terms. ('Kingsley Amis Looks Back', The Listener, 93: 2394, 20 February 1975, p. 241.)

¹⁷ G.S. Fraser, 'The Poetry of Thom Gunn', Critical Quarterly, iii:4 (Winter 1961), p. 362.

¹⁸ Philip Larkin, A Girl in Winter (London, 1977), p. 248.

¹⁹ Anthony Thwaite, 'The Poetry of Philip Larkin', The Survival of Poetry, ed. Martin Dodsworth (London, 1970), p. 46.

²⁰ Kingsley Amis, Take A Girl Like You (London, 1979), p. 273.

²¹ Kingsley Amis, Ending Up (London, 1974), p. 135.

²² See 16, above.

²³ Kingsley Amis, 'A Man on Rockall', Spectator, 9 November 1956, p. 656.

Chapter Eight

JOHN WAIN

In the concluding pages of his Sprightly Running, John Wain expresses a bleak, yet realistic view of life. He writes:

Naturally I think that human life is tragic. No shallow optimism, no easy faith that humanity will be happy when this or that piece of social engineering has been completed, or when we have finished our conquest of Nature . . . The longest journeys are made within the self. The solitude that can exist within the human mind is more absolute than the emptiness of interstellar space.¹

This is the rule rather than the exception at which Wain arrives through a long story of misfortunes and sufferings during the earlier formative years of his life. 'Solitude is more absolute than space', because being alone is to face one's own self. An army of past tragic events, failures and frustrations besieges the soul and blocks the breath to the point of suffocation. These saddening memories are buried deep in the consciousness and we carry them with us to the grave. In 'The Bad Thing',² Wain tackles this depressing psychological state:

Sometimes just being alone seems the bad thing.
Solitude can swell until it blocks the sun.
It hurts so much, even fear, even worrying
Over past and future, yet stifled. It has won,

You think; this is the bad thing, it is here.
 Then sense comes; you go to sleep, or have
 Some food, write a letter or work, get something clear.
 Solitude shrinks; you are not all its slave.

Then you think: the bad thing inhabits yourself.
 Just being alone is nothing; not pain, not balm.
 Escape, into poem, into pub, wanting a friend
 Is not avoiding the bad thing. The high shelf
 Where you stacked the bad thing, hoping for calm,
 Broke. It rolled down. It follows you to the end.

The range of this poem is a matter of its combination of the feeling of fear and despair which solitude brings about with the counter-action of such feelings. The first five lines unfold the problem of time and demonstrate its impact. They are rhythmic and they convey what they have to convey concretely. Loneliness is a bad thing, solitude swells and blocks the sun and above all the past and the future are abandoned. What is left is the present which is inhabited with fear and worries. The sense of loneliness is intensified by darkness. It suggests night; the time of sadness and memory as well as of the shadow of death.

Like Larkin, Wain is not interested in solving this question. What he offers are only alternatives to certain modes of his lifestyle. To sleep, to eat or to write a letter does not help to overcome the problem of time. It may shrink but never disappear. It inhabits the self and soon:

The high shelf
 Where you stacked the bad thing, hoping for calm,
 Broke. It rolled down. It follows you to the end.

'The Bad Thing' exhibits the blend of our inward worries, aspirations and desires to live decently in a hostile world. These desires may die and be mingled with the nonstopable flow of time, but still, they are significant because they make our struggle in life purposeful. The right commentary on this point is Wain's essay on Samuel Johnson:

One of the most attractive and compelling features of all Johnson's writings is its very individual blend of the personal with the highly universalised. His tone is magisterial, his language presses always towards generalisation, and yet Johnson, the man himself, is always palpably present.³

What gives this poem its generalised posture is the employment of the direct-address technique 'you'. By speaking directly and in the simple present tense to his reader, the poet creates a sense of immediacy and urgency in the poem. It also helps him to make a non-intimate and an impersonal statement of what could otherwise be a very personal state of affairs. In this respect, Wain achieves in this poem what Keith Douglas does in 'Bête Noire'.⁴ In theme they are similar, yet there are considerable differences in their treatment of it:

. . . I sit at my table and nobody knows
I've got a beast on my back . . .

Suppose we dance, suppose we run away
into the street, or the underground
he'd come with us. It's his day.
Don't kiss me. Don't put your arm round
and touch the beast on my back . . .

Here the image is intensely concrete and the experience is personal. Yet, as the poem develops its theme, the poet sees in it the recurrence of experience of wider range than his own which could apply to other people. The poem ends with: 'I have a beast on my back'--a strong assertion that life is an inescapable burden. Both poems are clear statements of their writers' inner feelings and their effect is produced mainly by the imagery they contain and the development of their subject.

