

THIS UNQUICKENED WORLD  
A STUDY OF THE  
POETRY AND NOVELS OF PHILIP LARKIN

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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THIS UNQUICKENED WORLD

A Study of the  
Poetry and Novels of Philip Larkin

by  
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### ABSTRACT

This thesis is intended as a study of the writings of Philip Larkin. It works from the basic premise that both Larkin's poetry and novels have as their major element and thematic concern the underlying tragedy of the ordinary man's existence, that for the most part the life of the average individual is bounded by sadness, only occasionally quickened by joy, and has one absolute certainty, the passing of time into death.

Chapter One comments on Larkin's early book of poetry, The North Ship (1945). It attempts to trace the major influences on the young poet as indicated by Larkin himself and outlines both those aspects of the early poetry which differ from the later poems and those which point forward to the mature poetry of The Less Deceived and The Whitsun Weddings.

Chapter Two is an analysis of Larkin's two novels, Jill (1946) and A Girl in Winter (1947). It discusses the literary merit of the novels as well as how they represent a second stage in Larkin's development as a writer. The themes revealed in the novels relate closely to the major concerns of the poetry.

Chapter Three has three sections, organized in chronological order, which deal with The Less Deceived (1955),

The Whitsun Weddings (1964) and the uncollected poems up to February, 1973. (One poem has been published since.) There are few stylistic developments from stage to stage. As a group the poems present a varied but unified view of the "unquickened world" of Philip Larkin.

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## INTRODUCTION

Philip Arthur Larkin was born August 9, 1922, the only son of Sydney Larkin, City Treasurer of Coventry, and Emily Larkin (née Day). He lived in Coventry for eighteen years. His childhood, while uneventful, was very happy, filled with the youthful pastimes of creating imaginary cricket and rugby games, collecting pictures of cricket heroes from cigarette packets, (a recent poem "To the Sea" has a reference to this pastime), and with a friend, rendering "dance music" with a "kazoo and a battery of toffee tins, lids, pens and a hairbrush". Larkin's intense interest in jazz dates from this period. On one occasion a friend left a tenor saxophone at the house of a mutual acquaintance and, with almost religious awe, the boys "reverently handled its heavy silver plated intricacy and depressed the numerous cork-padded keys."<sup>1</sup> After attending King Henry VIII School for ten years, from 1930 to 1940, he decided because of the war (his early ambition to be a jazz drummer discarded<sup>2</sup>) to go up to Oxford a year earlier than he had intended, and entered St. John's College.

1. Philip Larkin; "Not the Place's Fault", Umbrella, Vol. 1, No. 3, Summer, 1959, p. 110.

2. Ibid, p. 112.

His first job was as a librarian in the small Shropshire town of Wellington. After three years he became assistant librarian at the University of Leicester, where he remained from 1946 to 1950. His next post was at Queen's University, Belfast. While there he produced a small privately printed collection of poems (in an edition of only one hundred copies) entitled simply XX Poems (1951), which received very little attention even though copies were sent to a number of well-known literary figures. (Larkin has said that the reason for their silence may have been that he stuck penny stamps on the envelopes when the postage had recently been raised to three ha'pence). <sup>3</sup> An equally obscure pamphlet, Fantasy: 21, appeared in 1954. In 1955 Larkin was appointed Librarian at the University of Hull, in which town he presently lives.

With the publication and general acclaim of his two major volumes, The Less Deceived (1955) and The Whitsun Weddings (1964), he has been the recipient of several honours. In 1965 he was awarded the Queen's Gold Medal for poetry. The manner of its coming was very much as Larkin would have wanted. John Masefield, the reigning Poet Laureate, wrote to say the medal was on its way and soon it arrived by registered mail,

3. Philip Oakes, "The Unsung Gold Medalist", Sunday Times (Color Supplement), March 27, 1966, p. 65.

all wrapped in corrugated cardboard. Larkin also has been given two honorary D. Litt. degrees, from Belfast in 1969, and Leicester in 1970. He has also compiled the most recent Oxford Book of English Verse, which replaced the edition compiled by W. B. Yeats.

In an essay in the Coventry arts magazine, Umbrella, Larkin tells of writing ceaselessly in his school days: "Now verse, which I sewed up into little booklets, now prose, a thousand words a night after homework." The first writing of Larkin's to be printed appeared in his school magazine when he was twelve, "... a short facetious paragraph or two, ... in the manner of 'The Humourist' ". His first publication, outside of his school magazine was a poem in The Listener of November 28, 1940, when he was eighteen. The poem, entitled "Ultimatum", was one of four he submitted. Even though he considered it the poorest of the lot, and had included it to make the others look better, it was accepted by the editor, J. R. Ackerley.<sup>4</sup>

Despite his early interest in poetry, Larkin is by no means a prolific writer. In fact he says, "I write

<sup>4</sup> Philip Larkin, "Not the Place's Fault", Umbrella, Vol. 1, No. 3, Summer, 1959, p. 111-112.

4  
terribly little -- about three poems a year." <sup>5</sup> This is understandable when one considers the total dedication with which Larkin approaches his art. His job as a librarian appears to be eminently suited to one who needs a job to live, but does not intend it to interfere with his creative life. (He once compared it to stoking boilers.) His manner of living -- solitary meals, driving out into the country, walking along, having very few close acquaintances -- emphasizes his total devotion to poetry and his personal belief that nothing must stand in the way of his art. His way of life is a conscious choice for he feels his talent would be stifled by the distraction of involvement with people, movement or change. (Even as a child he resented the disruptions holidays brought into his ordered life.<sup>6</sup>) The rightness of his choosing is often a subject for his poetry and is questioned in such pieces as Poem XXII of The North Ship; "Reasons for Attendance", and "No Road" in The Less Deceived; and "Mr. Bleaney", "Self's the Man", and "Dockery and Son" in The Whitsun Weddings.

The creative act, for Larkin, even more than for most writers, is rarely one of explosive inspiration, and his manner of composition is so exact, so bordered by familiar

5. Quoted in Penguin Book of Contemporary Verse, Ed. Kenneth Allott, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1962), p. 332.

6. Philip Larkin, "Not the Plate's Fault", Umbrella, Vol. 1, No. 3, Summer, 1959, p. 107.

objects which must be used, that it has been described (by Philip Oakes, in an interview in the Sunday Times) as something of a ritual. During a productive period, Larkin sits down each evening to write at 8:30, working in an easy chair with a device called a Lap-tab across his knees, supporting the fat blue exercise book in which he writes. (The exercise books are part of the pattern of writing. They were purchased by his father during World War II; Larkin keeps all of his drafts in them and has used only five since 1944.) For two hours he works and reworks a line at a time. At 10:30 he finishes, then plays jazz records, usually Sidney Bechet, nothing by the new jazzmen. (Since 1961 he has been jazz correspondent for the Daily Telegraph.) Larkin believes that in the intervening twenty-four hours his subconscious goes to work on the poem and that if the routine is broken the poem is spoiled. Even then few of his poems appear in print. Of the poems written between March, 1963 and March, 1966 he considers only two fit for publication.<sup>7</sup> His total output aside from the two booklets mentioned above, and brief appearances in various anthologies, is two novels and three

7. Philip Oakes, "The Unsung Gold Medalist", Sunday Times (Color Supplement), March 27, 1966, p. 63-65.

books of verse, and a number of uncollected poems (many of which will be included in his soon to be released volume High Windows). The novels are Jill, published in 1946 and reissued in 1964, and A Girl In Winter (1947). His major achievement has been three slim volumes of poetry -- The North Ship, a book of early poems which appeared in 1945 and was republished in 1966, The Less Deceived (1955) and The Whitsun Weddings (1964). He also issued (in 1969) a compilation of his jazz reviews for the Daily Telegraph entitled All That Jazz.

The poetry and novels of Philip Larkin present to the reader the experiences of the ordinary man as perceived by the unordinary observer, who records them in a moving and memorable manner. The tone varies, but is always full of sympathy for the sadness of the human condition; the language is clear but evocative and usually free from ambiguity and allusion. The imagery is drawn from observation both of English landscape and urban areas. The themes are everyday concerns, and yet universalities; they are ordinary, but significant, and basic to the fabric of every man's life. Both poetry and novels reveal an "unquickened world" <sup>8</sup> in which the breaking of dreams, the sufferings of life, the agonizing inevitability of the passing of time and coming

8. Philip Larkin, "Night-Music", The North Ship, (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1945, 1966), p. 23, line 24.

of death are the only certainties. At times, man's passage through the unquicken world may be illuminated by brief flashes of contentment, even happiness, but this contentment is achieved, in the main, by stoic acceptance, or ignorance, of what the often hostile fates hold in store.

Larkin has said, "I can't believe one needs violent experience to write something especially revealing."<sup>9</sup> The obvious implication of this statement is that conventional people living a conventional existence can be a significant subject for poetic comment. Larkin's poetry and novels portray many aspects and views of the harsh reality of the average man's life, particularly the average man of the twentieth century. It is an often depressing and pessimistic world picture, but it is a place that most of us, at one time or another, inhabit.

9. Philip Oakes, "The Unsung Gold Medalist", Sunday Times (Color Supplement), March 27, 1966, p. 65.

## THE EARLY POETRY

Every poet must find for himself the manner in which he writes best and the subjects he can portray effectively. The validity of his revelation of life through his art is determined by the personal and distinctive nature of the individual's approach to, and conceptions of, reality. That is, the driving force of his poetic is dependent upon his ability to see reality in a manner strikingly personal and yet of general impact. Many, perhaps most, young poets attempt to portray their own truths through another's vision, and Larkin was no exception. His earlier poetry clearly reveals the influence of other writers, although even as a novice poet Larkin was always too much aware of his own artistic integrity to produce mere pastiche. The poems of his first volume, The North Ship, exemplify the struggle of the budding writer in his efforts to establish a vantage point from which to survey the world and to record faithfully his view of experience.

The North Ship was first published by Fortune Press in August, 1945. In his introduction to the republished edition (Faber and Faber, 1966) Larkin dismisses it as being of little merit. In fact, he is amazed "that anyone should

have offered to publish it without a cheque in advance and a certain amount of bullying." <sup>1</sup> He notes too that the poetry of The North Ship resulted from a search for a style and a variety of influences:

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 under-graduate, 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. <sup>2</sup>

Of the three influences Larkin mentions, Dylan Thomas is the least pronounced. The most one can detect is, at times, a similarity in rhythm and tone, particularly in the opening lines of Poem XXX, "So through that unripe day you bore your head", which reminds one of the cadence of "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower", or "Do not go gently into that good night".

However, it may be that Larkin's friend is referring to poems which did not actually appear in the final selection for The North Ship. During the years immediately following The North Ship Larkin did compile a manuscript of poems with the "portentous title" In the Grip of Light. The only published mention of these poems occurs in an interview with

1. Philip Larkin, The North Ship, (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), p. 7.

2. Ibid, p. 8.

Ian Hamilton, London Magazine, November, 1964. Here Larkin criticizes it rather severely. He comments that it "went round the publishers in the middle and late forties, but thank God, nobody published it." The poet's obvious relief that these earlier poems are not publicly available is further emphasized by his equally obvious determination to keep things that way.

In The Grip of Light was just a typescript of poems written c. 1946-1949. I can't remember if I tried to publish it, but if so I was unsuccessful. I haven't looked at it in years. Probably it would have some interest but I'm afraid I'm going to keep it dark! 3

It could be that this unpublished manuscript contained the poems imitative of Dylan Thomas. Larkin's reply to a question posed by Hamilton concerning the extent to which his poetry was a reaction to the apocalyptic poets sheds some light on the matter (along with the admittedly tremulous evidence of the title itself).

Larkin: Well, one had to live through the forties at one's most impressionable time and indeed I could show you, but won't, a lot of poems I wrote that you wouldn't... well, that were very much of the age. I wrote a great many sedulous and worthless Yeats-y poems, and later on far inferior Dylan Thomas poems -- I think

3. Philip Larkin, letter to the writer, October 21, 1970.

Dylan Thomas is much more difficult to imitate than Yeats -- and this went on for years and years. It wasn't until about 1948 or 9 that I began writing differently ... 4

Since The North Ship is predominantly influenced by Yeats, the period of Thomas's influence would seem to coincide roughly with the years when Larkin was writing the poems of In The Grip Of Light, for in 1951 the more mature XX Poems appeared.

Likewise, The North Ship does not show a great many obvious traces of W. H. Auden; the extent to which Auden dominated the still earlier poetry, however, is clearly illustrated by the poem "Ultimatum". This piece, which appeared in The Listener when Larkin was eighteen, was his first publication outside of his school magazine. It has never reappeared in any anthology, or in Larkin's three volumes of poetry, but it is worth noting here in its entirety as a representative stage of Larkin's development as a poet. "Ultimatum" is far more Audenesque than anything in The North Ship.

But we must build our walls, for what we are  
Necessitates it, and we must construct,  
The ship to navigate behind them, there.

4. Philip Larkin, "Four Conversations: Ian Hamilton", London Magazine, Vol. 4, No. 8, 1964, p. 72.

Hopeless to ignore, helpless instruct  
For any term of time beyond the years  
That warn us of the need for emigration:  
Exploded the ancient saying: Life is yours.

For on our island is no railway station,  
There are no tickets for the Vale of Peace,  
No docks where trading ships and seagulls pass.

Remember stories you read when a boy  
-- The shipwrecked sailor gaining safety by  
His knife, tree trunk, and lianas -- for now  
You must escape, or perish saying no.

Thematically this poem deals with one of Auden's major concerns. It reiterates the necessity of man's being socially aware and part of the world community. Man, despite the urgings of his individuality (which causes him to build walls, to see himself as an isolated unit) eventually comes to the realization of "the need for emigration", that there is no easy way out, no well travelled route to "the Vale of Peace". This return to a social context can only be engineered by the unaided efforts of the individual and failure means the total negation of his personality. The major symbol of

isolation, the island, is a favorite image of Auden's. Stylistically, the use of alliterative, and sometimes repetitive, parallel structure ("Hopeless to ignore, helpless instruct") for emphasis and effect is a distinctive characteristic of Auden's that Larkin follows closely in this poem.

A gradual lessening of Auden's hold on Larkin is apparent in The North Ship but some likenesses can be traced. Larkin's "Conscript" could fit both thematically and stylistically into Auden's series of twenty-seven poems "In Time of War".

The ego's county he inherited  
 From those who tended it like farmers; had  
 All knowledge that the study merited,  
 The requisite contempt of good and bad;

But one Spring day his land was violated;  
 A bunch of horsemen curtly asked his name,  
 Their leader in a different dialect stated  
 A war was on for which he was to blame,

And he must help them. The assent he gave  
 Was founded on desire for self-effacement  
 In order not to lose his birthright; brave,  
 For nothing would be easier than replacement,

Which would not give him time to follow further  
The details of his own defeat and murder.

This poem, particularly when read aloud, sounds like Auden in its swift and smooth transitions from line to line and stanza to stanza, ending in the final impact of the rhyming couplet. The use of the speech-like rhythms of iambic pentameter, the clarity of language, the use of the personal pronoun to achieve a curiously impersonal effect and the occasional near rhyme (further -- murder) are often elements of Auden's style.

Poem XXVIII of The North Ship sounds remarkably like one of Auden's musical pieces, particularly " 'O where are you going?' said reader to rider". In his first three stanzas Auden asks disturbing questions in a rhythmic, singing, almost ballad-like manner. In the first line of the last stanza of his poem, Auden uses the imperative as a reply, instead of the usual negative or affirmative, while the next two answers are both affirmative.

"Out of this house" -- said rider to reader

"Yours never will" -- said farer to fearer

"They're looking for you" -- said hearer to horror,

As he left them there, as he left them there.

Larkin employs this same technique of parallel structure in his first two stanzas, posing questions with a choice of alliterative predicate nominatives and the descriptive qualifying clause coming after.

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?

In the final stanza of his poem Larkin uses the imperative, but goes further and answers all questions asked by direct commands which suggest, rather than affirm, a reply to the previous stanzas.

Shine out, my sudden angel,  
Break fear with breast and brow,  
I take you now and for always,  
For always is always now.

The predominant influence in this volume is unquestionably W. B. Yeats. In the introduction to the 1966 edition Larkin explained why he was so completely taken up at that time by "the Celtic fever". In 1943 he attended a reading by Vernon Watkins of Yeats's poetry. He was so impressed by Watkins's passion that, after Watkins had impulsively given the audience all his books, he later collected and returned them. This time he was read more poetry. The period of adulation of Yeats followed.

As a result I spent the next three years trying to write like Yeats, not because I liked his personality or understood his ideas but out of infatuation with his music (to use the word I think Vernon used). In fairness to myself it must be admitted that it is a particularly potent music, pervasive as garlic, and has ruined many a better talent.<sup>5</sup>

The imitation of Yeats undoubtedly affected adversely some of the more purely lyrical poems in The North Ship, but that the "potent music" failed to wreak its usual havoc is a tribute to Larkin's poetic integrity and sensibility. Even in its immature stages his writing was more derivative than imitative. Nonetheless, the extent to which Larkin patterned himself on Yeats remains considerable and resulted in Larkin using, to a fair degree, Yeatsean imagery, style,

5. Philip Larkin, The North Ship, (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), p. 9.

and subject matter, whereas the major effects of Auden had been the less easily defined area of style alone.

Throughout the poetry of The North Ship fragments of Yeatsean imagery keep recurring, for Larkin actually read Yeats each evening before beginning his own writing.

Every night after supper before opening my large dark green manuscript book I used to limber up by turning the pages of the 1933 plum-coloured Macmillan edition, which stopped at 'Words for Music Perhaps', and which meant in fact that I never absorbed the harsher last poems. This may be discernible in what I wrote. <sup>6</sup>

At times Larkin simply drew upon Yeats's vocabulary to enrich his own poetry. The mystical number seven, which Yeats used extensively, appears in the "seven-piled wave" of Poem XVII, and in the "seventy years" of Poem XX. Larkin also uses the term "stone places"<sup>7</sup> and "a stony place"<sup>8</sup> to denote ugliness and infertility requiring infusion of beauty. This parallels a typically Yeatsean use of "stony ground" in "Meditations In Time of Civil War", Part Two, line three. "The frenzied drum" of Yeats's "A Prayer For My Daughter" becomes the "wintry drum" of the first poem of The North Ship.

Occasionally, Larkin goes beyond the using of isolated words which are common in Yeats's poetry. Consciously or

6. Ibid, p. 10.

7. Ibid, p. 21.

8. Ibid, p. 24.

unconsciously, he borrows particular images and develops them within his own framework while retaining their Yeatsian connotations. In a very early poem of Yeats's, "Anashuya and Vijaya", Vijaya implores the seemingly passionless stars to sing praises of his love.

Sing, turning in your cars

Sing till you raise your hands and sigh, ...<sup>9</sup>

Larkin's image, in "Night-Music", of the stars' singing in order to quicken a dead earth is similar and may have originated in that early image of Yeats's. The stars take on the opposite value in Yeats's "A Dream of Death". The "indifferent stars" of that poem relate closely to the idea of the "cold hill of stars" of Poem XXI of The North Ship; in both cases the passing of human love is viewed with cold detachment by the far-distant heavens.

A predominant symbol used throughout the early poetry of Yeats is the image of wild birds, particularly their song and clamour. The calling of the bird indicates at times the happy harmony of nature ("Until a curlew cried and in the luminous wind / A curlew answered")<sup>10</sup> and freedom and exuberance ("merry as a bird")<sup>11</sup>. Often this

9. W. B. Yeats, "Anashuya and Vijaya", The Collected Poems, (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1952), p. 12.