In Douglas's poem, the past with its frustrations and the future with its obscurity are like a beast which the poet carries once on his back and another time within himself: 'he walks inside me: I'm his house'. He gives it different names and describes its actions in different places: one time it is a medieval animal, then a monster and a third time a gentleman . . . in Notre Dame or Chartres or Piccadilly, dancing and running into the streets . . . etc. This digression damages the experience. The result is that the poem suffers from inner disorganisation. Douglas seems to be hypnotised by his beast so that he runs into a state of hallucination. The more he digresses, the more loose the idea becomes. The poet heaps up details that contribute little to the development of the poem's subject. They become decorations as Edmund Blunden observes: 'He hated decoration without anything behind it, but his verse is decorative, and, thinking of it, I think of figureheads and lamias, or of the masks which he devised so eagerly.'⁵

As to 'The Bad Thing', its subject unfolds exquisitely. It seems to reach a conclusion through reasoning.⁶ The first line is a

statement, 'it has won' is the first conclusion, 'Then sense comes' is an illustration, and 'Solitude shrinks' is another conclusion. 'Then you think' is a further illustration and the last two lines are the final conclusion. Furthermore, the imagery of a shelf rolling down is richer and more suggestive than Douglas's beast imagery. It suggests the variety and abundance of the depressing experiences in one's life. This effect is reinforced by the structure of the sound of the concluding line: 'Broke. It rolled down. It follows you to the end'. It has a weighty sonorousness: the [r] sound produces the effect of a heavy object (the shelf) collapsing under the load of misfortunes. The repeated [d] sound in 'rolled down' creates the thud with which this heavy shelf lands and the [o] and [w] sounds produce its rush as 'It follows you to the end'. Thus, what Douglas seems to wade through in forty-one lines, Wain says in only fourteen lines. In Wain's poem, we can feel what he himself describes as 'the urgency and directness of a personal statement' brought about by the economical use and the clarity of language. This is one of the merits he celebrates in Larkin: '. . . Larkin's work is faithful to another element in the traditional craft of poetry, its perspicuity. He provides the unexpected word, but never the clotted or tenuous line that pulls the reader up'.⁷

In 'Vers de Soci  t  ', Larkin approaches the same subject; loneliness versus sociability: 'Funny how hard it is to be alone'. He draws the attention to the fact that loneliness is not so much frightening as what it evokes of sad feelings. Loneliness is an appropriate climate for such feelings to come to the surface:

The time is shorter now for company,
 And sitting by a lamp more often brings
 Not peace, but other things.
 Beyond the light stand failure and remorse . . .

The last line is dense and moving because it evokes in our consciousness a blend of fierce exultation of the power of 'light' and the depression of darkness; 'failure and remorse', which intensifies into fear and uncertainty. Stylistically, the same line is a thrust meant mainly to make a general statement which applies to a variety of cases. However, what it gives us is not an abstract concept of life but an image of a sinister creature encroaching on our lives.

While in Wain's and Larkin's poems, one human experience is clarified, it is oversimplified in Douglas's. Clarification rather than simplification should be the writer's objective. It is to understand and pass on to the reader the truth about human life as accurately and clearly as possible. To this effect, Wain writes:

But the kind of truth he [the writer] explores is the truth about human life, what it is like to be a human being . . .

A writer, then, is doing well if he understands the truth about any kind of human situation, any kind at all, and passes it on to the reader without evasion, without distortion, without smudging it into sentimentality, and above all without oversimplifying it.⁸

One basic truth about human life is that it is subjected to the relentless force of time. All attempts to escape this fact are only to palliate its severity as they are eventually thwarted: 'There are many ways of making life more tolerable, but none of ridding it of

its basically tragic quality. One always comes back to Johnson's "The cure for the greater part of human ills is not radical but palliative".⁹

Our wounds caused by time are only deepened by its passage. 'A Fragment'¹⁰ is a straightforward statement that time is no healer:

It is a lie that time can heal a wound.
Scar tissue hardens, but the nerve is there,
Like some grim Crusoe evermore marooned . . .

However cauterised your flesh has been,
However long your holidays from pain,
It is a lie to say time heals it clean,

And when you lie you wound yourself again.

What has immediately come to the fore here is a full awareness of the inadequacy of the means by which we confront time. As in 'The Bad Thing', the strength of this poem stems from its acknowledgement of man's weaknesses. The final line comes to seem almost an unbearably painful insight into human existence. The contradiction it implies is to stress the barrenness of our effort. If you move you get injured and when you lie safety is not guaranteed because you inflict a big injury upon yourself by being still. Neither action is fruitful.

This destructive barrenness underlies our actions. We may enjoy what we get but only for a short while. 'Suffering is exact' in life and sooner or later man realises his impotence. The preoccupations of 'To a Friend in Trouble'¹¹ are crucial to the understanding of Wain's attitude towards time:

On those sharp edges of your broken love
 You cut your veins, which do not leak out blood,
 But suck in trouble, trouble, to your heart:
 What can I say? except that all about us
 I see a time of melting, a time of unloosing;
 And on my own life's flat horizon, also,
 The clouds swim up.
 So many faiths dry up or slide away,
 So many lovers I see with averted faces
 Who wander, and will not stay to be pacified.
 Now all our hearts, I think,
 Suck in this scalding drug through broken veins,
 This dry, ammoniac, destructive pain.
 I do not know what I should say to you:
 It is the madness of summer beats us down,
 The red-eyed sunshine and the pelting rain.
 I stand beside you empty of all comfort,
 Except to say that now your love is smashed
 And gashes at your veins, I feel your pain:
 And in these throbbing nights I also see
 Those broken edges in my doubtful dreams.

There is a genuine sentiment but no sentimentality. The agony of loss is explicit and deeply felt. The first three lines establish the pattern. The experience (the broken love) gains its generalised quality as the argument moves from the poet addressing his friend: 'your broken love', to the poet's himself: 'What can I say', and then to people and their faiths: 'So many faiths . . . / So many lovers'. The poem is robust, never fretful or neurotic. Wain speaks of his friend's misfortune as only important because it is a part of other people's loss including himself: 'Now all hearts, I think / Suck in this scalding drug through broken veins'. The statement and the feeling do not belong to any specific time because they are common-places of every time. This is one of Wain's poetic principles, the universality of the experience. It is this which he likes in C.S. Lewis's book A Grief Observed: 'Its notes on the psychology of grief

are interesting and valuable. But what we see is generalised grief, not one particular man's. It is what Johnson desiderated for literature, a "just representation of general nature".¹²

The imagery of 'broken veins' is powerful and generative. Its force comes partly from its strong physicality, and partly from the fact that man and his beliefs are in the end completely powerless before the process of time. Man needs beliefs to live, but in affirming this need he will soon be aware of their emptiness. Love is no exception because life is in general tragic as Samuel Johnson, Wain's hero, observes:

Life is everywhere a state in which there is much to be endured, and little to be enjoyed. So large a part of human life passes in a state contrary to our natural desires, that one of the principal topics of moral instruction is the art of bearing calamities.¹³

The poem, after all, is not an exercise in the art of consolation, rather, it is a realistic and frank argument of the truth of an aspect of human life. Like Larkin in 'Deceptions', Wain here shows his own grief as well as his friend's without allowing them to disarm his reason and to lapse into sentimentality. There are also other resemblances between the two poems: first, Wain's lines: 'What can I say? except that all about us / I see a time of melting, a time of unloosing', bear affinities with Larkin's: 'What can be said, / Except that suffering is exact'. Second, both poems are about the grief of broken-hearted people--a man who has been jilted by his girl and a young girl who has been raped. And finally, both poets are too modest and realistic

to make big promises or elevated statements: Wain's assertion,

. . . I feel your pain:
And in these throbbing nights I also see
Those broken edges in my doubtful dreams.

is reminiscent of Larkin's

Even so distant, I can taste the grief . . .
For you would hardly care
That you were less deceived, out on that bed,
Than he was . . .

The strength of the conclusions of both poems is in the suggestiveness of their statements. They are warm and anti-sentimental. They verge on doubt and uncertainty which characterize life. The use of imagery in them shows the poets' ability to strike out concrete and original images to produce the desired effect. Larkin's imagery: 'Your mind lay open like a drawer of knives', is fierce enough to describe the ferocity of the harm that has befallen the girl; the ruin of her innocence. On the other hand, Wain constructs a fresh imagery. Through the work of the imagination, he achieves a sense of the vicious attack of time on man. The image of the damaged veins has been saved from being hackneyed through a built in contradiction. When the lover cuts his veins they do not bleed, instead, the wound allows more trouble and grief to get into the veins and spread through every blood-cell. It is a slow death.

This is the ironic nature of life. It carries its death within itself. Love invests the heart with joy as well as with suffering. In 'Eighth Type of Ambiguity',¹⁴ love appears to carry this contradiction of exultation and frustration:

When love as germ invades the purple stream
It splashes round the veins and multiplies . . .

This is an ironic wit. It is meant to direct our attention to the contradictory quality of life and not of a mere impulse to decorate. The 'germ' could be the seed of passion and love which may flourish and give life, or it could be the source of a fatal disease which annihilates the body. Consequently, our desires and hopes may come to nothing. For Wain, life is poisoned by doubt because it is contradictory:

Personally, I cannot accept either brand of optimism. To me, life is tragic, because humanity is made of contradictions. Even the most ruthlessly selfish of men cannot go from the cradle to the grave doing just as he likes--because there is never one clear, undisputed thing that he likes. Each of us wants contradictory things, and some of our hopes will come to nothing, some of our powers will lie idle, whatever we do. We can never follow up all the possibilities that life indicates to us: if we try to, we destroy ourselves, and if we choose one path and follow it resolutely, we hanker inwardly after the path we have neglected.¹⁵

We hanker after what we have left because we are uncertain of the validity of our choice. Doubt characterises our view of the future because of the relativity of life itself. In 'Anniversary',¹⁶ Wain takes the occasion of his birthday to speculate on time: the past, the present and the future:

These are my thoughts on realizing
That I am the same age as my father was
On the day I was born.

As a little scarlet-howling mammal,
 Crumpled and unformed, I depended entirely on someone
 Not very different from what I am to-day.

When I think this over,
 I feel more crumpled and unformed than ever:
 I ask myself what I have done to compare with that.

It also makes me aware, inescapably,
 Of having entered upon the high table-land,
 The broad flat life of a mature man.

Where everything is seen from its actual distance,
 E.g. childhood not so remote as to seem a boring myth,
 Nor senility as something that awaits other people.

But deeper than that,
 It is like entering a dark cone,
 The shadow thrown across my life by the life it derives from.

And deeper than that still,
 It is the knowledge that life is the one communicable thing.
 It called. I heard it from where I slept in seed and liquid.

The patterns of seed and brine coalesced in a solemn dance,
 Whence my life arose in the form of a crest,
 And has carried itself blindly forward until now.

In ignorance of its uniqueness until now,
 Until I stumbled over these thoughts solid as bricks,
 And like bricks fearsome in their everyday squareness.