10. Ibid, "Paudeen", p. 122.

11. Ibid, "The Three Beggars", p. 207.

sense of joy and freedom is related to woman:

She seemed to have grown clean and sweet  
Like any rock-bred, sea-borne bird: 12

In Poem XII of The North Ship Larkin captures the image of the artless spontaneity of bird song as indicative of the loveliness of a young Polish airgirl beautifying an English train.

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.

Her rhythmic speech ("Like the train's beat") appears to hold the essentials of beauty in her so that the listener sees her not as a person to be known but as an almost-alien creature to be admired. Like her hair, she is simultaneously "wild and controlled". Her "foreign talk" contains elements of familiarity ("gestures like these English oaks") while embodying her strange beauty. The image of the "written

skies" contrasts effectively with the term "meaningless" (referring both to the girl's language and to the birds' song) for writing, again, can be personally comprehended and understood. Larkin may also be hinting at the vital contrast between musical notes "written" and played. The beauty of the sound surpasses the intellectual comprehension which can be applied to the sheet of music. The "bright-tongued birds" of Poem XIII, the long anticipated birds of the morning of Poem XVI, the "birds' clamour" of XVII represent for Larkin unfettered happiness and life. Conversely the "birdless sea" of the title poem "The North Ship" ("Song 65 N") and the "battered carcass of a carrion crow" (Poem XIV, "Nursery Tale") evoke pictures of sterility and death.

"The Cat and The Moon" combines two common Yeatsian images, the dance and the moon, both of which are related to change and the dislocation of order. In Yeats's poem the moon will perhaps learn "A new dance turn" from the dancing of the cat, *Minneloushe*; the "changing moon" takes on "a new phase" which is very different from its old "courtly fashion". Larkin's "The Dancer" appears to have been inspired by this poem for it shows in a similar fashion the breaking of the moon from its orbit on the cessation of the dance. A further, or concurrent, source of the concepts

in "The Dancer" may have been "The Crazy Moon". Larkin's reference to "the anchorless/Moon" which goes "raving" and "swerving / Down at the earth for a catastrophic kiss" is very like line two of that particular piece in which "The moon is staggering in the sky", and the dance has faltered.


The aura of mysterious femininity and passion surrounding woman in Yeats's early poetry is centered in flowing female hair. Man's ties to woman are asserted in a symbolic twining of her hair around his universe in "He Wishes His Beloved Were Dead".

Nor would you rise and hasten away,  
Though you have the will of the wild birds,  
But know your hair was bound and wound  
About the stars and moon and sun:

Similarly, he expresses his love for a beautiful maiden in "Brown Penny": "I am looped in the loops of her hair." Larkin too writes of the hair in expressing the essence of femininity and in "750 N. Blizzard" of "The North Ship" (the title poem) has borrowed almost the identical image..

A girl is standing there  
Who will take no lovers  
Till she winds me in her hair.

The poem most indebted to Yeats is Poem XX, "I see a girl dragged by the wrists". It illuminates a basic theme of Larkin's; the significance of the familiar and the ordinary which is embodied in these particular lines by the picture of two old men painfully shovelling snow. Their beauty transcends the physical beauty and energy of the girl struggling in the field of snow. This theme is a clever reversal of what Yeats implies in "The Lover Tells Of The Rose In His Heart". While Larkin asserts that "everything's remade / With shovel and spade", Yeats demands that all common things must be "remade like a casket of gold" to hold the beauty of his lover. Further influence may be traced to "The Old Men Admiring Themselves In The Water". The old men know that "Everything alters" and "All that's beautiful drifts away". They recognize their age and ugliness and yet they admire themselves -- they have a kind of beauty. Furthermore, in Poem XX one can pinpoint borrowings of a specific nature from three different poems by Yeats. Larkin's descriptions of man as "a sack of meal upon two sticks" and "All that's content to wear a worn-out coat" sound very much like line two from "The Hour Before Dawn", "A bundle of rags upon a crutch", or line nine of "Sailing to Byzantium", "A tattered coat upon a stick", or line forty-eight of "Among School Children", "Old clothes upon old sticks".



The first poem of The North Ship is a striking comment on the paradoxical nature of human existence. It is much indebted to Yeats in specific instances. The device of the refrain occurs very often in his poetry and Yeatsean vocabulary and images -- birds in flight, gulls and girls, the wheel -- abound. The poem actually appears to have been inspired by lines fifty-four to fifty-eight of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen".

So the Platonic Year  
Whirls out new right and wrong,  
Whirls in the old instead,  
All men are dancers and their tread  
Goes to the barbarous clangour of a gong.

The cyclic nature of man's existence, his simultaneous holding of life and death, right and wrong, youth and age, the fact that each co-exists with, actually lives within, the other is the theme of "All catches alight". Just as Yeats explored these puzzling and paradoxical questions in Words For Music Perhaps ("Love has pitched his mansion in / The place of excrement"), so does Larkin consider them in The North Ship. "All catches alight" provides a framework in which to consider much of the poetry in this book and relates significantly to the poetry of The Less Deceived and The

Whitsun Weddings. Thematically speaking, the early poetry is very similar to the later two volumes, except for a dramatic shift in emphasis. The world pictured in The North Ship is at times "unquickened", but love and life present themselves far too often for the picture to be a totally pessimistic one. There are more poems describing the ultimate finalities of life than there are about its possibilities, but at this stage in his poetry Larkin shows much more the positive attitude of youth than the fatalism of the older poet of The Less Deceived and The Whitsun Weddings.

"All catches alight" is a poem of joy and exuberance, of rejoicing in the rebirth that spring offers.

All catches alight  
At the spread of spring:

The whole of the earth is caught up in this cyclic renewal of energies.

Birds crazed with flight  
Branches that fling  
Leaves up to the light --  
Every one thing,  
Shape, colour and voice,  
Cries out, Rejoice!

Nonetheless, the celebration of life does not lack a continual awareness of death which insistently edges its way into the festivities; behind the happiness one can sense the lurking presence of sadness. Each of the four stanzas of the poem describes the movements of life, but each is followed by the bleak refrain:

A drum taps: a wintry drum.

The music to which the cycle of man moves is the soft, sinister throb of the "wintry drum".

Death's presence, however, is not enough to intimidate man for "all runs back to the whole". Winter and death come closer with each passing day of spring, but spring must ultimately begin again. And so, the mating couples of the earth, both man and animal, do not hesitate to fulfill the functions of life.

What lovers worry much

That a ghost bids them touch?

When the wheel has turned a complete round "all created things" will forget death, and long-dead "centuries of springs / And all their buried men" will be re-born and "Stand on the earth

again", presumably in everlasting life.

Poem VIII, entitled "Winter", reiterates this belief, that the seeds of hope lie dormant in the anguish of despair. The first two stanzas show a dismally bleak world, whose dominant symbols are two horses, "each horse like a passion / Long since defeated", and the swan (again, a Yeatsian borrowing) representing "the cold of winter". In the last stanza the "shrivelled men stand / Crowding like thistles" but memory has wakened in each diminished individual hope for the future, a hope that shines in each face and reflects back to the lifeless winter sun a measure of human pride.

Yet still the miracles  
Exhume in each face  
Strong silken seed,  
That to the static  
Gold winter sun throws back  
Endless and cloudless pride.

Occasional poems in The North Ship are purely lyrical | descriptions of the beauty of woman, but passion and love, for Larkin, rarely occur without their antitheses, sorrow and a sense of loss. In Poem XVI, the lover lies in bed in the dark hour before dawn, the lonely hour in which doubts

and fears assail the mind. Ardour is replaced by a sense of futility, and despair is so complete that the poet can readily believe that life is meaningless, that vitality is an illusion, that

The soundless river pouring from the cave  
 Is neither strong, nor deep;  
 Only an image fancied in conceit.

The poem ends with the merest hint of optimism; the arrival of morning, with the birds and the voices of girls, is imminent in its resumption of movement. In Larkin's poetry morning is indicative of a time of hope. Indeed, Poem VII appears almost to be a joyous sequel to the poem discussed above. The lover throws off his despair in the magnificent awakening of the dawn.

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

Here, where no love is,  
All that was hopeless  
And kept me from sleeping  
Is frail and unsure;  
For never so brilliant,  
Neither so silent  
Nor so unearthly, has  
Earth grown before.

Sorrow in the presence of joy, age following swiftly on the heels of youth, life and death being an iota apart, these are the harsh realities of life. The acceptance of these realities, however, does not automatically preclude fulfillment in life. One's view can be slanted toward the darker side of existence, but nonetheless the dreariness of day to day reality can be seen not as a force able to defeat man but as a stepping stone to greater glories of the spirit. Poem XX, "I see a girl dragged by the wrists", exemplifies this belief in the significance of the ordinary action. The vitality and beauty of the girl's joyful struggle in the "dazzling field of snow" strike no answering chord in the poet as once they would have done. Such exuberance of existence he realizes can be the property of only a lucky few. That part of his being which could have responded, even in

envy, to her wildness and gladness has dwindled and died in the knowledge that he can

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

He is aroused, however, by the sight of "two old ragged men" shovelling snow, who represent for him the beauty of day-to-day survival and the importance of "All actions done in patient hopelessness." It is with these that Larkin feels a sense of kinship rather than with the girl:

For me the task's to learn the many times  
When I must stoop and throw a shovelful:

These ordinary actions are a cornerstone to spiritual aspirations, to the possession of the "golden horn" of the "snow-white unicorn" of the soul.

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.

Despite the graveyard connotations of lines two and three of the quotation, life is worth the fight "against all argument". Indeed, death's constant reminder of the brevity and futility of the ordinary life emphasizes the necessity of living. The presence of death can even be a source of poetic inspiration and personal encouragement. In Poem XVII, Larkin is very aware that to write of sadness one must come into close contact with it. Death has to surround the poet even if he is to compose only "one sad song".

-- For this I must visit the dead.

Headstone and wet cross,  
 Paths where the mourners tread,  
 A solitary bird,  
 These call up the shade of loss,  
 Shape word to word.

He finds the desolation he seeks, but along with it, arising out of the trappings of the graveyard, is a distinct beauty (albeit a rather dismal one). The "sodden graves" will not let one forget death, but yet surprisingly, above each reminder of man's mortality, the tombstones shine like gold and the voices of birds (consistently a symbol of life and energy) in the morning reflect joy even in the very abode of death.

That stones would shine like gold <sup>CD</sup>  
 Above each sodden grave,  
 This, I had not foretold,  
 Nor the birds' clamour, nor  
 The image morning gave  
 Of more and ever more,  
 As some vast seven-piled wave,  
 Mane-flinging, manifold,  
 Streams at an endless shore.

In the later two volumes, the optimistic tinge, the hopeful grasping for life through the inevitable presence of death, rarely appears. Illusion is impossible, and all life, vital or otherwise, ends in the same manner. These gloomy conclusions are affirmed from time to time in The North Ship. Despite the attempt to see worth in the struggle for life alone, in spite of man's ultimate fate, an extremely pessimistic note comes through in several poems. Even a world of beauty like the one described in Poem II, "This miracle of glass, whose every hall / The light as music fills," becomes tarnished and obscured as suddenly and without warning, "The clouds cast moving shadows on the land." Somehow, the terrible question which follows, "Are you prepared for what the night will bring?" has no satisfying

answer. The knowledge in the blood that "Submission is the only good",<sup>13</sup> that man must gladly submit to his destiny, his function as "an instrument sharply stringed", upon which "all things" are "to strike music as they please",<sup>14</sup> seems inadequate "when the street / Darkens"<sup>15</sup> and the only definable aspect of the world is "an ancient sadness falling"<sup>16</sup>. This bleak picture of life's ventures and attempts and of the futility of all human beginnings is most emphatically illustrated in "Nursery Tale". Even the new light of day is unable to dispel the melancholy of the darkness.

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.

Stylistically, the poems of The North Ship are very different from the work of the mature poet. The early poems

13. Philip Larkin, "Poem IX", The North Ship, (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), p. 21, line 6.

14. *Ibid*, lines 7-8.

15. *Ibid*, lines 9-10.

16. *Ibid*, line 11.

not only use Yeatsian material, they actually sound like the Irish poet. As Philip Gardner points out,

.... it is not so much a matter of deliberate pastiche as of a kind of ventriloquism, with Larkin as the dummy (or, perhaps, the medium) through whom the dead poet speaks in accents uncannily his own. 17

Gardner also remarks on another aspect of these poems which, in some instances, causes them to have a curiously empty ring, a lack of concrete impact -- they do not appear to have been inspired by a deeply felt or, at least, an observed experience.

Here and there, however, over-riding the mellifluousness of the "potent music" of Yeats, an ironically self-aware voice breaks through, speaking in a manner which might easily be a part of The Less Deceived or The Whitsun Weddings. 18

... only a name

That chimes occasionally, as a belief

Long since embedded in the static past.

... This is your last, meticulous hour,

Cut, gummed; pastime of a provincial winter.

17. Philip Gardner, "The Wintry Drum: The Poetry of Philip Larkin", Dalhousie Review, Vol. 48, No. 1, 1968, p. 89.

18. Anthony Thwaite, "The Poetry of Philip Larkin", in The Survival of Poetry, (Martin Dodsworth, Editor), (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 41.

These lines from Poem XXX strike with a crystal clarity, a finality and an acceptance of all time does to the past. It is almost with relief that the poet feels the dangerous tumult of love become only a "severed image" as time goes about its business. Somehow though this image, even preserved and dead, has value; memories take on a deeper significance than the actual experience in that they are static and without the "uncertainty and gales of shame" of the original. These lines are not far removed in tone and suggestion and actual image from "Lines On A Young Lady's Photograph Album" of The Less Deceived.

Similarly, four lines from "Songs: 65° N" of the title poem of The North Ship point directly forward to the final stanza of "Next, Please" in The Less Deceived, where they have been reworked and expanded to bring out a sharper, more detailed picture.

I am wakened each dawn  
Increasingly to fear  
Sail-stiffening air,  
The birdless sea.

("The North Ship")

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.

("Next, Please")

The word "unfamiliar" reminds one of another one of Larkin's stylistic strengths of which indication is given in The North Ship -- the use of the most apt word or phrase, carefully worked and designed to give maximum possible effect. In the context of "Next, Please", "unfamiliar" has at least two layers of meaning, emphasizing the every-day denotation of the strange, the unknown, and at the same time deepening the usual meaning by suggestions of a witch's "familiar", the black cat symbolic of fear and evil. In The North Ship the reader can hardly fail to notice amid the Irish vocabulary Larkin's unerring eye for the descriptive term. Such fragments as "this prolific plant, / 'Dumb idleness" of Poem VI, "sibilant-muscled trees" of "Night-Music", "the bright-tongued birds" of Poem XIII, and "tall ships, wind-mastered, wet with light" of Poem XXIV illustrate the command of language inherent in his poetry from the earliest published works.

In the 1966 republication of The North Ship the last poem is of later vintage than its companion pieces. Larkin says of it:

As a coda I have added a poem, written a year or so later, which, though not noticeably better

than the rest, shows the Celtic fever abated and the patient sleeping soundly. 19

The cure for "the Celtic fever" was Thomas Hardy, who, according to Larkin, was come upon quite by chance.

When reaction came, it was undramatic, complete and permanent. In early 1946 I had some new digs in which the bedroom faced east, so that the sun woke me inconveniently early. I used to read. One book I had at my bedside was the little blue Chosen Poems of Thomas Hardy; Hardy I knew as a novelist, but as regards his verse I shared Lytton Strachey's verdict that 'the gloom is not even relieved by a little elegance of diction'. This opinion did not last long; if I were asked to date its disappearance, I should guess it was the morning I first read, 'Thoughts of Phena At News of Her Death'. 20

The untitled later poem, "Waiting for breakfast", first appeared in the little pamphlet, XX Poems, which Larkin had had privately published in 1951. This poem is not as much like Hardy as the Yeatsian pieces are like Yeats, but it reveals a new manner of finding and using material and signals a major change in style and consideration of subject matter. The tone of the poetry becomes more personal and meaningful as Larkin's manner settles into an ironic and

19. Philip Larkin, The North Ship, (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), p. 10.

20. Ibid.

fatalistic attitude toward a life which is rarely quickened by human joy.

The influence of Hardy was at once simpler and yet much more profound than any similarity of vocabulary or imagery. This new approach to material, in which the poet comments on experience through the eyes of the ordinary, but self-aware, observer, has often provoked the criticism that Larkin's poetry lacks largeness of theme and utterance. Nothing could be further from the truth. Larkin's themes are unshakably major but, like Hardy's, they are embodied in the personal example, the vital experience, of one man. A close look at one of Hardy's poems reveals much of the nature of the technique Larkin was beginning to handle well in "Waiting for breakfast". The two poems are very different in actual subject matter, but in each case the poet's attitude to his subject matter is much the same. Both poems are in the first person and deal with a meaningful experience in the life of that person. Hardy speaks through a single soldier; Larkin, more personally, through a young poet, but in both minds there is a state of initial contemplation which eventually arrives at a significant statement.

Had he and I but met  
By some old, ancient inn,  
We would have sat us down to wet  
Right many a nipperkin

But ranged as infantry  
 And staring face to face  
 I shot at him as he at me  
 And killed him in his place.

I shot him dead because --  
 Because he was my foe,  
 Just so; my foe of course he was;  
 That's clear enough; although

He thought he'd 'list, perhaps  
 Off'hand like -- just as I --  
 Was out of work -- had sold his traps --  
 No other reason why.

Yes; quaint and curious war is!  
 You shoot a fellow down  
 You'd treat if met where any bar is,  
 Or help to half-a-crown.

("The Man He Killed") .

In this poem we have no stirring Tennysonian heroics nor even slashing Byronic irony, but its theme, the irrationality of war, is no less epic than that of "The Charge of the Light Brigade" or "Before Waterloo". Its pathos, however, is caught

through the eyes of the individual, an ordinary foot-soldier, who probably fails to see, over and beyond the close-packed masses of the dying, the ripping of bayonets and the havoc of grape shot, the heroic nature of the battle. He is not concerned with the general carnage, but is trying to clarify his own thoughts about having killed one of the enemy. The working-out of his reasons, awkwardly and hesitantly, proceeds from one attitude to another to the final conclusions. The use of language in the third stanza, the halting rhythm of the soldier's words, adds immeasurably to the effect of "not knowing". The device of having the last word of a stanza ("although" - stanza three) a transitional one which leads to a change in thought also reminds one of Larkin's technique. The awkwardness of the speaker, his indecision, the consideration of alternatives leaves one just the right impression of unpolished, questioning sincerity.

Throughout the first stanza of "Waiting for breakfast", unlike the other poems of The North Ship, the observation is exact, mood and incident perfectly framed within description by the imaginative use of detail. Like Hardy's soldier, who is musing on an incident in the past, the young man is considering the preceding night spent with his lover.

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.

The second stanza abruptly swings into another mood,  
a realization of the life-potential in the quiet scene.

Misjudgment: for the stones slept, and the mist  
Wandered absolvingly past all it touched,  
Yet hung like a stayed breath; the lights burnt on,  
Pin-points of undisturbed excitement;

The possibilities of the day and his growing awareness of  
an almost unbelievable state of joy transmute the original  
drabness of the first stanza into a transcendent state that  
cannot be held or pursued, "bewareing the mind's least clutch".

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

However, in the final stanza, the mood and train of thought shift again. This state of joy is a reminder to the "I" of the poem of the state of poetic inspiration and he wonders if the joy he is experiencing can live side by side with the presence of the Muse. The fickle Muse comes only when it chooses, and the poet is desperately afraid that perfection of life means destruction of inspiration. Poetry demands total dedication and will not tolerate an absorption in this girl and the happiness she represents.

... 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 poet of "Waiting for breakfast", like the soldier of "The Man He Killed", moves through a series of introspections to an ironic conclusion about his life. Obviously, not all of Larkin's poems follow this exact pattern, but this inner questioning and dogged pursuit of the alternatives provide the basis for most of his best poems.