This poem is the product of its writer's obsession with time. His birthday is 'the high table-land' where he stops to view, with alarm, what has gone and tries to foretell what is to come. There is the personal account of the past as being not far because it is a real story and not a myth. It has been kept in the memory. He carries it with all its ups and downs. However, it is not fearful like the future: 'When I think this over, / I feel more crumpled'. This vein of melancholy can be traced to its source earlier in his life:

At twenty-one I had far less curiosity about the world, far less faith in the future . . . I was too pessimistic and distrustful of life to feel the young man's normal urge to wander about the world and pile up experiences, emotional and otherwise. All that, I told myself, was an illusion. Emptiness was everywhere, except in the past.¹⁷

The poet is prepared to consider his past and future in their 'actual distance'. But he does not dwell on the present because he believes that the real 'Now' slides immediately into the past. Concerning his attitude towards the personal past, Wain differs from both Hardy and Larkin. Unlike Hardy's Wain's poetry is not the product of nostalgia or regret for the past. He considers the past as only a crucial period in the formation of one's life. Now, in his middle age, he is the product of his own past. For this reason, he does not reject his past as Larkin does when he refers to his birthplace as 'only where my childhood was unspent'.

In addition, 'Anniversary' reveals the depth of a personal feeling. It gains its authority from the fact that it is a moving autobiographical reflection. To a certain extent, Wain is like Hardy in this respect. Hardy had the,

. . . knack of slipping in and out of autobiography. His utter unselfconsciousness in this respect is one of the most interesting features of his work. He builds his poem round a story or a situation, and it appears to make no difference whether the original event happened to him, or to someone else, or just occurred to his imagination. Many poets feel a need to cover their tracks elaborately when speaking of their own experience or situation; others are so compulsively autobiographical that they must re-tell every story, or shape every invention, to put themselves at the centre.¹⁸

In this poem, Wain covers his tracks carefully. Through the fact of man's creation in the womb,

The patterns of seed and brine coalesced in a solemn dance,
Whence my life arose in the form of a crest . . .

and through the idea that miseries in life are handed down from generation to generation,¹⁹

The shadow thrown across my life by the life it derives from . . .

he achieves the universality of his personal experience. What worries him is the future. The only certain thing about it is that it signals the advent of old age. It is 'like entering a dark cone', with nothing ahead but senility and 'a death that might or might not appear as a merciful release'. This is the future which Larkin has also anticipated:

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.

Syntactically, 'Anniversary' proceeds slowly because of its compressed language. It is packed with monosyllabic words. The lines are growing longer as the poem progresses. This dragging syntax properly enacts the poet's sense of weariness as time weighs heavily on him. Such a language is appropriate for meditation. The poet reflects on the three stages of man's life: childhood, when he was helplessly dependent on his father like 'a little scarlet howling mammal', his maturity 'the broad flat life of a mature man', and old

age when he finds himself in a tight corner: 'a dark cone'. Such reflections, a reminder of the transience of life, break the illusion of time and show man dying slowly by 'sucking in trouble, trouble, to your heart'. This trouble is like a 'germ [which] invades the purple stream' and multiplies.

Wain's imagery of the 'germ' resembles William Empson's 'Slowly the poison the whole blood stream fills' in 'Missing Dates'.²⁰

Empson's poem also speaks of the emptiness of life and the unavoidable end:

Slowly the poison the whole blood stream fills.
It is not the effort nor the failure tires.
The waste remains, the waste remains and kills . . .

Not to have fire is to be a skin that shrills.
The complete fire is death. From partial fires
The waste remains, the waste remains and kills.

It is the poems you have lost, the ills
From missing dates, at which the heart expires.
Slowly the poison the whole blood stream fills.
The waste remains, the waste remains and kills.

Hard as they are, these lines manifest a strong ring of validity. Their grim tone is maintained through the repetition of the two refrains: 'Slowly the poison the whole blood stream fills' and 'The waste remains, the waste remains and kills'. The concrete imagery of the first one has a genuine function. The idea here is that since the movement of the blood in the body is circular, so the journey of the poison always starts again. Conversely, one's life becomes a constantly oppressive prison. And as Wain himself observes: 'Empson places concrete for abstract in a way that, even in its least exciting passages, is recognizable as English poetry'.²¹

What must be stressed, at this stage, is the relation between life and its destruction which is created by the evocation of the imagery of fire: 'The complete fire is death', and that of the two refrains. They establish firmly the sense that we are heading steadily towards extinction. However different our paths, they all lead ultimately to what D.J. Enright has termed, 'The Abyss'. This sense of approaching death is dramatised by our realisation of the opportunities we have missed and the losses we have suffered. Christopher Ricks has spotted this point: '... the pull towards death, towards a sense of waste and death in life, is very much a matter of feeling so many possibilities of life unbegotten'.²² What this poem claims does not deny what it establishes. For though life is tragic it continues.

Similar to this bleak view of life is Larkin's which is bitterly expressed in 'Aubade'.²³ Here is the first stanza:

I work all day, and get half drunk at night.
 Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare.
 In time the curtain-edges will grow light.
 Till then I see what's really always there:
 Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,
 Making all thought impossible but how
 And where and when I shall myself die.
 Arid interrogation: yet the dread
 Of dying, and being dead,
 Flashes afresh to hold and horrify . . .

The obsession with time turns out to be not only with its passage but also with the termination of the poet's own time. The idea of death is not so much frightening by itself as the dread of how and when and where one dies. However, the bitterness this feeling evokes in the

poet is not caused by the sense of regret for unrequited love or unused time but by the total emptiness of life: 'The sure extinction that we travel to'. This is an intricate puzzle which even religion fails to solve.

Religion used to try,
That vast moth-eaten musical brocade
Created to pretend we never die . . .

Not only does the succession of days prolong his agony, it also indicates the continuity of life:

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.

This is an acknowledgement of the superiority of time to man. The implication here is that poetry illuminates things but it does not transcend time. This is a realistic view of the relationship between art and life typical of the poets of the Movement.²⁴ Hardy exerts a great influence in the formation of such a view. Donald Davie writes: 'Hardy appears to have mistrusted, and certainly leads other poets to mistrust, the claims of poetry to transcend the linear unrolling of recorded time'.²⁵

Larkin himself draws the reader's attention to this point in Hardy's poetry. To Hardy, the concept of poetry does not lie outside life because 'He's not a transcendental writer, he's not a Yeats, he's not an Eliot; his subjects are men, the life of men, time and the passing of time, love and the fading of love'.²⁶

Though the four poets, mentioned above, accept the view of life as being tragic, yet their reaction to it is different. On this very point, Hardy is to Larkin what Empson is to Wain. Like Hardy, Larkin believes that to live is to suffer and as time rolls we become tangled in an intricate web of pain and misfortunes. Meanwhile, this resignation is not passive as it is accompanied with stoical endurance of the harshness of life. He resents the ruthless fate but he does not move. Yet, in the meantime, life has to be lived any way. This tragic stoicism is an element of strength in Larkin's poetry as Wain thinks it is in Hardy's: 'The strength of Hardy's work comes mainly from a tragic stoicism, a blind will to go on living in spite of the malignancy of fate; and also from a considerable curiosity about human nature'.²⁷

Wain, for his part, is like Empson. He takes the view that although life is a tragic play, we have to play our parts 'with energy and imagination, making the most of every line'.²⁸ One should accept the harsh actualities of life courageously and must move. So in 'Time Was',²⁹ life is not so much suffering as suffering is life:

. . . time and judgement whipped me into fear:
I trembled at the ticking in my ear . . .

Let me rejoice to punch a window through
And gash my fist, touch flame and feel it burn!
When I'm a ghost, I'll caper through a wall.
I'll loll at ease beneath a waterfall . . .

What confronts us in these lines is language rather than style. It entirely suits its purpose. It is full of action: 'rejoice', 'punch',

'gash', 'touch', 'feel', 'caper'. The syntax is energetic and steady conveyed by monosyllabic words till it subsides and dissolves leisurely through the liquidity of the [l] sound into a state of relaxation 'beneath a waterfall'. But this stoppage is only temporary; it is just to draw a fresh breath and continue the journey:

To live is to go forward and forget . . .
 Now that I start my journey to the truth,
 Let me set down the burdens of my youth . . .

A typical Johnsonian stoicism. For though 'Life is everywhere a state in which there is much to be endured, and little to be enjoyed', Wain adopts Samuel Johnson's 'stoical resistance against hopeless odds':

But it was not his gloom alone that made Johnson a hero to me. It was his tragic gaiety. Amid all [his] settled conviction of hopelessness, he was sociable, welcomed friends, revelled in talk, devoured books. All this I did too.³⁰

To live is to struggle and to enjoy life with a tinge of melancholy and to endure its mishaps. And in order to make your struggle meaningful you have to have a purpose in life. Writing is Wain's purpose. It is what he lives for, because it gives him:

. . . a sense of purpose in life, an overriding object which he finds worthy of his last drop of blood. To me, the struggle to write well is a sufficient task for a lifetime; whatever misfortunes come to me, there can never be any of the dreaded ennui, the feeling of living on mechanically from day to day, that makes so many lives into stuffy little purgatories.³¹

Notes

- ¹ John Wain, Sprightly Running (London, 1962), p. 262.
- ² John Wain, A Word Carved on a Sill (London, 1956), p. 52.
- ³ John Wain, 'Dr Johnson as Poet', Encounter, 38:5 (May 1972), p.60.
- ⁴ Keith Douglas, Collected Poems (London, 1966), p. 144.
- ⁵ Ibid, p. 19.
- ⁶ In the introduction to his poetic contribution to D.J. Enright's anthology, John Wain, like the other poets of the Movement, deploras the lack of clarity, logic, and the 'shaping intelligence' in the poetry of what he calls the 'minor poets' of the time:

I began to write verse at a time when the most fashionable minor poets were in revolt against any kind of clarity and saw no need to admit the shaping intelligence into their work to any significant extent. Words were used imprecisely, structure was casual, logic was disregarded, and the two chief requirements, it often seemed, were a highly emotional temperature and a heavy dramatisation of the poet's personality. It was thus partly in reaction against this (though also for temperamental reasons) that my earlier poems aim at poise, coherence, and a logical raison d'être for every word, image and metaphor used. (Poets of the 1950s, Tokyo, 1955, p. 90.)

For more details, see also Blake Morrison, The Movement (London, 1980), p. 159.

- ⁷ John Wain, 'Engagement or Withdrawal?', Critical Quarterly, VI:2 (Summer 1964), p. 168.