The North Ship, in spite of its dependence on other poets and the poet's youthful inexperience, does have a certain intrinsic value. Many of the lines are finely conceived and beautifully expressed and several poems present genuine and moving insights. Nonetheless, the major interest

lies in how, on the one hand, the poems show a stage of youth and optimism in Larkin's development, and, on the other, how they foreshadow the mature and authoritative Larkin of The Less Deceived and The Whitsun Weddings. Beneath the Irish influence and the sentimentality of youth one can detect the themes, imagery and modes of expression which are the hallmark of the later poet.

poems of The North Ship, even though the dates of publication of the three books are very close. The attitudes expressed resemble closely those in the more pessimistic poems of The Less Deceived and The Whitsun Weddings, published, respectively, eight and seventeen years later than A Girl In Winter.

When Jill was published in 1946 it aroused little public comment. Larkin's friend, Kingsley Amis, said at the time that he had enjoyed it, later remarking that he had seen a copy in a bookshop in Coventry Street between Naked and Unashamed and High Heeled Yvonne.<sup>1</sup> In retrospect Larkin does not appear to think highly of the novel; though one must remember that he is always very self-effacing. In the introduction to the 1964 edition he describes it as "an unambitious short story" and asks of the reader only "the indulgence traditionally extended to juvenilia".

Although the author's judgment is perhaps too harsh, the novel does have some major faults. The plot itself seems to be too much based on coincidence to be entirely real. It is just too pat to have John Kemp, the poor, hardworking, well-mannered scholarship boy, abysmally shy and totally inept, discover he is to room with Warner, the unruly, uncouth, hard-drinking lad from a public school, who is his exact opposite. This situation could occur in real life, but in

1. Philip Larkin, Jill, (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), p. 19.

this case it too obviously suits the author's purpose and strikes a jarring note. The somewhat neurotic escape of Kemp's, his creating a fantasy girl of pure innocence, whom he calls Jill, is handled quite well, but that John later sees in a bookshop the exact replica of his creation and finds that her name is Gillian appears very contrived. Again, John's repeated sightings of his quarry and his finally being introduced to her in his own rooms, Gillian being the cousin of his roommate's girlfriend, all strike one as being too much of a coincidence to be true.

The central character, John Kemp, is well developed and we are totally aware at all times of what is happening to him. Larkin depicts his despair and suffering sensitively and with compassion. The only person besides Kemp who is real is the girl Jill, who is really an extension of himself. She is made real by the intensity of his needs. Her creation through the fascinating schoolgirl's diary is a masterful piece of writing and reveals one of Larkin's strong points both as a poet and novelist. He has the ability to get inside a character, to perceive his suffering from within. To do this with an Oxford student like Kemp is an achievement; to create a girl's diary, one so convincingly written and so completely from the feminine point of view, is a tour de force. In fifteen pages the reader is given the essence of the introverted schoolgirl, who hates all aspects of Willow Gables

school, and who continually finds herself at odds with both the other girls and teachers. We share her sorrow at the loss of her only friend who moves to America without telling her, and her grief at her father's death. We feel her joy in small triumphs and her sense of total frustration. Her crises are those of an adolescent girl and her reactions and comments are convincing down to the last inflection and expression. Yet, one cannot help feeling that most of the other characters in the novel are not quite alive, that they are one-sided rather than two-dimensional. Warner and his friends are "types", beer-drinking, women-chasing, insensitive students. We perceive them only as they react upon John Kemp, as they abrade his delicate exterior. Whitbread (the only person at Oxford who extends friendship to John) is also portrayed as John sees him, a pushy, working-class type determined to "get on". This lack of depth may well be intentional on Larkin's part, an attempt to demonstrate the limitations of John's point of view. In effect, people exist only as they affect him.

These flaws in action and characterization can be overlooked perhaps if one considers Larkin's intention to be a symbolic representation of a quest for lost innocence. The major concern of the novel is the portrayal of the mental anguish of the young hero, his complete inability to cope with the harsh reality of a world whose random series of

events "happens" to him without a measure of control. The existence of Warner, Whitbread, Elizabeth Dowling (Warner's girlfriend) and the other minor characters depends more upon their validity as symbols rather than as actual people. Their failure as "real" characters is felt less because of their impact in context, vividly and emphatically illustrating the pain of the human being in isolation, unable to identify with or even make true contact with people who live so closely around him.

John Kemp is a scholarship student from the factory town of Huddlesford, and as the novel opens he is en route to Oxford. His inadequacy and lack of self-confidence are straightway confirmed, first by the author's description, and then by a rather pathetic incident in the crowded train compartment. Unsure as to whether it would be in good taste to eat his lunch on the train, he retires to the lavatory and hurriedly eats two of the sandwiches. A rattling at the door causes him to throw the rest out of the window and so he hungrily returns to the compartment, only to observe the rest of the travellers opening their lunches. The inevitable follows, charitable offerings of food are pressed upon him. His refusals only convince the others that he is ill and he becomes a very unwilling center of attention.

In the end he was forced to accept not only three sandwiches from the ladies, but a piece of cake from the girl and a quarter of the clergyman's apple. He kept his eyes fixed on the dirty floor as he chewed, utterly humiliated. <sup>2</sup>

On his arrival at the college, ~~he~~ discovers that a tea-party is already underway in his rooms. His roommate Christopher Warner and Warner's friends are a boisterous and unruly lot and Kemp feels extremely ill-at-ease. His discomfiture is increased even more when he attempts a casual observation about the similarity between Warner's china and his own: he is greeted with derisive laughter, since Warner has already broken open John's crate and used John's crockery without any intention of purchasing his own. Late that night Christopher comes in drunkenly and noisily, vomiting and belching. The pattern of infringing on Kemp's rights continues with Christopher's noisy beer parties, with his borrowing money from John, copying his essays, and ignoring him except to impose. Yet, paradoxically, John, in his loneliness, admires Christopher and his friends, their sureness, their aggressiveness, and their ability to handle situations. When his tutor offers to take him alone instead of with Warner, John refuses.

John's malleability is further emphasized by a skillful flashback to his schooldays. He is not a scholar imbued with a burning desire for learning, but a great hard-working

2. Ibid, p. 23.

sponge which avidly soaks up knowledge. He is the product of Mr. Crouch, the somewhat frustrated head of English studies at Huddlesford Grammar School, who had decided to coach a student for University and chosen Kemp... All John's actions appear to be dictated by his awareness of others.

One of the few overtures of friendship made to him comes from a fellow scholarship student from Yorkshire called Whitbread. Whitbread is like John; poor but hard-working. Again, John has mixed feelings towards him. He is filled with a grudging admiration for Whitbread's ability to work hard, but this reminder of his own new found slackness makes him uncomfortable. Then too he realizes that Whitbread is "his sort", and he feels slightly uneasy and embarrassed by Whitbread's eagerness to "get on", to push ahead. Kemp no longer feels a member of the working class, and, certainly, his awareness and sensitivity justify this feeling. On the other hand, his feelings of inferiority and insecurity make it impossible for him to see himself as part of the public school group of Warner and his friends.

It has been suggested by an American critic, James Gordin, that Jill is the first example of the displaced working-class hero in the post-war British novel.<sup>3</sup> While not discounting this comment entirely, Larkin makes it clear that such was not his overt intention in Jill.

3. James Gordin, Postwar British Fiction, (Cambridge University Press, 1962), p. 1.

In 1940 our impulse was to minimize social differences rather than exaggerate them. My hero's background, though an integral part of the story, was not what the story was about.<sup>4</sup>

The story is about an innocent boy who is thrust into a world of experience he cannot fathom. Sex and violence terrify him, even secondhand, in yarns traded by Christopher and his gang.

Their stories were lustful and playfully savage, and John found they had extreme physical effect on him. He sat crouched on a hard chair, his fists clenched on his knees, gripped by an unreasoning terror that seized him whenever he heard of experiences that would have left him dumb. The life they described was intensely primitive to him. He tried to imagine himself set down amongst it, but blackness fortunately descended on his consciousness before he could savour the whole impossibility of it.<sup>5</sup>

Despite his terror, John yearns to be a part of this life and casually rejects the alternative way of life he could pursue. Whitbread and his friends are a distinct contrast to Warner; their solid, hardworking attitudes toward bettering themselves through studying at Oxford could logically have been John's. Instead, he takes up drinking and smoking and does little or no study, and is immensely

4. Philip Larkin, Jill, (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), p. 11.

5. Ibid, p. 57.

attracted to Elizabeth Dowling, a rather coarse but sexually attractive girlfriend of Christopher's. He devotes all his actions to pursuit of these new aims in life.

Although his character has changed, his loneliness grows as his efforts to enter Warner's circle of friends succeed only in his having an occasional beer with them. Even John (with his limited view of reality) has difficulty in seeing in these rare moments of casual friendliness a deeper significance, but he is overjoyed (and also very worried) when asked to meet Christopher's mother at the train and to look after her at lunch until Christopher arrives from a football match. Once over his shyness, he thoroughly enjoys the meeting, comparing the handsome Mrs. Warner with his own dull mother. Some days later, as he is going out of his rooms to leave Christopher alone with Elizabeth Dowling, he overhears part of a conversation about himself. They laugh at his feebleness, his inadequacies, and he discovers how completely he is despised when Christopher quotes Mrs. Warner's description of him as something "stuffed". He returns to his rooms in a mood somewhere between rage and total despair. A letter from his sister (a teacher in Manchester) sparks an idle conversation about sisters, and John, having told a mild lie about his sister (whom he names Jill), is astounded to discover that Christopher envies his relationship with her and is actually interested

in what they have done together. Later that night Christopher's envy has gone. Their original relationship is restored. John, failing to realize that Christopher has forgotten the whole thing, writes a letter "from Jill" and leaves it lying around in the hopes of his roommate's reading it. His total humiliation by Mrs. Warner (whom he had admired a great deal) is the incident which sparks his initial interest in "Jill".

John's fascination with violence grows into admiration. When Christopher comes home drunk and assaults another student whose room he has entered in search of food John regards it as an heroic act. Even when Eddy has the unfortunate student fastened by croquet hoops to the wet lawn all night (in retribution for Christopher's fine) John "basked in all this violence as he would in a hot climate. He was excited and admired Christopher without envying him." <sup>6</sup> However, the threat of such violence being focused upon himself causes him to return to his fantasy about Jill.

As he writes he finds that he is becoming strangely interested in his own fictitious character and turns the letters into a continuous narrative about the girl Jill. His fantasy takes on even greater importance and he feels an almost neurotic need to create on paper his vision of a Jill who is beautiful and innocent. At first she is merely another self, a more capable self who recreates and changes the unpleasant events of the school term. The symbolic nature of

6. Ibid, p. 128.

his creation appears to him one day at dinner and his whole being yearns to capture the elusive goal after which his tortured soul is unconsciously striving. The furious revelation of his own personal loss of innocence strikes him with the suddenness of a blow.

The sensation he had was of looking intently into the centre of a pure white light: he seemed to see the essence of Jill, around whom all the secondary material things formed and reformed as he wrote them down. He thought he saw exactly what she was and how he should express it: the word was innocent, one he had used dozens of times in his own mind and yet until that moment had never understood.<sup>7</sup>

To his utter consternation, one day John sees his own creation in the flesh in a bookshop. He attempts a conversation but is rebuffed. His fantasy has taken on such real overtones, he knows the girl so well, that he is startled by her non-recognition. Nonetheless, he is certain he will be able to possess this vision of innocence. In doing so, he will symbolically regain his own lost purity.

... above his astonishment, his humiliation, a grander feeling surged; that of thankfulness. He felt like a sailing ship running home into the estuary of a river after a long sea-journey.<sup>8</sup>

7. Ibid, p. 152.

8. Ibid, p. 157.

This contentment disappears as John talks about sex with Christopher, who plans to make love to Elizabeth in their rooms. It is replaced by the certainty that he must keep his vision of innocence away from Christopher. But his attempt is doomed to failure. John knows he is unable to function purely on a sexual level with Jill (and indeed does not want to), but he finds it impossible to separate innocent desire and sex. The sharply defined world of black and white to which he tries to return simply does not exist. The innocent Gillian is Elizabeth's cousin and Elizabeth is a consistent symbol of coarse sexuality who toys with John's vague sexual urges. And, after a desperate and futile search for her name and address, John finally meets Gillian in his own rooms, on the very afternoon Warner expects to make love to Elizabeth. Then, so that his totally innocent girl can eat, John steals a cake from Whitbread. As the novel progresses, the blurring of the sharply defined ideals of the age of innocence becomes even more pronounced: not only does innocence associate with desire, but the reverse happens. Elizabeth takes on some Jill-like qualities and refuses to sleep with Christopher.

Next day, Elizabeth's brother gives John a message for Gillian, and he and his friends convince John that this is his chance to become really acquainted with her. They think the whole thing a ribald joke and jest obscenely about the

humour of John's possible seduction of Gillian. As usual, John handles the situation rather badly. The girl hardly recognizes him and confusedly refuses his offer to take her to tea. He attempts to explain in an extremely bewildered fashion his feelings of knowing her before through his fantasies. Despite his confusion, she reluctantly agrees to come to tea in his rooms the next day. Her acceptance creates an enormous joy in him, a joy which rises and expands as he carefully shops for special delicacies. Predictably enough, she does not come, sending Elizabeth to say she is ill.

The flurry of happiness he has felt since learning that his vision of innocence really exists gives way to total despair. This trance-like state is shattered only by news of heavy air raids on Huddlesford; his personal tragedy is dwarfed by the enormity of impersonal events over which he knows he can exert no control. His subsequent visit to Huddlesford, where he finds his family safe, does much to help him to an apparent maturity. Christopher and his friends diminish in importance to him and, as often happens in such cases, he finds himself accepted to a far greater degree. A visit from Mr. Crouch, whose school has been bombed and who is off to join the Air Force, produces some meaningless advice and crushes the last aspects of the academic life as a worthwhile ideal. In a fit of depression

he goes to Whitbread's room and finds that Whitbread is writing an examination. He himself has done so little study that his tutor has not even considered him for the examination. The sudden awareness of his change in character makes him irrationally angry and he callously destroys or defaces most of the possessions of the one person who had befriended him. A great cheerfulness comes over him with this unpleasant and violent act. Having thus committed himself to impulse and irrationality he proceeds to go out and get drunk. At the college he reads a note informing Christopher that Jill is somewhere at a party in Eddy's college. After various drunken adventures he finds them, and walking up to Jill, kisses her once on the lips. He is knocked down by Christopher and then thrown into a fountain by the boisterous drunken students. His final pathetic grasp at innocence is countered by a final stroke of violence.

As a result of his soaking John contracts pneumonia and spends several feverish days in a half-delirium. He thinks of his relationship with Jill, knowing that at least in his fantasy their love had been complete, knowing too that even in his dreams their love would have had to die. Both love fulfilled and love unfulfilled like all other great opportunities must come to the same end -- nothing. It makes little difference whether man attempts to influence his own fate or not. John's attempts to change events, to return to the

innocence of his pre-Oxford life, were destined to fail from the beginning. Things merely happen, without pattern. Man can only accept and endure, rising again like wind-bent trees.

He was watching the trees, the tops of which he could just see through the window. They tossed and tossed, recklessly. He saw them fling their way and that, throwing up their heads like impatient horses, like sea waves, bending and recovering in the wind. They had no leaves. Endlessly, this way and that, they were buffeted and still bore up again to their full height. They seemed tireless. Sometimes they were bent so low that they passed out of sight, leaving the square of white sky free for a second, but then they would be back again, clashing their proud branches together like the antlers of furious stags. ... He looked at the tree-top in the wind. What control could he hope to have over the maddened surface of things?<sup>9</sup>

The novel, according to Larkin, was written in the manner of poetry, with "intense care for detail" and a poet's eye for minute observation and clarity of style. The final effect is that of a poem, a compacted density of meaning carefully and skillfully put together by use of symbol, contrast and highly connotative language. The symbolic juxtaposition of Christopher Warner and Whitbread as embodiments of contrasting ideals, the sexuality of Elizabeth set in opposition to the original innocence of Jill, the quaint politeness of Whitbread's acquaintances compared with the rowdiness of Warner's chums all bring a unity and coherence to the rather unrealistic plot and flat supporting characters of the novel.

9. Ibid, p. 242-243.

In particular, the poet, working in his more compact medium, must have the ability to choose the exact word or phrase necessary to communicate a given mood or emotion and to create subtleties of meaning. This poetic density of expression is very prominent in Jill. For instance, after meeting Mrs. Warner, John attempts to alleviate his drab appearance by buying himself a bow-tie, blue with white dots. Unfortunately, he has no idea how to tie it until Elizabeth, whom he meets by chance, adjusts it for him. Later he meets Christopher and his friends, all quite drunk, and joins them in the bar. As John drinks whisky for the first time, Christopher notices the new bow-tie and, pulling the ends, unties it. John, intoxicated both by the whisky and by the attention given him, causes everyone to laugh uproariously, first by admitting he cannot tie it again, and then by telling of his meeting with Elizabeth.

... by the time he finished the end of the story Christopher, tapping his square-faced ring against his glass, was laughing too. They were not laughing at the same things, but that did not matter. Good humour was restored. The Cambridge man said he felt a lot better, and where could they get something to eat? Eddy was whistling. The landlord called time and his wife came out from behind the bar to collect glasses. As she passed Eddy she pushed him aside like a piece of furniture, but he did not notice. John stood smiling, listening to the talk, the loose ends of his bow-tie hanging foolishly down.<sup>10</sup>

10. Ibid, p. 105. (Underlining mine.)

Thus, the bow-tie which for John was a symbol of his new-found color and dash, really reflects his total ineptitude and isolation. Indeed, the mere fact that everyone noticed it suggests how pallid his personality must normally have been. And the final picture is such a vivid one, John smiling on the edges of the conversation, thinking that for once he is totally accepted, but with the bow-tie hanging foolishly down and he unable to do anything about it.

In Jill many of the major images are drawn from nature, and the exact portrayal of landscape and setting gives an added depth to the novel, often reflecting and emphasizing the moods of the central character. In many instances the weather provides an accurate gauge of John's feelings. Rain and chill, for example, concur with John's dismal mood after a happy night in the pub with Christopher and his friends.

John did not feel as happy the next morning as he thought he would. When he had pulled the bedclothes over himself the night before he had thought he would never be depressed again, ... When Jack called them in the morning, he sat up dubiously. ... The window-pane was blurred and wet: it had been raining since dawn.<sup>11</sup>

A similar image appears after Mr. Crouch visits him at Oxford.

11. Ibid, p. 105.

John had grown depressed when they parted about the middle of the afternoon. He walked back to his rooms in a bitter mood. There was a cold humidity in the air; the streets were wet though no rain had fallen that day.<sup>12</sup>

Occasional moments of cheerfulness and strength do occur in John's stay at Oxford. These feelings of strength are symbolized by, and at the same time inspired by, the wind.

... when he awoke in the morning he felt not despair, but happiness, his mood having changed overnight as the wind might swing completely around ... Wind, warm and blustering, tore along under the overcast sky: in half an hour it would be an ordinary dull morning. But John did not see it like that; ... The wet green grass in the quadrangle, the brooding of the cloisters, the trees with their dripping twigs, and, above all, the wind -- these felt like the agents of some great force that was on his side. He felt sure he was going to succeed.<sup>13</sup>

John's indecision and his chaotic state of mind as he realizes the tidy innocence of boyhood is gone are also presented by an image of nature. The aimless whirling of gulls (very reminiscent of Yeats) is an excellent representation of John's fear of definite action.