⁸ See 1, above, pp. 206-7. Wain touches once more on this issue when he told Frank Kermode that 'the whole subject of writing is to tell the truth, and continue to make it truthful, although you are putting it into literary form, then goodness me, that is enough'. ('The House of Fiction', Partisan Review, XXX:1, Spring 1963, p. 79.)

⁹ Ibid, p. 262.

¹⁰ See 2, above, p. 36.

¹¹ John Wain, Weep Before God (London, 1961), p. 11.

¹² John Wain, 'C.S. Lewis', Encounter, XXII:5 (May 1964), p. 52. It is worth remarking here that an autobiographical element can be detected. A vein of melancholy generated by the poet's past is running throughout the poem. His friend's broken love is an occasion on which he can express his own grief which is buried deeply in 1941, at the age of sixteen, with his unrequited love for Betty Brewer 'whom I had only seen once' and for another girl from Surrey. This early awareness of being so persistently rejected creates his middle-aged pessimism and makes him accept a 'backward-looking stoical melancholy as one's portion in life'. These emotional defeats culminated in his first broken marriage in 1956 which:

. . . has left me only with the knowledge that parting from someone you care for is the worst kind of pain, the slowest to heal and the most deeply felt; that the moment when two people face each other and realize that they have reached the end of the journey is the nearest thing to hell that life can offer; and that the most terrible of all words is Good-bye.
(See 1, above, p. 161.)

¹³ Quoted by John Wain, see 1, above, p. 101.

¹⁴ See 2, above, p. 17.

¹⁵ See 1, above, p. 260.

¹⁶ See 11, above, p. 7.

¹⁷ See 1, above, pp. 158-9.

¹⁸ Selected Shorter Poems of Thomas Hardy, ed. John Wain (London, 1977), p. xi.

¹⁹ There is always this tense conflict within man's self between the natural human desire to beget life and his recognition that life is such a disastrous gift. And when life is given, then both will

eventually be the losers--the begetter and the begotten; the giver and the receiver as Larkin puts it in 'This Be the Verse' in High Windows:

They fuck you up, your mum and dad.
They may not mean to, but they do.
They fill you with the 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 sappy-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.

²⁰ William Empson, Collected Poems (London, 1955), p. 60. In his remarkable article, entitled 'Ambiguous Gifts', Wain directs the public attention to the potentialities of Empson's poetry by stating that 'it would be a pity if he [Empson] were known simply as the "ambiguity" man, and not as a poet'. On many occasions he expresses his admiration for him, praising his poetry 'with its passion, logic, and formal beauty'. (The Penguin New Writing, 40, ed. John Lehmann, Middlesex, 1950, pp. 116 and 127.) One time, Wain says that 'I should be only too pleased if I could produce poems as good as Empson's.' (See 1, above, p. 205.) In fact, he did write many Empsonian poems. Blake Morrison points out some aspects of Empson's influence on them:

Several other poems had Empsonian last lines--
'And language quite a useful kind of noise', 'And
underline in red their own disasters', 'And where
you love you cannot break away'. Nearly all employed
some kind of characteristic Empsonian technique--
terza rima, heavy end-stops, a blend of colloquialism
and literary allusion. (See 6, above, p. 26.)

Certainly Empson's influence is very evident especially on Wain's A Frame of Mind. But in his subsequent books, Wain revolts against his master and his reservations about Empson's mannerisms begin to show. Blake Morrison quotes G.S. Fraser as saying that 'John Wain spends a lot of time these days telling me he is no longer in any real sense a disciple of Empson'. (Ibid, pp. 265 and 303.)

²¹ Ibid, p. 118.

²² Christopher Ricks, 'Empson's Poetry', William Empson: The Man and his Work, ed. Roma Gill (London, 1974), p. 203.

²³ Philip Larkin, 'Aubade', TIS, 23 December 1977, p. 1491.

²⁴ In 'A Salute to the Makers', Wain emphasized the earth-bound nature of man and his activities. He places him in the real time and real place and not in the world of fantasy. As to Wain himself:

. . . all my most profound experiences, from making love to watching a sunset, have come to me through the medium of concrete, measurable realities. (I don't say that the experiences themselves have been concrete and measurable; I say that the medium was.) All those high ecstatic states which are to be experienced in the stratosphere, above the perception of physical reality, are unknown to me and I suppose always will be unknown, which is why even a minor earth-inhabiting poet means more to me than a high mystical poet. (Encounter, XXXV:5, November 1970, p. 54.)

²⁵ Donald Davie, Thomas Hardy and the British Poetry (London, 1973), p. 4.

²⁶ Philip Larkin, Required Writing (London, 1983), p. 175.

²⁷ See 18, above, p. x.

²⁸ See 1, above, p. 156.

²⁹ See 11, above, pp. 1-2.

³⁰ See 1, above, p. 101.

³¹ Ibid, p. 263.

Conclusion

Larkin's attitude towards time is that it is a destructive power and man is at its mercy for time is the agent which brings about change, decay and death. He deals with time not as an abstract concept, rather, he views it in the light of its effects on objects and human beings.

This constitutes his personal attitude towards time. His arguments depend on his own experiences of everyday life rather than on definable philosophical perspectives. Hence, he looks upon time as a personal problem and he considers all elements of time as different aspects in the life of one man--the speaker or the poet. Moreover, he sees the problem of time passing in a wider perspective as man in relation to society and to nature:

Snow fell, undated. Light
Each summer thronged the glass. A bright
Litter of birdcalls strewed the same
Bone-riddled ground. And up the paths
The endless altered people came . . .

The damage caused by the passage of time is depicted in these lines in terms suggesting changes in man's physical appearance: 'The endless altered people came', and 'the changing and yet immutable quality of casual, unorganised life, the life of "nature":¹ 'A bright / Litter of birdcalls strewed the same / Bone-riddled ground'.

Confronted with the concept of time as a delusion and in particular with human sense of impotence in the face of harsh destiny,

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.

Larkin loses faith in the power of the elements of time to seem meaningful. The present appears futile and void of meaning: 'A time traditionally soured, / A time unrecommended by event'. It exists as a reminder of a frustrated past: 'A valley cropped by fat neglected chances / That we insensately forbore to fleece'. He rejects the past in that he is not nostalgic and his own private past because it is merely uneventful.

Such a view of the past eventually brings about Larkin's disappointment with the present and uncertainty about the future. The future turns out to be unpromising: 'Only one ship is seeking us, a black- / Sailed unfamiliar, towing at her back / A huge and birdless silence'. Time destroys anything that might serve to satisfy man's desires:

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

Individual fulfilment, mental and physical, seems to veer between unrewarding gain and utter loss. This results from the unbridgeable gulf between the elements of desire and frustration; our dreams contrasted with disappointing reality.

By negating human aspirations, Larkin affirms time not only as flux, but as a destructive element. Thus, sterility is his element: 'Deprivation is for me what daffodils were for Wordsworth'. Unhappiness is Larkin's poetic 'Muse' because:

. . . it's unhappiness that provokes a poem. Being happy doesn't provoke a poem. As Montherlant says somewhere, happiness writes white. It's very difficult to write about being happy. Very easy to write about being miserable.²

The melancholy vein which runs through Larkin's poetry comes from his feeling that one has not got out of life what life has to offer. This pessimism arises not out of his inability to understand the truth of life but out of the concept that the end of life is death. This melancholy is an element of strength in his poetry. In answer to the charge that his poetry is pessimistic, Larkin says:

Yes and no. The substance may be pessimistic or melancholy. But a poem, if it's a good one, is a positive and joyful thing: it represents the mastering, even if just for a moment, of the pessimism and the melancholy, and enables you-- you, the poet, and you, the reader--to go on.³

Pessimism, as such, is not a passive surrender to time. Rather, it is an understanding of the truth of life. And since 'unhappiness was

the key to poetry',⁴ thus poetry becomes the function of imaginative creativity:

O world,
Your loves, your chances, are beyond the stretch
Of any hand from here! And so, unreal,
A touching dream to which we all are lulled
But wake from separately . . .

This transmutation of experience into imaginative achievement in the course of time deserves acclaim and acknowledgement.

Structurally, as thematically, Larkin's poetry is conspicuously consistent. Larkin is a remarkable craftsman: his insistence on clarity and directness in language earns him a confidence of vision and an ability to communicate this vision. His style has undergone a slow development. The North Ship shows obviously the predominance of Yeats, Yeatsian mannerisms and music: I 'write like Yeats . . . out of infatuation with his music'.⁵ However, the last poem in this book, 'Waiting for breakfast, while she brushed her hair', marks an abrupt departure from Yeatsian influence. It is a noticeable,

. . . transition from the vague symbolism of
many of the earlier poems to a style based on
the concrete details of actual experience and
a conversational idiom.⁶

This poem shows that Larkin begins to form his own distinct poetic voice soon after he discovers Hardy. His later books exhibit a different tone. They 'showed an unmistakable anxiety about social and political developments during the sixties. This anxiety took a comic [yet, wittily serious] form'⁷ in satirical poems, such as

'Naturally the Foundation will Bear Your Expenses', 'Take One Home for the Kiddies', 'Sunny Prestatyn', 'Annus Mirabilis', 'Homage to a Government' and 'Going, Going'.

Larkin also displays a full command over his material and form: ' . . . form and content are indivisible'.⁸ The use of memorable endings, double-negatives, compound adjectives, participles and his beautiful handling of details are the most dominant stylistic characteristics of his poetry. Their use and effect have been dealt with throughout this study.

The recurrent imagery is another important aspect of Larkin's poetic style. Images, such as dark, moving vehicles, water, clouds and wind arise organically as unifying elements in his poetry. It is interesting to note, in connection with this, that the imagery most frequently and significantly occurring is 'wind'. It is always blowing wherever it appears in his poems. As it is always in motion so it is associated with time and destruction. The wind has connotations of unhappiness and infinite woe in Larkin's poetry. One of my favourite instances is this passage from 'Wedding-Wind':

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 the 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 . . .

The skill with which Larkin pulls together the threads of his theme--the sense of movement through time: day alternating with night, the pathos of love as its happiness is spoilt, the ferocity of the wind evoked by 'a stable door was banging, again and again', the innocence and naivete of the girl and the sense of rurality which is at work here--seems to me compelling and fascinating.