... all the sense of continuity that made days, weeks, months, slip away like the perspective of a street, had broken up, and all seemed a crowd of gulls, circling, crying, recircling, suspended, between the sky and the shore.<sup>14</sup>

12. Ibid, p. 229.

13. Ibid, p. 182-183.

14. Ibid, p. 188.

The state of calm he attempts to achieve is symbolized by the dignity of the swan, a strong contrast to the image of vulgar, screaming gulls. John's most successful attempt at this state of mind occurs when Jill agrees to visit him. This high point of mood is equalled by a high point in Larkin's style and an exceptionally accurate use of the right word and the right detail for maximum effect. Kemp is in a completely unfamiliar state of mind: he feels a wonderful contentment and an almost physical sense of emergence. Unable to stay at home because of his exuberance, he finds himself walking for the first time along a canal.

... its novelty coincided with his unfamiliar mood. The wet gravel stained his shoes. The rain had stopped, and the water was quite still, disfigured at times by scum, weed and rotten wood, all drifted to a standstill. A brightly-painted coal barge was moored to a wharf on the other bank: on his side there was a hedge dividing him from allotments and the railway lines. The hedge was wet, smelling of damp wood and leaves, but the nettles under it were dry and soft-looking, with occasionally a single bead of water lodged between leaf and stem. A packet of chips lay half-hidden in the ditch.<sup>15</sup>

This is not, by any means, a picture of classic beauty, but it is a very effective visual image. John, in his joy, has a new-found sense of observation, of detail. As he looks on, the drab details take on something of his own sense of emergence, and illuminate his personal feeling of belonging.

15. Ibid, p. 193-194.

That this sense of complete satisfaction is to be short-lived makes this passage all the more poignant.

From this side, the west, the sun began to struggle through, a yellow light making every twig glisten. The air seemed to freshen at once and the only sound was the squelching of his shoes; ducks swam cautiously away from him and farther on a single swan drifted sulkily on the water. The dropped head, the neck's magnificent curve and the webbed feet giving every now and then a stroke backward expressed disdain and scornfulness. Because of the nearness of the coal yards and the telephone wires and dirty water, he did not think it beautiful at first. But something about it fascinated him. And as he watched, an express train hurtled past twenty yards off on the shining rails, and the long stretch of coaches racing away awakened nothing like regret in him, as they once would. He was glad to see them go, glad, simply to be where he was and to see them go. 16

Like John Kemp, Katherine Lind of A Girl In Winter is an outsider, partly because of her continental background and university education, but also because she has a curious sense of spiritual displacement as well as a physical one. She dislikes her job in a wartime English library and lives a solitary life, without friends, even though she has been at her present job for nine months. Her relationship with the library staff is mainly one of uneasy neutrality or casual cordiality. At the same time, however, her boss, Mr.

Anstey (an obnoxious, overbearing, pretentious civil servant type with an exaggerated idea of his own importance) continually bothers her, presumably because of an inferiority complex resulting from his lack of a university education. The drabness of the winter chill which penetrates the cold old building surrounds her physically just as her loneliness surrounds her spirit. She is, literally and figuratively, a girl in winter.

There was little expression on her face as she closed the door behind her. Indeed, there rarely was: her pale, shield-shaped face, dark eyes and eyebrows, and high cheekbones, were not mobile or eloquent. Nor, more curiously, was her mouth, which was too wide and too full-lipped for beauty. Yet because it was alert and sensitive it should have been most expressive. Almost she looked as if her lips were bruised and she had to keep them unfamiliarly closed.<sup>17</sup>

This description reminds one of the Polish airgirl of Poem XII of The North Ship. The girl of the poem is more beautiful and vivacious than Katherine Lind for "Swift language flatters the lips" and "all humanity of interest / Before her angled beauty falls". She dominates the train compartment in which she sits while Katherine is a much more subdued figure. The Polish airgirl seems to be a very out-going figure while the "girl in winter" attempts to keep all emotion inside,

17. Philip Larkin, A Girl In Winter, (London: Faber and Faber, 1947), p. 15-16.

holding her feelings behind her "unfamiliarily closed" lips.

However, the two girls appear to be very similar in one aspect -- Larkin's awareness of their "foreignness". Despite the sharp contrast in personality, each seems to hold around herself an aura of isolation and difference, each a stranger in a strange land.

As the novel opens, Katherine is in an unusual state of expectancy and hope. She is waiting for a letter from Robin Fennel, an English soldier with whose family she had spent a summer vacation years before. Her dull daily routine is further broken by an unexpected errand. She is asked to accompany home Miss Green, a whining, ungrateful junior assistant who has a very bad toothache.

Larkin uses this incident to reveal that Katherine's instincts toward people are not completely dead. As the two girls begin the journey, Katherine sees Miss Green merely as a welcome excuse to leave work and is actually happy with the sick girl's unpleasant and distant attitude because "... it was a relief not to have to pretend sympathy." <sup>18</sup> However, her sympathy is inadvertently aroused by Miss Green's obvious weakness and need.

... she grasped for the first time that she really needed care, that she was frail and in a remote way beautiful. It was so long since she had felt

18. Ibid, p. 26.

this way about anyone that it came with unexpected force: its urgency made her own affairs, concerned with what might or might not happen, bloodless and fanciful. This was what she had not had for ages, a person dependent on her: ... It was so unusual that she knew it to be linked with the thankfulness she had been feeling for the past few days: ... for the first time in months she had happiness to spare, and now that her passive, pregnant expectation had suddenly found its outlet, it was all the more eager for having come so casually and unexpectedly, leading her to this shelter she never knew existed in the very centre of the city. 19

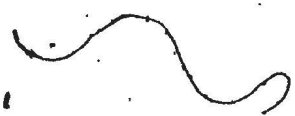
Larkin then skillfully contrasts Katherine's sudden involvement with the complete lack of humanity of the dentist who is to remove the troublesome tooth. He refuses to do the job at first since he does not work on Saturday. His decision to pull out the tooth comes not as a result of any pleas for help, but as a final and necessary step to getting rid of the girl. The subsequent scene, the drilling and extraction of the decayed tooth, is a harshly vivid portrayal of pain. On the other hand, the atmosphere of the surgery appears to blanket humanity altogether. The room holds a thick displacement of feeling, centered particularly in the expressionless voice and inhumanity of the dentist.

The unusual nature of this particular day is heightened by events that follow. Katherine invites Miss Green to her flat to rest, her first visitor in nine months. Furthermore,

that long-awaited letter from Robin Fennel has arrived, stating that he is coming to see her. As Miss Green is about to leave, she finds that her handbag has been taken in error in the chemist's shop. Katherine offers to return the purse left in its place and in it discovers a letter addressed to Miss V. Parbury, 50, Cheshunt Avenue. The handwriting is that of Mr. Anstey.

Normally, such a series of coincidences would strike one unfavorably as manipulation of plot and character. However, in context one is prepared to accept them without too much criticism just as Katherine accepts them without thinking, for this is an extraordinary day in her life and unusual events are to be expected. It is Larkin's intention, I believe, to convey the fundamental absurdity of such a random series of chances which could be significant and which appear to have a pattern in that they are unusual, but are, in the end, merely random happenings.

As in Jill, Larkin skillfully uses flashback technique to reveal past action. In Part II of A Girl in Winter we are shown how Katherine came to know Robin and spend a summer holiday in England. She had begun an exchange of letters with Robin merely because the rest of her schoolmates had started the practice of writing to foreign "pen-friends". The total formality and completely impersonal nature of the year of



correspondence (despite all her efforts to the contrary) causes the invitation to England to come as a rather unwelcome shock.

At this stage in her life Katherine is very much aware of people and the need for personal relationships. Consequently the polite formality of the Fennels bothers her.

... Katherine felt that at this moment it was at last natural for her to be there, yet at the same time there was no intimacy among them: the whole thing resembled a scene in a hotel lounge.<sup>20</sup>

Robin's stiff and unnatural attitude, in particular baffles her and raises the question of why he had asked her to come.

... it couldn't be natural for anyone of sixteen to behave like a Prince Regent and foreign ambassador combined. It just wasn't possible. Besides, if (ghastly thought!) by the thousandth chance it was natural, it would mean that he would never have asked her. They would be so entirely opposite in every way that -- And again, to be so independent, yet so gracious -- and Robin's movements were always beautifully finished and calm -- well, it would mean that people, mere friends, mere other personalities, would hold no interest at all for him.<sup>21</sup>

As the days pass, Katherine tries to stir Robin into an act of impulse or emotion, but there is no hint of a change

20. Ibid, p. 89.

21. Ibid, p. 90-91.

in their polite, entertaining and completely unnatural relationship. The vacation continues through a series of tennis matches, excursions and like pursuits until Katherine realizes that she has fallen in love with Robin, despite any interest other than a friendly one on his part. Some days later, when Katherine makes a slight physical advance, pushing back a lock of Robin's hair, he reacts in an almost frightened manner.

The knowledge dawns that her awareness of people, her alertness to every stir of emotion around her, has created a love Robin does not reciprocate. In an ensuing conversation with Robin's sister, Jane, she finds out that she had really been invited not by Robin but by Jane, who, in her own boredom, had been fascinated by Katherine's letters.

However, just as John Kemp finds his disenchantment with Christopher's friends causes him to be more fully accepted, so Katherine finds that as her interest in Robin dies, his warms toward her. He relaxes his formal air and becomes a human being, at times even taking a half-flirtatious tone with her. With the arrival of a boisterous friend of the family, Jack Stormalong, Katherine loses her place as the centre of attention. Indeed, she is a little annoyed that, as her stay with the Fennels comes to an end, she is so much taken for granted. On her last evening, becoming thoroughly bored with Stormalong's anecdotes, and disgusted with the rest

of the Pennells, she walks down to the river where she is joined a little later by Robin. They take out the boat and, suddenly and without warning, Robin kisses her, holding her close for a silent moment. He releases her almost carelessly, and, neither saying a word, they go back to the house. As Katherine sits in her room in a rather dazed state, Jane enters to announce that Jack Stormalong has asked her to marry him.

The use of the holiday flashback is an excellent juxtaposition of two states of mind, the present attitude of Katherine Lind, the girl in winter, and that of the younger Katherine, the girl in summer. Her youthful warmth and sensitivity to people are brought out by the contrasting figure of Robin, whom she describes as an object of "barren perfection". He is a challenge to her sense of the necessity of personal relationships.

... She was used to striking a quick response from people, to jumping from track to track of intimacy until either she tired of it or they reached a stable relationship. With him she simply could not get going. ...<sup>22</sup>

Her love for Robin ends in unhappiness, in realization that things were not as she had imagined them. Katherine fails also to break any "personal ground" with Jane, despite the fact that

22. Ibid, p. 117.

Jane's groping for any kind of meaning and significance in a pointless life had been the reason for Katherine's invitation. The irony of Robin's kiss after she has lost all desire for him adds to the irony of the fact that she has attracted Jane, a suggestion Katherine finds absurd.

... She had no feelings for Jane at all. And it was ridiculous that she should affect a person she did not care about. ...<sup>23</sup>

Nonetheless, in spite of the lack of impact she has made she is happy; the trip to England will stay with her as "something irrelevant and beautiful".

As the novel returns to the present time, Katherine's reason for writing the Fennels becomes clear. Robin is not a source of romantic interest for she scarcely remembers that she was ever attracted to him. The Fennels instead represent a last link with her destroyed past life. With the coming of the war and the destruction of all that was familiar to her had come the terrifying realization that eventually a break with the past happens to almost all people. In her past she had based her happiness on personal relationships, but now people mean nothing to her and existence appears to have lost its brightness and sense of immediacy. Her source of emotion has died and she has not yet found a replacement. It is the

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 150.

desperate desire to deny this atrophy of her feelings, this total sense of not belonging and not caring, which drives her to get into contact with the Fennels.

She knew -- for such a break brings knowledge, but no additional strength -- that her old way of living was finished. In the past she thought she had found happiness through the interplay of herself and other people. The most important thing had been to please them, to love them, to learn them so fully that their personalities were as distinct as the taste of different fruits. Now this brought happiness no longer ... And what had replaced it? Here she was at a loss. She was not sure if anything had replaced it.

She was not sure if anything would replace it.

So where did the Fennels come in all this? Simply that she was lonely; more complexly, that they supported her failing hope that she was wrong to think her life had worsened so irrevocably. Since writing to Jane, those three nearly-forgotten weeks had taken on a new character in her memory. It was the only period of her life that had not been spoiled by later events, and she found that she could draw upon it hearteningly, remembering when she had been happy, and ready to give and take, instead of unwilling to give, and finding nothing worth taking. It was as if she hoped they would warm back to life a part of her that had been frozen, with the same solicitude she had tried to give Miss Green that morning -- though she feared in retrospect that she had done no more than if she had handed her an elaborate basket of fruit left for weeks in a refrigerator, all frosted over and tasteless. 24

24. Ibid, p. 183-186.

Katherine, having decided to return the handbag to Miss Veronica Parbury, cannot resist reading the letter in it. It is from Mr. Anstey, and is of such a sad note it awakens unfamiliar thoughts about her superior and blurs her sharp-edged hatred of him. On returning the handbag, she finds Miss Parbury to be a dowdy, rather silly, spinster who resembles "a large tea-rose gone well to seed" (again Larkin's deft touch is revealed) and who cannot marry "her friend" because she spends all her time nursing a domineering, invalid mother. The thought of Mr. Anstey offering to put Miss Parbury's mother in a Home at his own expense confuses and irritates Katherine. She is further irritated by Miss Parbury's total dedication and unselfishness. When she is called on the carpet by Mr. Anstey for being late and for having her boyfriend "leave messages at all hours" (Robin had called to cancel their meeting), she finally explodes at him and gives her resignation, referring sarcastically to his "silly Veronica Parbury". With Robin's message she knows now that this unusual day, a day in which she had regained her painful involvement with people, is over. However, when she reaches home, Robin, quite drunk, is waiting for her.

To her amazement, she finds him immature, unfamiliar, and even boring. He has no meaning for her at all and she continually has to remind herself of her previous friendship with him. Their casual, remote conversation continues until Katherine sees that Robin has come on the off chance of making

love to her. She sees too that he has lost his youthful self-possession and is driven by something he fails to understand. Out of a sense of pity and understanding, and with a total lack of enthusiasm or ardour, she agrees to let him stay the night with her. Finally, they fall asleep, to the remorseless ticking of a watch. With the slow, ceaseless falling of the snow, the novel ends.

In A Girl In Winter Larkin carries further his technique of using interaction of landscape and character to enhance the meaning and emphasize the mood of his writing. In Jill this correspondence between nature and characters, while effective, is fragmentary; A Girl In Winter is closely unified by the skilful use of imagery of nature.

The opening pages of the novel describe a desolate portrayal of England in winter, a bitterly cold, barren scene in which life must nonetheless go on. Along the country-side the fallen snow, everywhere covering the ground, illuminates the dismal day, attempting to lighten the dark picture of the frost-assailed land.

... Indeed, without the snow the morning would have resembled a January nightfall, for what light there was seemed to rise up from it.

It lay in ditches and in hollows in the fields, where only birds walked. In some lanes the wind had swept it up faultlessly to the very tops of the hedges. Villages were cut off until gangs of

men could clear a passage on the roads; the labourers could not go out to work, and on the aerodromes near these villages all flying remained cancelled. People who lay ill in bed could see the shine off the ceilings of their rooms, and a puppy confronted with it for the first time howled and crept under the water-butt. The outhouses were roughly powdered down the windward side, the fences were half-submerged like breakwaters: the whole landscape was so white and still it might have been a formal painting. People were unwilling to get up. To look at the snow too long had a hypnotic effect, drawing away all power of concentration, and the cold seemed to cramp the bones, making work harder and unpleasant. Nevertheless, the candles had to be lit, and the ice in the jugs smashed, and the milk unfrozen; the men had to be given their breakfasts and got off to work in the yards. Life had to be carried on; in no matter what circumscribed way; ... 25

The snow in the country, despite being a part of the slowing down of life, adds a time of brightness. Through it run the railway lines, which finally converge in the cities, "where the snow was disregarded, and which the frost could only besiege for a few days, bitterly."<sup>26</sup> In one of these cities lies Katherine Lind.

Part II of the novel, the long flashback to Katherine's summer holiday in England, opens with a striking contrast to the first scene. It is summer, a time for living and growing, a time of peaceful fruition.

The morning when she came to England for the first time had been still and hot: not an accidental fine day, but one of a series that had already lasted a week. Each had seemed more flawless than

25. Ibid, p. 11,

26. Ibid, p. 12.

the one before it, as if in their slow gathering of depth and placidity they were progressing towards perfection. The sky was deep blue as if made richer by the endless recession of past summers: the sea smooth, and when a wave lifted the sun shone through it as through a transparent green window... 27

With the return to Katherine's present, the mood of winter is reaffirmed at once by a further description of the snow. In the city its country brightness and grace have given way to a drab brownness, which adds to the dinginess of the setting and to the feeling of desolation. The coldness of the winter landscape directly reflects the bleakness and aridity of Katherine's soul and the freezing of her emotions.

... It was not romantic or picturesque: the snow, that was graceful in the country, was days old in the town: it had been trodden to a brown powder and shovelled into the gutters. Where it had not been disturbed, on burnt-out buildings, on warehouse roofs or sheds in the railway yards, it made the scene more dingy and dispirited. ....28

In parts I and II of A Girl In Winter one always senses a dull expectancy, a feeling of hope that the total frigidity of the winter will dissolve. At the end of the novel the new snow finally does come and its arrival appears to symbolize some kind of release for Katherine. Her attempt

27. Ibid, p. 67.

28. Ibid, p. 177.

to go back to the happy life of the past has resulted in a tumultuous day and left her emotionally exhausted. Despite the awareness that she has failed to regenerate her withered sources of feeling, she does find peace. The circle has been completed.

As she lies in bed with Robin, the falling flakes of snow and the ticking of her watch intermingle, the sands of time sifting inexorably into place. Dreams and shadows of dreams glide slowly out of darkness into further darkness, with no presence of light. Although unfulfilled hopes continually rise and fall in protest against this steady passage, the very sense of order and destiny gives Katherine a not unhappy acceptance of her fate.

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. 29

In both novels we see many of the themes which later formed Larkin's principal preoccupations as a poet. The large underlying theme which runs through both novels and all the poetry is the suffering of the human being, particularly that person who is set off in some way from his fellow sufferers.

29. Ibid, p. 248.

At times there seems to be a decided vein of French existentialist thought in Larkin's novels. His concern is for "l'étranger", the alienated one. At the end of the respective novels, both John Kemp and Katherine Lind have the frame of mind of Camus's "l'homme absurde". The difference lies in their viewpoint as we first see them. John arrives (after a train of shattering events) at the conclusion that all the supposedly significant choices in one's life really have no meaning, that they eventually with the passage of time come to the same end. In Katherine's case, the traumatic moment of realization has already happened before the novel begins, with the destruction of her well ordered existence by war. She too has discovered that people have no meaning any longer. A Girl in Winter shows her attempt to deny this awful reality and her final acceptance of "l'absurdité". Larkin's characters are too passive to attempt, after acceptance, the life style of a Don Juan or a Meursault, but we can easily imagine Katherine Lind, like Sisyphus, rolling her stone burden to the top of the hill, and once it has fallen, painstakingly retrieving it to begin again and again.

Beside his preoccupation with the passage of time and the all-important significance of death, Larkin deals often with the contrast between reality and illusion, the way in which one's hopes and expectations never quite achieve the proportions they had taken in the mind. John Kemp had visualized his Oxford rooms as warm and cozy. He had visions of a studious sanctuary with fireplace holding forth against the cold outside.