The relationship between Larkin's work and that of Gunn, Enright, Amis and Wain is striking. Faced with a cruel environment, they show an obsession with aspects of everyday life. They are realists in the sense that they deal with the world as they find it. More striking are the differences between them. Despite seemingly distinct similarities they show, there is still a great world of contrast between them. Gunn stands at the opposite pole to the rest in his sense of time and tradition. He is determined to look reality in the face so his poetry is concerned with ceaseless movement and 'snatching at occasion, whatever the risks, and whether it offers or not'.⁹

Enright's and Wain's poems express a bleak, yet a realistic, view of life; a restrained protest against the forces of destruction in life. Together with Amis, they seek to understand and to be reconciled rather than at odds with time and suffering. Thus, they achieve a sort of rhythm within themselves which is constantly reflected in their poetry, unlike Gunn whose preoccupation with violence for violence sake seems to lead him nowhere. Gunn accepts the past as an inexhaustible source of happy memories and the present

as a continuous movement to achieve his future desires. Apart from Larkin, all the rest accept the past and consider it as a vital period in the formation of one's life. However, they more or less share the same belief that life is contradictory. They also accept the view that life is tragic, yet they are driven by different impulses to carry on as has been shown in the eighth chapter: Larkin by acceptance, Gunn by revolt, Enright and Amis by reconciliation and Wain by stoical resistance.

Their struggle to live in such a hostile world has been reflected in the structure of their verses and in the structure of their language. Gunn's language is tough and ambiguous as he struggles to express philosophical concepts, such as 'will' and 'choice'. He only gives the impression of himself being caught in a literary world of abstraction and rhetoric. As for the others, although they insist on the use of simple and clear linguistic structures, they differ widely in the suggestiveness of their language and the richness of their images as Part Two of this study has shown.

Accordingly, they use a variety of conventions by which their experiences are put into shape. In keeping with his posture of challenge and movement, Gunn has taken to syllabics and tried free verse too. He manages, in some poems, to 'get certain free verse effects which I certainly can't get in metrical verse'. But there is always the danger that the poem may 'fall into a mass of prose written differently',¹⁰ and to demonstrate this demands a study of the final effect of each poem.

Gunn's technique represents a noticeable departure from the regularity of the traditional forms which his fellow poets of the Movement have employed. They make an extensive use of iambs and achieve consistency and facility in the composition of their verse. The early Wain is an exception: he tries tight metre; terza rima. Larkin, I feel, is the most consistent and is more proficient than the others. The skill and effectiveness with which they use these forms have been pointed out by comparisons between them in the second part of this study.

All the poets under discussion stress the significance of personal experience in the making of their poetry in an attempt to establish a meaningful relationship between art and ordinary life:

Generally my poems are related, therefore,
to my own personal life, but by no means always,
since I can imagine horses I have never seen or
the emotions of a bride without ever having been
a woman or married.¹¹

In one sense, this may be taken to testify to the idea that these poets choose the rationale that there are no innate ideas and that all ideas we have spring, in John Locke's terms, 'From experience: in that all our knowledge is founded; and from that it ultimately derives itself.'¹² Nevertheless, this may be the case in Gunn's poetry with its marginal philosophical generalisations. As to the poetry of the rest, the imagination is superior to the intellect yet controlled by it to block any tendency towards sentimentality.

This insistence on personal experience brings the whole problem of convention and tradition, and their attitudes to them, into focus. Gunn and the later Enright employ the mythic experience to explore the present. As we have seen earlier, their attempts fall short of success because the myth is related awkwardly to their material. An obvious thing to say here is that they do not use it as eclectically as Eliot and Yeats do and shape it into a suggestive combination of elements which illuminate the actuality or transcend the stranglehold of the space-time continuum.

By contrast, Larkin, Amis, Wain and the early Enright celebrate the earth-bound poet who 'is really engaged in recreating the familiar [and] not committed to introducing the unfamiliar'.¹³ Thus, they denounce any reference to mythology, philosophy and to other poets. However, their scattered comments on various aspects of life do not constitute a philosophy. Certainly, the reader never regrets the lack of 'a framework of mythology and theology and philosophy' in their poetry, unlike T.S. Eliot in his reading of Blake:

What his genius required, and what it sadly lacked, was a framework of accepted and traditional ideas which would have prevented him from indulging in a philosophy of his own, and concentrated his attention upon the problems of the poet . . . The concentration resulting from a framework of mythology and theology and philosophy is one of the reasons why Dante is a classic, and Blake only a poet of genius.¹⁴

Notes

- ¹ John Wain, 'Engagement or Withdrawal?', Critical Quarterly, VI:2 (Summer 1964), p. 167.
- ² Philip Larkin, Required Writing (London, 1983), p. 47.
- ³ Godfrey Smith, 'The Reluctant Laureate', The Sunday Times, 14 October 1984, p. 39.
- ⁴ See 2, above, p. 265.
- ⁵ Philip Larkin, The North Ship (London, 1979), p. 9.
- ⁶ George Hartley, 'Nothing to Be Said', Larkin at Sixty, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London, 1982), pp. 90-91.
- ⁷ David Trotter, The Making of the Reader (London, 1984); p. 182.
- ⁸ See 2, above, p. 69.
- ⁹ G.S. Fraser, 'The Poetry of Thom Gunn', Critical Quarterly, III:4 (Winter 1961), p. 360.
- ¹⁰ Ian Hamilton, 'Four Conversations', London Magazine, IV:8 (November 1964), p. 65.
- ¹¹ See 2, above, p. 79.
- ¹² John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (London, 1975), p. 104.
- ¹³ See 2, above, p. 55.
- ¹⁴ T.S. Eliot, Selected Essays (London, 1934), p. 322.

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