Instead, his room is draughty and usually filled with drinking friends of Warner's. Katherine Lind has constructed a complete picture of Robin Fennel even before she gets to England. She assumes that her holiday will be filled with days of close contact with him. She dutifully falls in love with him, having convinced herself of his intent by reading meanings into his actions. When she sees the reality of the situation, the silliness of her own imaginings and dreams are revealed to her, for Robin is really a boring, pompous stuffed shirt with very little sensitivity.

Despite Larkin's deprecatory remarks about his novels, Anthony Thwaite once noted that Larkin's style in A Girl In Winter compared favorably with E. M. Forster at the time of writing of Howards End. However, whereas Forster's major concern is "personal relationships", Larkin rejects this idea completely. In fact, in his novels personal relationships are rarely attained and almost never brought to fruition. A Girl In Winter seems almost deliberately to give the lie (at least in Larkin's eyes) to the belief that people are vital and necessary and states emphatically that happiness based on people "in connection" cannot last. The two twentieth century novelists whom Larkin does resemble are, curiously enough, both female.

Elizabeth Bowen, one of the most distinguished of living British novelists, constantly uses (as does Larkin) description of landscape and setting to establish the mood of her characters or to symbolize their emotional situation.

In The Heat of the Day (1948) one of her main characters, Cousin Nettie, has retreated from the real world into a home for the mentally unstable. The house, appropriately named Wisteria Lodge, is covered with the pale purple shrub, which strikes an overly cheerful note of false joviality in the same manner as the owners of the Lodge attempt to preserve their "dear people" from the real world. (Even the name Wisteria suggests an existence based only on memories.) Cousin Nettie's total isolation from reality is set out in a short descriptive paragraph:

He had been looking past her, out of the window. A distance of fields, woods and diluted November sky did indeed stretch without any other feature: sky and earth at last exhaustedly met -- there was no impact, no mystery, no horizon, simply a nothing more. This was a window at the back of a house at the edge of a town; Roderick recollected that Cousin Nettie had not for years now looked out of any other. And years ago she must have ceased to look out of this, for today she sat with her back to it with finality. What she liked must be this extreme end of the room, light on her work or the unassailing sensation of having nothing but nothing behind her back. 30

The nothingness of this setting is representative of the nothingness of her life.

From time to time this correspondence of natural setting and human emotion also occurs in Miss Bowen's

30. Elizabeth Bowen, The Heat of the Day:  
(New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949).  
p. 230-231.

A World of Love (1955).. The emotional state of the young heroine, Jane Danby, is brought out in the passages about nature in a manner very similar to Larkin's use of natural imagery in emphasizing John Kemp's state of mind.

... Music followed her over the empty country as she bicycled home through the lanes between there and Montefort; dust wraithlike rose from under her wheels. Honeysuckle sweetened the deepening hedges, from beyond which breathed distances cool with hay. The land had not yet composed itself quite to sleep, for light was not gone and might never go from the sky. The air through which she was swiftly passing was mauve, and tense with suspended dew: her own beautiful restlessness was everywhere. 31

A World of Love brings out an even more striking resemblance between the two authors for it has the same structural pattern as A Girl in Winter. Larkin's novel uses the sterility of winter with its extreme cold and the slowing down of life processes to symbolize the emotional sterility of Katherine Lind. With the eventual coming of the snow at the end of the novel we sense a release and a fulfillment for her. Miss Bowen's novel takes place during a like period of weather, the sterility of drought and extreme heat. The summer heat begins the novel and rises in intensity as the days go by. It parallels the emotional development of nineteen-year-old

31. Elizabeth Bowen, A World of Love, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), p. 34.

Jane Danby (who, in her search for love, reminds one considerably of the schoolgirl Katherine Lind). In the final pages of the novel, the tense double build-up of rising emotion and over-powering heat is relieved by the coming of the rain. In the final sentence of the novel, Jane is released from the arid world of loneliness into a world of love: In both novels the unity of the work is achieved by the consistently developed imagery of nature.

In spite of the fact that Larkin's clear and precise style is quite different from the rather convoluted prose of Elizabeth Bowen, the two are alike in the air of acceptance and passivity which surrounds much of their writing. Both record carefully and sensitively acute observations of life. Miss Bowen's style though is nowhere as elegant as Larkin's. In her case the effort of recording exactly shows itself at times in the awkward structure of her often tortuous sentences. A short passage about the relationship of death and love from A World of Love serves to illustrate this point:

2... When of love there is not enough to go round, inevitably it is the dead who must go without: we tell ourselves that they do not depend on us, or that they have not our requirements. Their continuous dying while we live, their repeated deaths as each of us dies who knew them, are not in nature to be withstood. Obstinate rememberers

of the dead seem to queer themselves or show some signs of a malady; in part they come to share the dead's isolation, which it is not in their power to break down -- for the rest of us, so necessary is it to let the dead go that we expect they may be glad to be gone. Greatest of our denials to them is a part to play: it appears that they now cannot touch or alter whatever may be the existent scene -- not only are they not here to participate, but there would be disorder if they were here. Their being left behind in their own time-caused estrangement between them and us, who must live in ours. 32

One can deny neither the truth of these statements nor their perceptive nature. The slow and round-about working out of the thoughts involved, the doubling back of the mind onto itself, is almost made visible by the idiosyncratic syntax.

Larkin's use of language, on the other hand, is invariably clear and controlled, holding both the scene and the mood faultlessly. The descriptive passages from A Girl in Winter quoted above (see page 71), with its slowly sweeping sentences cataloguing the well chosen details, has the visual impact of a motion picture camera panning a scene with a wide angle lens. Even the complex descriptions of thought and inner feeling are clearly shown and beautifully organized.

She knew -- for such a break brings knowledge, but no additional strength -- that her old way of life was finished. In the past

she thought she had found happiness through the interplay of herself and other people. The most important thing had been to please them, to love them, to learn them so fully that their personalities were as distinct as the taste of different fruits. Now this brought happiness no longer: ... And what had replaced it? Here she was at a loss. She was not sure if anything had replaced it.

She was not sure if anything would replace it. 33

Rosamond Lehmann, who began her career as a novelist in the same year as Miss Bowen, frequently uses the theme of change and loss, the loss of innocence in particular, in her novels. Her first novel, Dusty Answer (1927), is like both Jill and A Girl in Winter in its depiction of a young idealistic girl who sees her enchanted childhood and its beautiful memories (real or fancied) fade into the harshness of real life. Dusty Answer is a better novel than either Jill or A Girl in Winter -- it certainly brings out a richer and more varied view of life. Unlike John Kemp, the heroine of Dusty Answer, Judith Earle, on her arrival at Cambridge establishes a strong relationship (bordering on the lesbian) with the most popular girl at school. However the ease with which her wildest dreams fulfill themselves serves only to heighten the tragedy of the eventual loss of her friend's love. Judith lives more in imagination than in reality, creating a world of desires rather than actualities, but at times she appears to realize the futility of her imaginings.

33. Philip Larkin, A Girl in Winter, (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), p. 183.

... Imagination at least had been fecund, it had fed itself: -- but the reality was as sterile as stone. 34

However, she forgets disappointments rapidly even though her existence is a catalogue of dreams smashed or tarnished. Her first love from childhood marries and is killed in war immediately after. Jennifer, her loved one at college, deserts her for an older woman. Another close friend, who had loved her even as a child, drowns and prevents her from taking up a relationship with still another childhood friend. And, finally, Roddy, the man whom she has loved and imagined as her husband for years (despite the fact that he is a shallow, bi-sexual playboy) tells her he loves her, seduces her, and then immediately discards her. Judith finally realizes the "dusty answer" inherent in life's expectations as she waits for the long-lost Jennifer (who has contacted her by letter). Jennifer does not keep the appointment. At the end of the novel Judith's conclusions parallel the final conclusions of John Kemp and Katherine Lind. Her state of mind is, like theirs, one of almost happiness, induced by passive acceptance.

She was rid at last of the weakness, the futile obsession of dependence on other people. She had nobody now except herself; and that was best.

This was to be happy -- this emptiness, this light uncoloured state, this no-thought and no-feeling. 35

34. Rosamond Lehmann, Dusty Answer, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1927), p. 66.

35. Ibid, p. 355.

The rapid passage of time towards death, the inadequacies and futilities of human actions, the breaking of dreams, the dying of love -- the cataloguing of these themes perhaps serve to provide ammunition for those who argue that Larkin's writings are a negation of human values. The pathetic nature of John Kemp, the spiritual barrenness of Katherine Lind may well defend the thesis that Larkin's characters are pallid nonentities who barely live throughout their short period of existence. But Larkin once said that the novelist's art is that of being interested in other people. Small people they may be, with trivial crises, petty defeats and insignificant triumphs, but their pain is very human and very real. Neither Jill nor A Girl in Winter is a great novel, but each treats a significant theme in a significant manner. Both convey a sense of the author's empathy for the suffering of the world and both do so in a clear and evocative style.

## THE LATER POEMS

The poetry of The Less Deceived (1955) shows marked development from the immature poems of The North Ship. Imitation of other poets is almost non-existent and a confident originality of expression stands out. The new method of working with material so evident in the last poem of The North Ship, "Waiting for breakfast", adds immeasurably to the later poems. This maturity of style seems to go hand in hand with the attitude the author has arrived at with regard to experience and life. The poems of The North Ship glittered occasionally with the exuberance and vitality of youth. Even its pessimism seems to be more an adolescent preoccupation with death rather than the bleakness of his later writing. The two novels show the inevitable loss of youthful innocence and the futility of any attempt to regain it: both Jill and A Girl in Winter emphasize that life has no meaningful pattern. Events occur and must be accepted. The poet of The Less Deceived writes from the vantage point of one who accepts the tragedy of human existence and who lives in "this unquickened world" with stoic resignation. This very acceptance of the uncertainty of life with all its contradictions, the refusal to be deceived as to what is in store for us and still to go on living a day-to-day existence, is in its own way a celebration of ordinary life which transcends its drabness. One may never be happy,

but one must live. In the shattered world of John Kemp, in the totally bleak world of Katherine Lind, and "the unquickened world" of The Less Deceived disillusionment and death are always present, but there is never a hint of suicide.

Larkin attributes the change in his poetic method to the influence of Thomas Hardy (see also page 36 above).

What Hardy taught Larkin was that a man's own life, its suddenly surfacing perceptions, its 'moments of vision', its most seemingly casual epiphanies (in the Joycean sense) could fit whole and without compromise into poems. There did not need to be any large-scale system of belief, any such circumambient framework as Yeats constructed within which to fashion his work: Larkin has dismissed all that as the 'myth-kitty'. Like Parolles in All's Well, he seems to say: 'Simply the thing I am shall make me live.' As Larkin himself put it in a radio programme on Hardy: 'When I came to Hardy it was with the sense of relief that I didn't have to try and jack myself up to a concept of poetry that lay outside my own life ... One could simply relapse back into one's own life and write from it.' "

This realization has led to a very introspective kind of poetry which, at its best, springs from a concrete experience but gains its force through a process of intellectualization. Larkin's poetry is indeed, in Wordsworth's terms,

1. Anthony Thwaite, "The Poetry of Philip Larkin", The Survival of Poetry, Martin Dodsworth (Ed.), (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 43.

"emotion recollected in tranquillity" and the process of remembering not only enlarges upon the initial experience, but helps remove the emotion one step from the purely personal. The mental working-out of the emotional response associated with the experience results in the creation of "a set of different tensions"<sup>2</sup> between the recorded event and emotional reaction to the event. The restraint and control resulting from the intellectual process is strengthened by the preciseness of language and tightness of metrical control found in many of his poems. "No Road", said by Alun Jones to be "one of the finest personal love poems" published in England since the war, is perhaps representative of Larkin's exceptional poetic technique, precise diction, and skill in image-making.

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#### NO ROAD

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.

Leaves drift unswept, perhaps; grass creeps unmown;  
 No other change.  
 So clear it stands, so little overgrown.

2. Philip Larkin, Letter to the writer, October 21, 1970.

Walking that way tonight would not seem strange,  
 And still would be allowed. A little longer,  
 And time will be the stronger,

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.

---

The poem springs from past experience, but the obvious depth of feeling is held in check and never allowed to become sentimental. The tone is one of resigned melancholy, suggesting the beauty of the relationship now ended. As C. B. Cox remarks, "the scene is precisely visualized, and the careful control of rhyme and rhythm gives a feeling of deliberate restraint; the mind is fully aware of its own emotions."<sup>3</sup> The measured rhythm of the lines adds to the overall feeling of sorrow and acceptance of sorrow; each line leads into the other with slow and measured beat which suggests the finality of the destruction of the relationship. The first sixteen lines of the poem read easily; the balanced phrases and occasional alliteration allow the sentences to proceed smoothly, if slowly. The final two lines of the poem, in which the poet admits that

3. C. B. Cox, "Philip Larkin", Critical Quarterly, Vol. 1, 1959, p. 16.

the parting was his responsibility, are deliberately awkward, as if the poet finds them hard to say. The internal rhyme (or near-rhyme) of the final lines stops the easy flow of words, as if emotion almost breaks through the tight control. The roughness of these culminating lines suggests at once the difficulty of the original decision and the poet's difficulty in admitting now that there is something wrong in his making the decision.

By using the image of the road as his basic metaphor, the poet suggests "the firmness and breadth of the intimacy they created together; but the picture of destructive nature reminds us that all that man builds, in his personal life as well as in material things, must pass into oblivion".<sup>4</sup> The extension of the road metaphor throughout each stanza also lends unity to the poem.

Larkin's vocabulary is usually simple and much concerned with precision of expression. The use of negatives to define the limits and shades of the world and the use of the prefixes "un", "in", "im", "dis", to record exact shades of response rather than a wider approximation is another hallmark of Larkin's poetry found in "No Road" ("unswépt", "unmown", "disuse").<sup>5</sup> The simplicity of language is often deceptive, however, because

4. Ibid., p. 17.

5. Anthony Thwaite, "The Poetry of Philip Larkin", *The Survival of Poetry*, Martin Dodsworth (Ed.), (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 52-53.

Larkin has a gift of using absolutely the right image, an image that often conveys multiple levels of connotation. That is

not to say Larkin presents turgid metaphors which can be interpreted in different ways -- one almost always knows what Larkin is talking about. Simple images are presented in such a way as to suggest a variety of responses, lucidly, concisely and economically. The last stanza of "No Road" is especially indicative of this. Nature is "Drafting a world where no such road will run". The word "Drafting" is evocative of surveying, a necessary first step in building any road. "Drafting" also suggests a world of carefully laid plans and measurements, a world in which instrumentation is ruler and in which emotion does not reside. That world is also "like a cold sun" since the warmth and affection of his previous relationship is missing. A "cold sun" suggests the exact opposite of what a sun normally stands for, a source of life. That the "cold sun" rewards others is also a precise literal image as well as a highly symbolic one. A winter sun must also be a summer sun for other parts of the globe. Even the choice of the word "will" to express his determination is an apt one, for a will is also, in another sense, an associate of death and "ailments", and, as it fulfills its function, also rewards others.

The utilization of imagery of nature in "No Road" is typical of many of the poems of The Less Deceived; of the

twenty-nine poems nearly two-thirds make some use of natural imagery. In several poems animals are symbolic representations of the fate of man. "Myxomatosis" describes a rabbit, dying of a virus, "caught in the centre of a soundless field". Like man it cannot comprehend why it is dying, and like him, it cannot alter its destiny. "Wires" is based on similar imagery. Young cattle, always in search of "purer water" are unaware that the "widest prairies" all have "electric fences". Once they attempt to venture beyond these "electric limits" however, the agony of the "muscle-shredding violence" they encounter transforms them into "old cattle from that day". In "Toads", that squat cold-blooded animal, "with its sickening poison" symbolizes both the drudgery of the average man's work and that deadness of personality which refuses to allow him to reject it. The impermanence of human achievement is emphasized by the image of the retired racehorses of "At Grass"; once famous holders of trophies and records now stand anonymously in the "cold shade". Birds, on the other hand, (possibly because they are not limited to the earth) usually represent unfettered happiness in its rare occurrence, and the singing of birds, joy.

While the animal inhabitants of nature symbolize what man is, nature itself often points out, by contrast, what man is not. The setting of "Spring" is a very happy one; "children finger the awakened grass", dogs bark, birds sing in the "most

gratuitous" of seasons. Into the midst of new life is then inserted the poet, "an indigestible sterility", unable to be absorbed into the shape of things. Man's insignificance and mortality stand out when contrasted with the ever-renewed ebb and flow of the sea. In "Absences" the formless, patternless movement of the waves and the shifting, tearing, constantly rebuilding clouds, allow no place for man.

In many instances Larkin's imagery deals with the day-to-day actions of the ordinary person. The poems of The Less Deceived spring from such diversities as idle perusal of a girl friend's photograph album, hanging around outside a dance-hall, travelling by boat or by train, wandering into a country church, and the birth of a child. Small details of personality take on added symbolic value. The carrying of luggage, changing of a girl's maiden name, or the aging of facial skin are transformed into evocative and lasting images.

Larkin's world is one of uncertainties, and its most obvious characteristics are impermanence and incoherence. Thus, for Larkin, poetry appears to be one means of attempting to preserve and fix to a degree the chaos of experience.

I write poems to preserve things I have seen /  
 thought / felt (if I may so indicate a composite  
 and complex experience) both for myself and for  
 others, though I feel that my prime responsibility  
 is to the experience itself, which I am trying to  
 keep from oblivion for its own sake. Why I should

do this I have no idea, but I think the impulse to preserve lies at the bottom of all art.<sup>6</sup>

The act of preservation implies that the past, the significant experience, is reproduced faithfully and without distortion: complete fidelity to the experience is absolutely necessary. This "bedrock honesty" which refuses to gloss over the often brutal reality of human life in all its sadness is the basis of Larkin's poetry. The concern for exact reproduction makes it abundantly clear that his occasional use of the analogy of the camera (the photographic image, so to speak) is no mere coincidence.

This mimetic relationship is shown most clearly in "Lines On A Young Lady's Photograph Album". The intention of the artist is to present "a real girl in a real place", unretouched and surrounded by the tawdry accoutrements of lower middle class society.

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

6. Philip Larkin, Poets of the 1950's, D. J. Enright (Editor), (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1955), p. 77.

But shows the cat as disinclined, and shades

A chin as doubled when it is, what grace

Your candour thus confers upon her face!

How overwhelmingly persuades

That this is a real girl in a real place.

The fidelity of the reproduction cannot be denied in its honesty, but at the same time the poet is compelled to assert, with a typical tough-minded awareness of the creative process, that simple photography is not art. Patricia Bell has pointed out that, through the double honesty of an act of creation and the intellectual scrutiny of the nature of that process, the photographic imitation of reality manages in its very opposition to art to convey the inner reality to the beholder. That is, the accuracy of the camera is the creative imagination's means to perception.<sup>7</sup>

As one reads on, however, it becomes increasingly clear that the photographs in themselves are not the cause of the emotion evoked. The experiences are so poignant because they are the past, and cannot complicate one's life any longer.

7. Patricia Bell, "The Photographic Art", Review of English Literature, Vol. 3, No. 2, 1962, p. 52-54.

(Here one is reminded very strongly of Poem XXX of The North Ship.)<sup>8</sup>

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

The significance of the experience as it happens fades, while the importance of the preservation of the past dominates in the poem's final and lasting image.

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

In "Whatever Happened?" Larkin shows that he realizes the dangers of a "photographic art". It can too easily degenerate into the act of mere copying and fail to be imitation in the true sense, even while the photographer is aware of his responsibility as an artist.

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

8. See page 34 above.

Yes, gone, thank God! Remembering each detail

We toss for half the night, but find next day

All's kodak-distant.

The poem opens with a dramatic and vital struggle -- it appears that a group of cruising tourists have been attacked and robbed by pimps while on shore at a port of call. That night each violent and savage detail is still clear even though the attack's being over meant its immediate recession. Next day however the details of the event on shore have faded and are "kodak-distant". The second half of the poem shows how rapidly the significant event does recede into the past.

... Easily, then, (though pale),

'Perspective brings significance,' we say,

Unhooding our photometers, and, snap!

What can't be printed can be thrown away.

The metaphor of the camera is a very effective one. The mechanical act of picture taking (or remembering) with its futile routine of light-readings, does not suffice to capture the reality of "whatever happened", for its true significance cannot be preserved, "can't be printed", and is discarded.

The once-vital happening remains only as vague stirrings of the subconscious mind.

---

Later, it's just a latitude: the map

Points out how unavoidable it was:

!Such constal bedding always means mishap!

Curses? The dark? Struggling? Where's the source

Of these yarns now (except in nightmares, of course)?

The difficulty of holding the significance of the past events so that they do not fade or change is also one of the themes of "At Grass". Preservation of past events is very uncertain for man's memory is a very faulty instrument. The famous horses of "At Grass" can hardly be distinguished from the surrounding trees even though only fifteen years ago they were the centre of attention in "Cups and Stakes and Handicaps" and

Two dozen distances sufficed

To fable them:

A vivid picture of their heyday is succinctly presented in the jumbled images of the third stanza, the glorious confusion of silks, both of the jockeys and of parasols, the contrast of the

empty cars and silence outside in the summer heat, all hanging  
suspended in the long cry of "They're off", rising in power  
only to fall finally into the racing sections of the newspapers.

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 essence of these "Classic Junes" has vanished for the  
horses since they

Have slipped their names, and stand at ease,  
Or gallop for what must be joy,

Strangely enough, the disappearance of their fame has not really  
affected them. On the contrary, they exult in their freedom  
because they have eluded the dominance of time. At their peak  
their fame depended on the time it took to circle a track; now  
they have shaken off the past memories "like flies", and time  
is no longer the focal point of their lives for

... not a field-glass sees them home,

Or curious stop-watch prophecies:

They will die eventually, of course. In the evening the groom, and the groom's boy, will come with their bridles but for the moment they are free.

Discarding of memories can release some from the tyrannies of time. For others the conscious act of remembering is a defense against the fluctuations of time, if the event to be remembered is of enough emotional significance to warrant its survival. The poem "Maiden Name" at once illustrates time's hold on man and man's ability to keep (on occasion) that which he cherishes. The "young beauty" the author knew can no longer be the same person who carried the "five light sounds" of her original name for it seems to be a useless phrase "applicable to no one", its survival in the present depending upon its inscription upon a few old letters and other memorabilia. Unlike the horses of "At Grass", however, this name is inlaid upon more enduring metal than that of challenge cups; it is inscribed upon the faithful heart. The poet asks:

Then is it scentless, weightless, strengthless, wholly  
Untruthful? Try whispering it slowly."

No, it means you. Or, since you're past and gone,

It means what we feel now about you then:

The girl's "old name" will never change, and so her beauty, closeness, and youth will be held, always vivid, always clear, untouched by time.

Such optimism concerning time, however, is rare. The ordinary man perceives his certain fate on occasion; Larkin (an ordinary man with a more acute sense of observation) is always aware of the passing of time, the change time brings about in the human condition and the inevitable end of time, death. Time and its effects are considered from many viewpoints and time plays a smaller or larger role in the subject matter of almost every poem. Larkin particularly writes about the ambiguity of time. In "Triple Time" he attempts to show how the three ages of man, the past, the present, and the future, are in reality interacting components of the time-space continuum viewed from varying vantage points and merely seem to be significantly different. The dull and sterile present has little to recommend it. It consists of emptiness and blankness, its sharpness slightly blurred by its air of non-reality. Nothing ever happens in the present.

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

Nonetheless it is, coincident with its present emptiness, the future toward which eager childhood looked with gusto and futile hopes. At one time the present moment seemed an endless vista of future promise.

But equally they make up something else:  
This is the future furthest childhood saw  
Between long houses, under travelling skies,  
Heard in contending bells --

An air lambent with adult enterprise,

Soon that future will exist only as the past. As the past the unremarkable present will appear to be a vital time of missed opportunities and "neglected chances" which are to us the cause of our present and inevitable decline. Our final perspectives barely exist.

And on another day will be the past,  
A valley cropped by fat neglected chances  
That we insensately forebore to fleece.  
On this we blame our last

Threadbare perspectives, seasonal decrease.

The multiple facets of time are one and vary only in the varying capacity of the human mind to deceive itself.

The period of youth is for Larkin the happiest age of man, at least while it is being lived, for it is a time of hope, and disillusionment has not yet set in. With the passing of time comes the bitter realization that life, with its apparent wide expanse of horizon, has nothing to offer but devastating experience. As with the young steers in "Wires", the search for "purer water" ends soon in the jolting agony of the "electric fence", which narrows their existence. Maturity, the realization of pain and sorrow, is thrust upon them and they become "old cattle", with "electric limits to their widest senses".

In "I Remember, I Remember", Larkin can view the emptiness and disappointment of youth almost with resignation. While travelling with a friend by train, the poet becomes aware that he is in the station at Coventry, the place of his birth. Despite having lived there for so many years, he has difficulty in visualizing the town and replies sharply to his friend's questions.

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

No, only where my childhood was unspent.

I wanted to retort ...

The question does trigger a whole series of things which never happened to the poet, neither the happy and imaginative days

in the garden, the ideal and understanding family with its picture book farm, the sexual adventures of adolescence, nor the fortunate discovering of his poetic abilities. Beneath the surface ridiculing of this kind of childhood, one feels the recurrent bitterness of disillusionment, a feeling of having been cheated and not even being sure what it is one has been cheated of. The depth of emotion is tempered somewhat by the realization that this nothingness is universal and not peculiar to his childhood.

'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.'

For the average man, the present is also a very dreary landscape, a devastated industrial wilderness presided over by the "toad work". The way of life of an individual is often a measure of his own futility and for many that way of life entails endurance of a routine job which absorbs so much of life's precious time. The poet detests the monotonous grind of "the toad work". That he must endure "its sickening poison" six days of the week for the rest of his life is monstrous to him. Why can't he live by his wits? -- So many

others have chucked their jobs, gone back to living off the land, scrounging an existence and somehow managing to survive.

Lots of folk live up lanes  
With fires in a bucket,  
Eat windfalls and tinned sardines --  
They seem to like it.

Their nippers have got bare feet,  
Their unspeakable wives  
Are skinny as whippets -- and yet  
No one actually starves.

He would like to shout to his employer "stuff your pension", but he knows he will never have the courage to take such a drastic step just as he knows he will never tell anyone to "stuff" anything. There lies within him a deadness of personality that cannot reject the deadly orderliness of his routine existence. The colloquial tone of the poem is placid and a bit wistful as if the conclusions have already been made, and the loud vulgarity of "stuff your pension" stands out. The futility and impossibility of the speaker's longing for freedom is made especially clear by Larkin's choosing words that the speaker would never use to anyone.

For something sufficiently toad-like  
Squats in me, too;  
Its hunkers are heavy as hard luck,  
And cold as snow.

---

And will never allow me to blarney  
My way to getting  
The fame and the girl and the money  
All at one sitting.

I don't say, one bodies the other  
One's spiritual truth;  
But I do say it's hard to lose either,  
When you have both.

This theme, the wish to reject the everyday drudgery  
of the world, is continued in "Poetry of Departures". One  
always wistfully considers the possibilities of "getting away  
from it all" and to hear such comments as

He chucked up everything  
And just cleared off

brings a flush of emotion similiar to the emotional impact of

---

violence or sex (one is reminded of John Kemp's reaction to similar experiences in Jill). The ordered perfection of one's chosen life carries with it a revulsion from such artificiality.

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:

The knowledge that he could choose the carefree, wandering life helps keep him "sober and industrious", preventing him from making the choice. Furthermore, he realizes that rejecting his artificial, created existence would be much the same as choosing the items of which it consists.

But I'd go today,

...

... if

It weren't so artificial,  
Such a deliberate step backwards  
To create an object:

---

Books; china; a life  
Reprehensibly perfect.

The barely veiled sarcasm in the lines

Yes, swagger the nut-strewn roads,

Crouch in the fo'c'sle

Stubbly with goodness, ...

shows the poet's attitude toward the kind of life celebrated by Masfield and Kipling. Such a life does not mean freedom; it merely creates its own set of limitations.

To avoid the unpleasant reality of the present, man solaces himself with dreams of the future. "Next, Please" says all that can be said of such dreams. The poem begins in a very abstract fashion, generalizing on the subject of human hopes and expectancy, how every day people deceive themselves by saying "Till then". The conceit introduced in the second stanza, "The sparkling armada of promises", is beautifully extended throughout the whole poem in a fashion reminiscent of the metaphysical poets.

Watching from a bluff the tiny, clear,

Sparkling armada of promises, draw near.

How slow they are! And how much time they waste,

Refusing to make haste!

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

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

The promises grow nearer and larger, they become more and more tantalizing, each detail distinct and seemingly ready to be had, but they never stop. Larkin cleverly manipulates his language to deal with both time and space. As each becomes "present", both in the sense of being "here" in a particular place and in the present time, it turns to past, in time and also in going by. The enormity of our mistaken belief that each "will heave to and unload / All good into our lives" is pointed out by the very concrete image of the last stanza. The continuation of the ship metaphor adds an overall unity to the poem and contributes a great deal to the final impact. The horrifying contrast (similar to and yet so different from all that has gone before) makes abundantly clear exactly which vessel we have been awaiting.

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.

Indeed, in "Wants" Larkin suggests that all of man's efforts to avoid the black ship of death are insincere, that man's fondest wish is for isolation and oblivion. Beneath man's gregarious instincts, beyond his desire for love, sex, and for family security, lies his real need -- to be alone.

Beyond all this, the wish to be alone:

However the sky grows dark with invitation-cards

However we follow the printed directions of sex

However the family is photographed under the flagstaff-

Beyond all this, the wish to be alone.

The second and last stanza hammers home this point by paralleling the structure of the first. Even though one buys insurance against death, even though lovers chart their most fertile time of the month to create new life, even though bereaved relations pay huge sums at funerals to disguise the face of death, man above all seeks oblivion.

Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs:

Despite the artful tensions of the calendar,

The life insurance, the tabled fertility rites,

The costly aversion of the eyes from death --

Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs.

In poem XI of The North Ship Larkin called on the stars to "quicken" this bleak world and, indeed, on occasion the "unquickened world" sparks into happiness. It must be noted, however, that happiness is just another incident in the random pattern of things, and a rare one, at that. Man can neither influence its coming, nor can he persuade it to stay. If, by chance, he is fortunate enough to know real happiness, he can only accept that just as he accepts the sorrow of his life. The beautiful poem, "Coming", comments on the irrational nature of happiness. The "deep bare garden", bathed in the "chill and yellow" light of the end of winter is suddenly amazed by the singing of a thrush.

A thrush sings,

Laurel-surrounded

In the deep bare garden,

Its fresh-peeled voice

Astonishing the brickwork.

The emptiness and the stolid lack of movement of the "deep bare garden" and "the brickwork" contrast starkly with the "fresh-peeled voice" of the harbinger of new life. That the unyielding wall is "astonished" at this turn of events makes the image all the more effective. The intensity of feeling generated by the bird's voice awakens happiness even in the poet, even though he is unable to understand why he should be happy. He knows only that this is out of the ordinary and responds like a child to its impact. He feels

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

Such happiness is, for Larkin, a sporadic and random turn of events. (Of the 29 poems in The Less Deceived only three have happiness as their theme.) In "Born Yesterday" (dedicated to Kingsley Amis' daughter, Sally) he explores further what happiness really is. The usual wishes bestowed on a new-born girl are in reality those which are rarely fulfilled. He wishes her something quite different.

Tightly-folded bud,  
I have wished you something  
None of the others would:  
Not the usual stuff  
About being beautiful;  
Or running off a spring  
Of innocence and love --  
They will all wish you that,  
And should it prove possible,  
Well, you're a lucky girl.

Like the unforeseen beauty of the "fresh-peeled voice" of  
the thrush, such gifts of happiness happen rarely. Usual  
happiness is centred in being ordinary, having

like other women,  
An average of talents:

Indeed, he wishes that she be dull --

If that is what a skilled,  
Vigilant, flexible,

Unemphasized, enthralled  
Catching of happiness is called.

He seems to say that by being dull she will never perceive the futility of reaching for happiness. The poet who is himself "less deceived" because he sees all too clearly what life really is, hints that one might be far happier if one were less observant. The poet is aware that most of our dreams are illusions, but this does not bring him happiness. After all, if one honestly thinks one is happy (and does not see otherwise), is this not happiness or at the very least, contentment?

The chance for happiness lies for most people in personal relationships. For some few, however, happiness lies in their denial of involvement with other people. The poet himself is bothered by this important question, the same question that occurs in the final poem of The North Ship. Will the pursuit of happiness through involvement with another destroy his talent for writing poetry? Several poems explore the choice the artist is forced to make. "Reasons for Attendance" begins by portraying the poet as an outsider who, having heard the trumpet call of the music, looks somewhat wistfully through the lighted glass at the happiness of the dancing couples. As he watches, his tone changes.

Why be out here?

But then, why be in there? Sex, yes, but what

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

Inaccuracy, as far as I'm concerned.

~~His~~ call is a different music, "that lifted, rough-tongued  
bell /(Art, if you like)" whose clarion sound asserts that  
he too is an individual and that each individual must choose  
for himself. There are no general truths to be applied to  
happiness. The real danger lies in self-deception about the  
rightness of one's individual decisions.

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

The apparent positivity of the author's reaction, so evident  
in his choice of words describing the happy couples ("maul to  
and fro") is weakened by the last two words. This nagging  
uncertainty, that small question mark, appears again and again  
after one has made one's choice.

The "I" of "Places, Loved Ones" looks back in such  
a state of uncertainty. In the first stanza his tone is almost  
sarcastic as he asserts that he has never found his "proper  
ground" on which to live,

Nor met that special one  
 Who has an instant claim  
 On everything I own  
 Down to my name;

To want such is, he claims, a refusal of one's right  
 to choose "where / To build, or whom to love". One hopes to  
 be smitten by love because emotion removes the need, and the  
 responsibility for, choice.

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

The last stanza, however, reveals that, having missed love  
 and chosen his future, he is still not satisfied. The best  
 course of action then is to lie to oneself and to pretend  
 satisfaction,

to act  
 As if what you settled for  
 Mashed you, in fact;

And wiser to keep away  
 From thinking you still might trace  
 Uncalled-for to this day  
 Your person, your place.

The last lines of "No Road" suggest that perhaps there is something wrong with the personality which denies personal involvement. Some suggestion of what the "ailment" may be is given in "If, My Darling". The poet's constant realization and awareness of the ugliness of life prevents him from even partaking in the act of love. He remarks that if his darling were to really get inside his mind, and not stop at his eyes, she would not find, like Alice, a wonderland. She would discover instead the sickness of the inner person who is always certain of disappointment and sure of betrayal. Every image is a repulsive one, either of germs, infection or brutally damaged perfection.

She would find herself looped with the creep of varying  
 light,

Monkey-brown, fish-grey, a string of infected circles  
 Loitering like bullies, about to coagulate;

Delusions that shrink to the size of a woman's glove  
 Then sicken inclusively outwards. She would also remark

The unwholesome floor, as it might be the skin of a grave,

From which ascends an adhesive sense of betrayal,

A Grecian statue kicked in the privates,

The girl would be, above all, "stopping her ears" against the "incessant recital" of the cold realities of living, particularly the "skirl" of the bag-pipes of time. Such a revelation, hearing how

... the past is past and the future neuter

Might knock my darling off her unpriceable pivot.

So great is human desire for love that some feel impelled to take by force the fulfilment they cannot achieve in normal relationships. "Deceptions", (the poem was originally entitled "The Less Deceived" before Larkin gave that name to the whole volume) is a rare poem charged with a depth of emotion seldom found or so poignantly restrained in expression. Its subject is the fate of a young girl of whom Larkin evidently read in Mayhew's London Labour and the London Poor. She had been drugged and raped. The passing years have done nothing to dispel the grief the poet feels. He skilfully transposes the

drug she is forced to drink into a symbol of the sadness of her fate.

Even so distant, I can taste the grief,  
Bitter and sharp with stalks, he made you gulp.

The bright sun, the usual activity of "bridal London" which "bows the other way", makes her violation into a tragic parody of a wedding night. Ironically then, the "light, unanswerable and tall and wide" refuses her the consolation of forgetting, refusing to pass into night. Her wrong is exposed, her grief is sharp and metallic.

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

Small consolation can be given the girl, but the poet knows that her deception, cruel as it was, is far less than the self-deception of the man who has taken her virginity. The explicit sexual metaphor of the final two lines is indication enough that such wanton gratification is futile and empty.

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

A vivid contrast to the sorrow and emptiness of "Deceptions" is the total fulfilment in love found in "Wedding-Wind", Larkin's only poem of pure joy. A newly married woman rejoices in the unbelievable happiness of her love, and her only sadness is that the whole universe cannot share what she has.

... I was sad  
That any man or beast that night should lack  
The happiness I had.

As her wedding night, "the night of the high wind", passes into the morning of the following day ordinary actions, the feeding of the chickens, the washing of aprons and clothes, return. Yet the wind persists, indeed "All is the wind", so that she muses on "this bodying forth by wind / Of joy". Her conclusions are that nothing, not even death, will take away such ecstasy.

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?

Even with the sureness of love, however, it must be noted that such an explicit denial of death is nonetheless couched in the form of a question.

What will certainly survive of humanity is embodied in the poem generally recognized as one of Larkin's best, "Church-Going". This is a poem about religion, about a church, but it is not a religious poem (at least, in the usual sense). Larkin sees the place of worship as a focal point of all that has meaning in human experience.

"Church-Going" begins by portraying the "I" of the poem as a sceptical, rather flippant type who stops to look inside the church for want of something better to do. Despite the stance of "awkward reverence" he falls into almost automatically (probably because of the building's unmistakable churchly attributes), his attitude is one of disrespectful scepticism. Having mounted the lectern, he briefly parodies the minister, and back at the door, donates an Irish sixpence (worthless in England, of course), reflecting "the place was not worth stopping for". Abruptly the tone of the poem changes and becomes a dialectic, a debate between the sniggering agnostic and that part of his personality which recognizes that he did stop and wonders why he did, as he has done before. He wonders if the church, as it completely falls out of use, will become an object of superstition.

Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?

Or, after dark, will dubious women come

To make their children touch a particular stone;

Soon all mysticism about the building will vanish, for "superstition, like belief, must die", as its original purpose becomes still more obscured in time. The poet adds contemptuously, will the last person to seek the church for what it was be a "ruin-bibber" or "Christmas-addict", entombing the dead building in his files. Or, on the other hand, will he be like the poet, "bored, uninformed", but somehow being drawn to the church, not because of any religious significance (in the 'narrow' sense), but because it once represented the union of the important stages of human life -- birth, marriage, and death. Buried beneath the lack of faith and modern scepticism, some desire in man to be more than he is will stir and seek out this place which once "held unspilt/So long" all that human life has to offer.

A serious house on serious earth it is,  
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,  
Are recognised, and robed as destinies.  
And that much never can be obsolete,  
Since someone will forever be surprising  
A hunger in himself to be more serious,

And gravitating with it to this ground,  
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,  
If only that so many dead lie round.

The Less Deceived is unquestionably a very pessimistic volume. Its world is rarely quickened. Sorrow is usual, joy comes seldom, and both are part of the random pattern of life that man cannot influence. Nonetheless, one always senses that Larkin feels not only compassion for man's suffering, but also confidence that something of man will not only survive but also overcome (perhaps by the very fact of its survival) the hostility of the environment into which he is thrust.

## II

Philip Larkin's second major volume of poetry, The Whitsun Weddings, was published some nine years (1964) after The Less Deceived, but there are no really pronounced developments of style or theme. The poetry of The Whitsun Weddings is cool and ironic in tone, beautifully restrained in portrayal of emotion and preoccupied with honest reproduction of the significant experience. Larkin has lost none of his gift of using the right image to suggest a variety of response; in fact, the later volume seems to have even more poetically dense

lines than The Less Deceived. A splendid example of such image-making is described by John Wain. He quotes five lines from "An Arundel Tomb", one of the major poems of The Whitsun Weddings.

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,

'Snow fell undated' is a shorthand way of saying something that would normally take half a page. 'A bright Litter of birdcalls strewed the same Bone-riddled ground' conveys with similar economy the changing and yet immutable quality of casual, unorganized life, the life of 'nature'; the bones lie in the churchyard and as the centuries go by they distribute themselves unevenly, among the stones and the roots, so that they are not tidily arranged, as they once were, but 'riddled', as if tossed haphazard here and there. The birds, who come and go, similarly represent this haphazard way that nature has; their bright calls -- 'bright' because cheerful, because unreflective, because associated with daylight and the life that goes on above ground among the unquenchably living -- are simply dropped like litter. And between the bird-calls and the bones, aware of both and showing something of the nature of both, are the people, the endless altered people, with their linked human lives, beginning out of sight in the past and leading on out of sight into the future. 9

9. John Wain, "Engagement or Withdrawal?: Some Notes on the Work of Philip Larkin", Critical Quarterly, Vol. VI, 1964, p. 167-68.

This poetic density, the ability to use language with multiple layers of connotation and denotation, often transcends the apparent ordinariness of Larkin's subjects and the simplicity of their presentation. "As Bad as a Mile" for example, is a mere six lines about a missed throw at a waste basket. Somehow, the badly aimed apple core is transformed into a highly evocative symbol of the whole of life which, once seen to fail, is known to be predestined to failure.

Watching the shied core  
Striking the basket, skidding across the floor,  
Shows less and less of luck, and more and more

Of failure spreading back up the arm  
Earlier and earlier, the unraised hand calm,  
The apple unbitten in the palm.

The image shown is a striking one and is presented in a unique manner. Not only is the picture held and fixed; it is run backward like a motion picture film. The author becomes the director (or critic) re-running a vital segment to note its effect. The element of luck (in youth one always hopes to be "lucky") disappears as failure, like a disease, spreads to envelop even the past, blighting the

optimistic image of the whole apple, untouched, ready to be consumed with delight. Delight, however, is a rarity in "the unquicken world" for most of us are fated to fail. The spreading gloom of ultimate failure (death) has always been man's end result, since Adam and Eve ate of the apple in the Garden of Eden, and were expelled from eternal happiness. Few poets would be able to express the concept of predestination with such universal implication in such an original and economical way.

Thematically also, The Whitsun Weddings is very much like The Less Deceived. There are some minor differences, Love and personal relationships are the concerns expressed in eleven of the thirty-two poems of the later volume. Besides the greater emphasis on this theme, the poems in The Whitsun Weddings seem to be more specifically English than those of the earlier collection and there are more comments on England itself. Generally though, the poems of The Whitsun Weddings re-emphasize the established poetic personality of the author or add another facet to that which has gone before.

According to Alun Jones, the poetry of Philip Larkin defines the mood of post-war England with great sensitivity.<sup>10</sup> Jones comments on the difference between American and English

10. In his article, Jones was referring to the poetry of The Less Deceived. I think, however, that his remarks can be expanded to include The Whitsun Weddings also without distortion.

poets of that era. He refers in particular to The Modern Poets, A Critical Introduction; (Oxford University Press: New York, 1960) by M. L. Rosenthal, and notes:

Mr. Rosenthal's nostalgic hope that the poets of the 1950's can maintain the "tragic and revolutionary perspectives" of the pre-war generation is bound to be disappointed, particularly in a country and by a generation who themselves experienced the squalid and brutal catastrophe that such perspectives engender. Mr. Rosenthal could hardly have expected a generation of English poets who were brought up during wartime to have much patience with heroic gestures. 11

Larkin himself seems to believe that the age of patriotic gestures and the "heroic bang" came to an end even before World War II, with the beginning of the Great War. In the poem "MCMXIV" he points out that 1914 marked the end of innocence for England, that with the coming of global war she must enter into a harsh world of experience just as John Kemp, the young hero of Jill, must leave his youth behind. The "long uneven lines" of men waiting to join the armed forces grin "as if it were all / An August Bank Holiday lark". The children, ironically named, with all due patriotism, "after kings and queens" are equally as unaware of the horrors

11. Alun R. Jones, "The Poetry of Philip Larkin: A Note on Transatlantic Culture", Western Humanities Review, XVI, No. 2, Spring, 1962, p. 45.

to come as the ageless country-side with its boundaries marked  
out in the time of William the Conqueror,

... fields

Shadowing Domesday lines

Under wheat's restless silence.

The last stanza comments on the transitory nature of such  
innocent joy

Never such innocence,

Never before or since,

As changed itself to past

Without a word -- the men

Leaving the gardens tidy,

The thousands of marriages

Lasting a little while longer:

Never such innocence again.

The young men who marched so gaily off to war are quite capable  
of the "heroic gesture" at this stage of their lives. For  
many however, a new awareness of the resounding falsehood of  
"the old lie" (so aptly illustrated by Wilfred Owen in "Dulce  
et Decorum Est") will cause irrevocable change in their beliefs.

The rhythm of the first two lines of the stanza seems to parody (perhaps unconsciously) two lines of another old lie:

Theirs not to reason why,  
Theirs but to do and die.

"MCMXIV" shows the prewar era rather nostalgically as one of naive and child-like innocence; "Naturally the Foundation Will Bear Your Expenses" begins by portraying patriotic feeling as somewhat vulgar childishness. In this poem (which has sometimes been mistakenly referred to as a bad attempt at light verse) Larkin seems at first to be satirizing the Armistice Day celebrations and the crowds who still think such a celebration meaningful. In order to poke fun at these "mawkish nursery games" played by the English middle classes he assumes the persona of a professor going abroad to lecture in India. The professor, who is presumably above such displays of patriotic fervour, leaves no doubt about his attitudes. He says

Yet not till I was airborne  
Did I recall the date --  
That day when Queen and Minister  
And Band of Guards and all  
Still act their solemn-sinister  
Wreath-rubbish in Whitehall.

He reiterates his feelings of superiority as he rises over all this in the commercial aircraft and flies towards his destination.

It used to make me throw up,  
 These mawkish nursery games;  
 O when will England grow up?  
 -- But I outsoar the Thames,  
 And dwindle off down Auster  
 To greet Professor Lal  
 (He once met Morgan Forster),  
 My contact and my pal.

Larkin's satire, however, is two-edged. The supercilious tone of the speaker condemns himself as surely as he condemns the Armistice Day crowds. Larkin says of the poem:

Actually, it's as serious as anything I've written ... Certainly it was a dig at the middleman who gives a lot of talks to America and then brushes them up and does them on the Third and then brushes them up again and puts them out as a book with Chatto. 12

The final lines of the poem clearly illustrate Larkin's dislike for such pretentious people and one suddenly realizes that

12. Philip Larkin, "Four Conversations: Ian Hamilton", London Magazine, Vol. 4, no. 8, p. 74.

the poet's sympathies are after all with the masses of common people celebrating a belief. Their belief may be vaguely childish but it at least is an act of genuine feeling. Though these people will never again march blithely off to war as they did before "MCMXIV", they nonetheless honour those who could sacrifice themselves with such definite belief. The poet allows the professor to speak in this manner so that he can condemn himself, much as Browning allows the Duke to speak in "My Last Duchess".

Larkin's poem is a magnificent growl of rejection, a voice from the 'other' England, which, between the cynicism of Fleet Street, the vulgarities of the glossies, and the metropolitanism of the clever weekly Press, seldom gets a hearing. Professor Lal, who makes it the mainstay of his career that he once met E. M. Forster, so easily known here by his Christian name, is a type one meets everywhere in the world of international 'culture'; the middleman of high intellectual fashion, catching jet 'planes from Berkeley to Bombay with his rapidly assembled lecture-notes in his briefcase, exists by virtue of the network of Professor Lals; and what the poem is saying (tacitly but very strongly) is that the real work of civilization is going on elsewhere if it is going on at all. 13

Larkin's poetry is often critical of middle-class England and its values, but he rarely leaves his country for any reason. In "The Importance of Elsewhere" he develops the paradoxical theme that one's own land is more difficult

13. John Wain, "Engagement or Withdrawal?: Some Notes on the Work of Philip Larkin", Critical Quarterly, Volume 6, 1964, p. 172.

to exist meaningfully in, but for that selfsame reason one is required to live in it. In the first stanza he remarks how the fundamental loneliness which is indigenous to man is lessened by the more obvious strangeness of different speech and surroundings. The very alienness of these things creates its own significant patterns.

Lonely in Ireland, since it was not home,  
 Strangeness made sense. "The salt rebuff of speech,  
 Insisting so on difference, made me welcome:  
 Once that was recognised, we were in touch.

All the ways in which Ireland is different from England, the "draughty streets, end-on to hills", "the faint / Archaic smell of dockland", the "herring-hawker's cry", are all ingredients in a way of life which go to suggest the poet "separate, not unworkable". England offers Larkin no such security, no such reason for being. The knowledge that his own customs, his own traditions offer such negative values means that in England a more strenuous resistance must be put forth on his part to combat this statement of his nothingness. This negation of the individual human existence must be denied by the simple fact of his living. The alienation felt while one is abroad is not serious because

one has a country to which to return. The author has no such security when the sense of alienation and loneliness strikes him at home in England.

Living in England has no such excuse:  
 These are my customs and establishments  
 It would be much more serious to refuse.  
 Here no elsewhere underwrites my existence.

The "here" of the last line is further delineated in the descriptive poem "Here" which talks of the part of England Larkin lives in. It is "a superb topographical poem about the North-East coastal area and Hull in particular. The topographical is a minor genre, yet in fact a 'poem about a place' can succeed, as "Grongar Hill" succeeded in 1726, in establishing the mood of a whole nation at a given time". 14

The landscape described in the poem is very vividly pictured, at once a world which fences in our lives and at the same time holds the promise of "unfenced existence" just "out of reach". The poet's point-of-view is, in this case, that of the cool, detached observer who seems to be surveying the passing scene from the windows of a railway carriage. His gaze sweeps from the busy and prosperous "industrial shadow" of the north to the bare fields ("Too thin and thistled to be called meadows") of the east. These in turn give way to the

farmlands and the "shining, gull-marked mud" of the river which "Gathers to the surprise of a large town".

The people of the area are as sharply depicted as the landscape. They are ordinary human beings; "A cut-price crowd", concerned only with achieving the materialistic aims of day-to-day existence. They

Push through plate-glass swing doors to their desires --  
 Cheap suits, red kitchen-ware, sharp shoes, iced lollies,  
 Electric mixers, toasters, washers, driers --

The great majority of the population will never see any other values but those of the bargain basement sales. They will live their lives dawdling / Where only salesmen and relations come". For some few people, though, realization of man's basic loneliness gives an added dimension to life. Their ideal existence is far away from cities, away from the conveniences and luxuries of the urban way of life, in

Isolate villages, where removed lives  
 Loneliness clarifies.

Larkin implies that here is the real goal of life, a goal which may be virtually unattainable.

Here is unfenced existence:

Facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach.

Indeed, the people of "Here" would perhaps find such a goal not so much unattainable as unrecognizable. They are real people, average working men, who seldom have enough money, whose major source of entertainment is having a few pints on Saturday night, and whose lives are pathetically barren and narrow. The only redeeming feature of such people's lives is that, unlike the poet, they rarely see what is lacking in them. "Take One Home for the Kiddies" is simultaneously a bitter comment about the insensitivity of people who buy their children small animals as toys and how these people fail to relate the fate of the animal to their own destiny. It is not hard to imagine the background of this poem: the harassed mother wandering the aisles of the basement department store, trailed by sniveling children who touch and demand, arrives at the pet section of the store.

On shallow straw, in shadeless glass,

Huddled by empty bowls, they sleep:

No dark, no dam, no earth, no grass --

Mam. get us one of them to keep.

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

The mother probably never notices that the children have killed their pet (or allowed it to die). She will also never see that the comfortless glass cages of the department store are her abode; the shoebox her fast-approaching resting place.

Imagery associated with the big department store, the centre of all material desires, occurs frequently in the poetry of The Whitsun Weddings. The central symbol of "Essential Beauty" is the large advertising billboard which rises majestically over the darkness and cold reality of ordinary life. For the people of "the unquickened world" these larger than life advertisements, showing "how life should be", seem to represent the ideal, the Platonic ultimate in Truth and Beauty. The gigantic symbols of perfection loom high over "the rained-on streets and squares / They dominate outdoors." They

Screen graves with eustard, cover slums with praise  
 Of motor-oil and cuts of salmon ...

The terrible contrast between life as we would want it and as it really exists is made abundantly clear in the last lines of

the poem. The "live imperfect eyes" of the lower middle classes seek desperately for the magic ingredient which will restore things as good as new or wash them perfectly clean. They long to drink in the "dark-raftered pubs", rubbing elbows with "white-clothed ones from tennis clubs". Unfortunately, "the boy puking his heart out in the Gents", the pensioner who "paid / A halfpenny more for Granny Graveclothes' Tea / To taste old age" (the pun is extremely ironic), the "dying smokers" (who have probably chosen their favorite brand from the advertisements) can never attain these desires. All they get is a darkly perceived glimpse of their own imperfection and mortality in relation to the ideal --

... that unfocused she,

...

Who now stands newly clear,

Smiling, and recognising, and going dark.

In The Whitsun Weddings Larkin develops more fully the basic theme of The Less Deceived -- the effect of time on man's hopes and achievements. Experience always reveals the large gap between the expectancy of youth and the harshness of reality. In age the poet lashes back at youth violently because it did hold out these false promises. The illusions for some are

epitomized in fiction, a longing to emulate the heroes of popular novels. The young "I" of "A Study of Reading Habits" at first identifies with the intrepid heroes of the pocket thriller.

It was worth ruining my eyes  
To know I could still keep cool,  
And deal out the old right hook  
To dirty dogs twice my size.

In adolescence he progresses to being the dark Gothic master of woman.

Evil was just my lark:  
Me and my cloak and fangs  
Had ripping times in the dark.

The last stanza reveals the emptiness of wanting. The tone of the poem changes from the mocking, half-joking voice of the boy who had "ripping" times with his fangs and cloak to the bitter and coarse comments of the man who refuses to read.

Don't read much now: the dude  
Who lets the girl down before  
The hero arrives, the chap  
Who's yellow and keeps the store,

Seem far too familiar. Get stewed:

Books are a load of crap.

The reasons for his refusal to read are obvious. The characters seem "far too familiar" because they are the failures of real life and there can be no happy ending.

The frustration and bitterness of the speaker is emphasized by his choice of words. The sudden vulgarity of "Get stewed: / Books are a load of crap" is carefully calculated for effect. (The contrast between it and the low-keyed colloquialisms of the rest of the poem makes the exclamation all the more striking.) Larkin's poems are often written as if seen through the eyes of a middle class man who suddenly realizes a shocking truth about his way of life. The youth of "A Study of Reading Habits" has become aware of the illusory nature of the world of fiction (and its implications for real life) and he blurts out his disillusionment in his own language. He is rejecting literature (since it epitomizes the fictional nature of one's dreams) both in what he says and the manner in which he says it.

Paradoxically, the greatest source of disillusionment and disappointment in youth is the attempt to see beyond dreams and illusions. One can put aside the wants of youth in order to seek the truth. In "Send No Money", knowing that

truth and desires are inimical, earnest youth asks of Time  
 "Teach me the way things go". At first the boy is grateful  
 for Time's answer:

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

With age comes the knowledge that awareness of the truth is  
 useless and also the regret that this revelation comes too  
 late, when youth has been wasted. The totality of bleakness  
 and despair is rammed home by one of Larkin's most striking  
 and terrible images, that of "the bestial visor", horrible  
 and shapeless symbol of despair, (which is, of course, his  
 own face).

Half life is over now,  
 And I meet full face on dark mornings  
 The bestial visor, bent in  
 By blows of what happened to happen.  
 What does it prove? Sod all.  
 In this way I spent youth,  
 Tracing the trite untransferable  
 Truss-advertisement, truth.

The random pattern of the universe is reaffirmed. Events cannot be influenced by man's awareness.

The poems dealing with the present time can be divided into two wide categories, the general and the particular. Some (like "Here" and "Essential Beauty") refer to the lives of the working people as a class; others illustrate the nothingness of the present by specific reference to individual lives. How many people are there who exist like the central figure of, "Mr. Bleaney", living out their sordid little lives in "one hired box" (again one gets the wryly ironic double meaning) whose drabness reflects the inner nature of its inhabitant? The poet has rented a small, shabby room once occupied by a Mr. Bleaney whose trivial preferences and petty pleasures are incessantly recounted to him by his landlady. His limited and dreary existence makes him feel a sense of kinship (but no liking) for his predecessor -- he knows their fates are the same. His only question is whether Mr. Bleaney ever realized the depth of his isolation.

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

That how we live measures our own nature,  
And at his age having no more to show

Than one hired box should make him pretty sure  
 He warranted no better, I don't know.

"Toads Revisited" extends this theme of the dreariness of most people's existence, but shows a slightly different aspect of the tedious world of "Toads". Indeed, in this poem he reveals that he needs the pattern of an ordered (if dull) life and that he needs work in particular, despising those who are "All dodging the toad work" through stupidity or weakness. Work is, for the ordinary man, unstinting dreariness, but it helps fill the void of existence. The everyday act does not quite have the spiritual significance of the ragged old men shoveling snow pictured in Poem XX of The North Ship, but it is closely akin to it.

Give me your arm, old toad;  
 Help me down Cemetery Road.

Perhaps the most graphic revelation of the havoc time, change and decay wreak upon our dreams and illusions occurs in "Sunny Prestatyn". As in "Essential Beauty" the billboard or poster image is used to suggest the ideal one strives to attain. Even as one struggles toward unreachable perfection, it changes, loses its gloss and is gone. The poster shows a beautiful laughing girl in a white bathing suit exhorting all who look to "Come

to Sunny Prestatyn".

Come to Sunny Prestatyn

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

However, in a few weeks this symbol of purity and beauty is defaced almost beyond recognition, and, soon after, is torn down and replaced by Fight Cancer. The crudity of the girl's defacement is "emphasized by an equivalent crudity in Larkin's language"<sup>15</sup> and the final image is a reminder that our world is one of disease and mortality.

She was slapped up one day in March.

A couple of weeks, and her face  
Was snaggle-toothed and boss-eyed;  
Huge tits and a fissured crotch  
Were scored well in, and the space

15. P. G. Gardner, "The Wintry Drum: The Poetry of Philip Larkin", Dalhousie Review, Vol. 48, No. 1, 1968, p. 94.

Between her legs held scrawls  
 That set her fairly astride  
 A tuberous cock and balls

Autographed Titch-Thomas, while  
 Someone had used a knife  
 Or something to stab right through  
 The moustached lips of her smile.  
 She was too good for this life.  
 Very soon, a great transverse tear  
 Left only a hand and some blue.  
 Now Fight Cancer is there.

Across the fluctuation of life tyrannized by time  
 extends one universal, one constant factor. This universal  
 is music, or, more particularly for Larkin, jazz. It aids  
 the memory in reaching back through the changes brought about  
 by time and solidifies experience. It is a reference point  
 in an otherwise unstable universe. As the middle-aged woman  
 of "Love Songs in Age" discovers, the remembering of old love  
 songs brings back youth for one instant. For a brief moment  
 she relives the ecstasy of being young and in love.

Relearning how each frank submissive chord

Had ushered in

Word after sprawling hyphenated word,

And the unfailing sense of being young  
 Spread out like a spring-woken tree ...  
 ... But, even more,

The glare of that much-mentioned brilliance, love,  
 Broke out, to show  
 Its bright incipience sailing above,  
 Still promising to solve, and satisfy,  
 And set unchangeably in order.

Music, however, does not awake pleasant recollections only. It brings back the past as it actually was, not as one would have liked it to be. Neither the bright promise of life nor the awakened sense of youth (so beautifully described by Larkin) can erase the actual fact that love had not then set her life "unchangeably in order" and that it cannot do so now.

This ability of music to bridge the gaps between times is also depicted in "Reference Back". Music can even on occasion immortalize a trivial experience. The young man of the poem is doing nothing except "wasting his time", idly playing jazz records. His mother is struck by one of them and remarks on it.

That was a pretty one, I heard you call  
 From the unsatisfactory hall  
 To the unsatisfactory room where I  
 Played record after record, idly,

Wasting my time at home, that you  
Looked so much forward to.

The passing comment, so meaninglessly inserted into the dreariness of the present, suddenly takes on importance. The music (so different from man) becomes a bridge for him between the triple aspects of time -- the past, present and future.

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

Music can reach across gaps of space as well as time. "Broadcast", a very unusual love poem, shows how music can link two lovers who are apart. The girl, "beautiful and devout" before the "monumental slithering" of the orchestra is joined to her absent admirer by the radio broadcast of the concert. Their separation may not --- one suspects from the final image ---

be a temporary one. As the man imagines the darkening of the auditorium the only image remaining is one of despair and loss. He says

Here it goes quickly dark. I lose  
All but the outline of the still and withering  
Leaves on half-emptied trees.

The most positive portrayal of the universal power of music occurs in "For Sidney Bechet". The rising note of the great horn player holds in it all things for all people. The peculiar quavering shrillness of the high note of the trumpet is embodied in the very effective simile of the second line.

That note you hold, narrowing and rising, shakes  
Like New Orleans reflected on the water,  
And in all ears appropriate falsehood wakes

For many people jazz creates an alternative to "this unquickened world" (just as books did for the boy of "A Study of Reading Habits"). These worlds are, of course, no more substantial than the shimmering reflection of New Orleans mirrored in the

water.

Oh, play that thing! Mute glorious Storyvilles  
Others may license, grouping round their chairs  
Sporting-house girls like circus tigers (priced

Far above rubies), to pretend their fads,  
While scholars manqués nod around unnoticed  
Wrapped up in personnels like old plaids.

The comic similes of circus tigers and old plaids have the kind of vigilant accuracy that one expects from Larkin. The youthful (or not so youthful) trad fan who loses himself in a dream of the old Jelly Roll days, when jazz was squarely equated with booze, gambling and -- above all -- prostitution, is apt to romanticize the red light districts which marked the New Orleans of la belle époque and to shake his head over their closing down by the U. S. military authorities in 1917. The image of circus tigers, perched on stools and uneasily obedient to the masculine power of their trainer, captures the whole of this feeling without spilling a drop, and at the same time comments on it. So with the unpaid researchers who chase Freddy Keppard or Omer Simeon through the labyrinth of long-forgotten recording sessions. 'Old plaids' go with a quaint pride of ancestry; they symbolize the wearer's sense of belonging to a clan that has no place among the realities of modern social organization; they go with pre-industrial Garden of Eden, which this poem comprehends but finally declines to share.<sup>16</sup>

Larkin realizes as always the imperfections of our society but he refuses to create an unreal<sup>v</sup> escape route into fantasy.

16. John Wain, "Engagement or Withdrawal?: Some Notes on the Poetry of Philip Larkin", Critical Quarterly, Vol. 6, 1964, p. 170.

As always he accepts the "unquickened world".

On me your voice falls as they say love should,  
Like an enormous yes. My Crescent City  
Is where your speech alone is understood,

And greeted as the natural voice of good  
Scattering long-haired grief and scored pity.

The cry of the horn is a cry of truth, a shout of affirmation made by one who cries out the agony of the human condition and his acceptance of it. Larkin's Crescent City (a crescent, as opposed to a circle, is imperfect) unlike the fantasy New Orleans is a place of pain, and jazz is its voice; the music of the horn is at once a celebration of the suffering in life and a denial of its triumph over man.

The major theme of The Whitsun Weddings is love, the question of love's existence, and its effect on the individual. One thing is certain for Larkin: love does exist, even if only in the minds of those who need it. Furthermore, it exists in a form unmatched on earth, a splendid contrast to the dullness of everyday life. In "The Large Cool Store" Larkin uses imagery of the various departments of the modern store (as in "Here") to symbolize the place love holds in the life of the average man. The colorless "heaps of shirts and trousers"

are symbols of

... the weekday world of those

Who leave at dawn low terraced houses

Timed for factory, yard and site.

However, just past the workwear one can see the stands of "Modes for Night", all the brilliance of seductively sheer nightgowns, "Baby Dolls and Shorties", the symbols of love. The curious contrast of the drab material of work pants and the "Lemon, sapphire, moss-green, rose" of the nightclothes is striking evidence of the fact that love exists. The contrast also comments on the make-up of love. It seems to reveal that love, like music, while part of the earth is really not of this world, not of our "nature". It points out

How separate and unearthly love is,

Or women are, or what they do,

Or in our young unreal wishes

Seem to be: synthetic, new,

And natureless in ecstasies.

Because of this, man exhibits a general need for love.

This universal hunger is the theme of "Faith Healing". The

power of the evangelist is based on his dispensing some twenty seconds of the "warm spring rain of loving care" to the throngs around him. His concern awakens a torrential joy within them.

... a crowd

Of huge unheard answers jam and rejoice --

Suddenly, without warning, the joy turns to a feeling of wrongness.

What's wrong! Moustached in flowered frocks they shake:

By now, all's wrong.

The change occurs because the evangelist, in releasing the happiness of love, has also made them aware of all life has denied them. Their tiny moment of love ends in the perception of loss. Love given or love denied, love experienced or not experienced, is the yardstick by which most people measure their lives.

... In everyone there sleeps

A sense of life lived according to love.

To some it means the difference they could make

By loving others, but across most it sweeps

As all they might have done had they been loved.

That nothing cures.

The key phrase is "might have done", for involvement with another person is not necessarily the answer to all life's problems. For the widowed woman of "Love Songs in Age", who has chosen personal involvement, "that much mentioned brilliance, love" has failed, despite its "promising to solve, and satisfy / And set unchangeably in order". In "No Road" the poet had suggested that perhaps there was something wrong with the person who rejected the choice of happiness. Refusal to commit himself to a life of marriage and personal involvement might, on the other hand, be just a natural refusal, a determined effort to defy the fates which so often only offer us second choice. The poet may, in effect, be saying, "If I can't get my ideal person, I refuse a substitute, merely for the sake of having 'someone'". In "Wild Oats" he remembers two girls of his youth, one "A bosomy English Rose", the other "her friend in specs I could talk to". Naturally, he takes out the plain one, becomes engaged, has many clandestine meetings, and finally rejects the idea of marriage "after about five / Rehearsals". The overt reason was that he was "too selfish, withdrawn / And easily bored to love". The last two lines of the poem suggest otherwise.

In my wallet are still two snaps  
Of bosomy rose with fur gloves on.  
Unlucky charms, perhaps.

Again, the "ailment" may be just the simple reason suggested  
in "Wild Oats", pure selfishness of the individual, attempting  
to wring from life what he alone wants. With love, as with  
any other facet of the "unquickened world", one can never be  
sure.

The bachelor poet of "Self's the Man" considers how  
Arnold, having married, must have been very unselfish to give  
up his life to 'paying "for the kiddies' clobber", painting  
halls and putting screws in walls.

And 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.

To compare his life and mine  
 Makes me feel a swine:  
 Oh, no one can deny  
 That Arnold is less selfish than I.

Midway through the poem the poet reverses his point of view, noting that even if Arnold did make a mistake "he was out for his own ends". Every individual choice must be based on self-knowledge, but this knowledge is not a very secure foundation. The poem becomes a comment on his own life and ends on a typically uncertain note. The certainty of the poet's tone wavers as he wonders whether or not his chosen way of life is a safeguard against insanity.

He still did it for his own sake,  
 Playing his own game.  
 So he and I are the same,  
 Only I'm a better hand  
 At knowing what I can stand  
 Without them sending a van --  
 Or I suppose I can.

The conflict of attitudes is at least partially resolved in "Dockery and Son", not in terms of one specific answer to the question, but in the terrible answer life provides for all

questions of humanity. While visiting his old college and discussing former fellow students, the poet hears a casual allusion to "Dockery" and the fact that his son is now up at Oxford. The shock of realizing that he is getting old sets off a train of thought about his own life and how different it is from Dockery's. As he walks the railway platform at Sheffield, the "ranged / Joining and parting lines" of the tracks remind him of the diversity of choice in existence. His own choice still seems right to him.

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

Yet he wonders why Dockery had chosen such a different way of life.

... how

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

The semantic cleverness of this conclusion (the essence of life being made thinner by adding other elements) leads him to consider the basis of such assumptions. He realizes that the way

one lives becomes one's reason for living in that manner. The "innate assumptions" about the rightness of one's choice are instinctive rather than logical,

... a style

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

And how we got it;

Dockery chose a son; he chose nothing. Unfortunately neither choice will withstand the one certainty of life -- "Whether or not we use it, it goes" -- and its final offering to man,

... age, and then the only end of age.

I say this poem "partially resolves" the question because there is a faint hope that something of man will outlast death and time. "An Arundel Tomb" opens with a description of two stone statues, "the earl and countess", which lie above the earthly remains of their original bodies. These nondescript stone images, faces blurred by time, faintly absurd in pose, hardly catch the eye,

... until

It meets his left-hand gauntlet, still

Clasped empty in the other; and

One sees, with a sharp tender shock,

His hand withdrawn, holding her hand.

Their individuality has been washed away in the flow of following humanity, but the careless gesture of clasping hands, which in itself meant very little, has survived. What was once a sculptor's fancy has become a symbol of hope for all those who see it. That this symbol does not represent the faith and love of the earl and countess as they lived matters little. Love, illusion that it may be, has something of immortality about it.

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.

The survival of man's finer moments is also the theme of the title poem "The Whitsun Weddings". The small gesture of holding hands of the above poem is akin to the departure of new brides on their honeymoons; neither event is really recognized as important by the person to whom it is happening.

The poet, however, records its significance. The railway station provides the same symbolic value as the church of "Church-Going", which held "unspilt" the essence of the more important events in human life -- marriage, birth, and death. The railway station is also a place of convergence and divergence, a place of beginnings and endings. The opening stanzas of the poem describe a landscape similar to that of "Here", a tiresome, dully familiar world seen from a train.

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

At each station platform are crowds of people, celebrating weddings and watching the young brides leave by train on their respective honeymoons. Their departure from each new station implies not separation, but survival of the event. The people on the platform are no longer participants, but spectators (although in their youth they performed the same rituals); they stand.

As if out on the end of an event

Waving good-bye

To something that survived it.

That all the young brides are on the same train is merely a "frail / Travelling coincidence" but their coming together serves to give their lives an uncommon unity. The completely ordinary and somewhat vulgar setting helps to emphasize the fact that the life of man, replete with dreariness, sadness and futility nevertheless holds some measure of sublimity. The newly married girls of "The Whitsun Weddings", "parodies of fashion", in their "perms", "nylon gloves", and "jewellery-substitutes" stand apart from

The fathers with broad belts under their suits

And seamy foreheads; mothers loud and fat;

An uncle shouting smut;

Of course, they cannot fail to become "fat mothers" and "grim. head-scarfed wives"<sup>17</sup>; their youth will be rapidly eroded by "the continuous coarse / Sand-laden wind, time"<sup>18</sup> to a

17. "Here", The Whitsun Weddings, p. 9.

18. "Skin", The Less Deceived, p. 43

parody of its former self. Nonetheless, in this marriage they have been granted "all the power / That being changed can give." For just one moment, as we observe their new beginning, we can forget the Mr. Bleanys, the unloved, the toad work, the dark vessel death and this "unquickened world". During that brief moment, life holds a growing and a swelling significance, a spiritual release which at the same time promises renewal.

A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower  
Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.

The final, beautiful image of the poem sums up man's life as portrayed in The Whitsun Weddings. One never knows where the arrow shower is going. It rises briefly and powerfully only to fall to the receptive earth. In its brief moment, nonetheless, it suggests new beginnings and new life. These girls will grow old, and become ugly, and die, but new marriages will reaffirm the sense of rebirth which sparks briefly from such an ordinary event.

### III

When asked about his development from the early stages of poetry writing as exemplified in The North Ship to the mature poems of The Whitsun Weddings, Larkin replied character-

istically that perhaps he was:

less likely to write a really bad poem now,  
but possibly equally less likely to write a  
really good one ... I don't think I want to  
change: just to become better at what I am.<sup>19</sup>

Poems which have appeared in various periodicals since 1964 attest to the truth of this statement. There is little discernible change in the style, theme, diction, and tone of most of the uncollected poems. For example, the poem "Love", published in Critical Quarterly in 1966, presents still another aspect of that persistent question -- does one need love and is its acquisition a selfish or unselfish act? The poem opens in a conversational and easy style, commenting on how selfish one must be in order to love.

The difficult part of love  
Is being selfish enough,  
Is having the blind persistence  
To upset someone's existence  
Just for your own sake --  
What cheek it must take.

The second stanza however gives the opposite opinion: the choice of love may well be an all-giving one.

19. Philip Larkin, "Four Conversations: Ian Hamilton", London Magazine, Vol. 4, No. 8, 1964, p. 77.

And then the unselfish side --  
Who can be satisfied  
Putting someone else first,  
So that you come off worst?  
My life is for me:  
As well deny gravity.

But, whatever the motivation behind the choice, most people  
do need to choose a life of personal relationships.

Yet, vicious or virtuous,  
Love still suits most of us;  
Only the bleeder who  
Can't manage either view  
Is ever wholly rebuffed --  
And he can get stuffed.

This poem reaches no conclusions. The poet notes that either  
aspect of love would be unsatisfactory, but concludes that  
being unable to accept one or the other means total isolation.

"Sympathy in White Major", published in The London Magazine in late 1967, is about the isolation of the reverse  
decision, the loneliness of a man who has devoted all his  
time to personal relationships. Ironically, the poem opens

as he is pouring himself a large gin and tonic, toasting himself for his unselfishness and devotion to people. The suggestion is left that his only real companion is the bottle.

When I drop four cubes of ice  
Chimingly in a glass, and add  
Three goes of gin, a lemon slice,  
And let a ten-ounce tonic void  
In foaming gulps until it smothers  
Everything else up to the edge,  
I lift the lot in private pledge:  
He devoted his life to others.

Spending his life in this manner actually did little to counteract the loneliness of others or himself. Yet the act of sharing one's burdens perhaps brought "all concerned" nearer the vital centre of things.

While other people wore like clothes  
The human beings in their days  
I set myself to bring to those  
Who thought I could the lost displays;  
It didn't work for them or me,  
But all concerned were nearer thus

(Or so we thought) to all the fuss  
Than if we'd missed it separately.

The last stanza is a rueful reiteration of all the kind things said about him by grateful friends. They are, however, clichés and carry very little genuine emotional impact.

A decent chap, a real good sort,  
Straight as a die, one of the best,  
A brick, a trump, a proper sport,  
Head and shoulders above the rest;  
How many lives would have been duller  
Had he not been here below?  
Here's to the whitest man I know --  
Though white is not my favourite colour.

The sarcastic reversal of the last line shows his real feelings. Such a twist is common in many Larkin poems ("Church-Going", "Self's the Man", etc.). Here the final, unexpected comment affirms what one has suspected all throughout the poem. Despite the accolades of his friends the writer feels that his life has been wasted. The tone of the poem is light and flippant, but still conveys a sense of concealed bitterness: the sarcasm is both a cover for the writer's feeling of loss and an indication of what he thinks of himself. Now he

can casually refer to the important things of life as "all the fuss" but his superficial remarks cannot really hide the seriousness of his failure.

Early in 1970 two new poems appeared in The London Magazine. "To the Sea" is a finely detailed descriptive poem, similar to "Here", "Church-Going", and "The Whitsun Weddings" both in style and theme. Its setting -- "the miniature gaiety of seashores" -- is a microcosm of life. The seaside holiday of the poet's childhood is seen as a symbol of purpose in life and the yearly return to the sea a renewal of it. The opening scene is timeless.

Everything crowds under the low horizon:  
 Steep beach, blue water, towels, red bathing caps,  
 The small hushed waves' repeated fresh collapse  
 Up to the warm yellow sand, and further off  
 A white steamer stuck in the afternoon --

Still going on, all of it, still going on!

The activities on the beach cut across people's ages. Both the young ("frilled in white / And grasping at enormous air") and the "rigid old", being wheeled along the sea for a "final summer", partake of its vitality. The scene evokes both his

childhood happiness and that of his parents who met on the beach. Now though he feels he is an intruder (possibly because he has not been here for many years and has no family to bring). The family vacation

. . . plainly still occurs

As half an annual pleasure, half a rite,

As when, 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.

As the day ends the sunlight turns milky "Like breathed-on glass" and the families desert the sea, but they will return. Even if their yearly pilgrimage is only motivated by habit, it lends a kind of continuation and survival to brief and fragmented lives.

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.

"Annus Mirabilis", published in the same month, is an entirely different kind of poem. On the surface the poem could be mistaken for nothing more than light verse (just as "Naturally the Foundation Will Bear Your Expenses" was) since its topic is the new era of sexual freedom in Britain and its imagery refers to "the Beatles' first L.P.". The fast-moving and tricky rhythms, the near-rhymes, and the frequent alliterations (all reminiscent of W. S. Gilbert) do little to dispel this image.

#### ANNUS MIRABILIS

Sexual intercourse began  
In nineteen sixty-three  
(Which was rather late for me) --  
Between the end of the CHATTERLEY ban  
And the Beatles' first L.P.

Up to then there'd only been  
A sort of bargaining,  
A wrangle for a ring,  
A shame that started at sixteen  
And spread to everything.

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.

So life was never better than  
In nineteen sixty-three  
(Though just too late for me), --  
Between the end of the CHATTERLEY ban  
And the Beatles' first L.P.

It soon becomes clear that the theme of this poem is an all too familiar one. Beneath the light-hearted tone reads a serious comment on how opportunities in life pass one by. The year of the title (the allusion to Dryden's heroic poem of the same name also includes the sexual pun on 'anus') is the miraculous year of sexual liberation. For most people sex had been an object shamefully purchased through barter of a ring. Marriage was merely a means to an end; one traded one's freedom for sex. That kind of shameful bargaining which permeated the whole of one's life suddenly dissolves in the sixties and is symbolized by the legalization of Lawrence's Lady Chatterley's Lover and the sexual activity associated with tremendously popular "rock" groups. Life becomes "A quite unlosable game" but unfortunately the poet is too old to play.

In Encounter of October, 1970, appeared two new poems about love; although related in theme they are very different in their treatment of subject matter. Indeed, it might be more accurate to say they are companion pieces by being opposites. "Dublinesque" describes the funeral of a prostitute. In life she had been a dealer in elemental human passions. In death the woman is transmuted into a symbol of ephemeral and unearthly love totally dissociated from the actual bodily function of sex. In "The Cardplayers" romantic love (that is, idealized love) is totally rejected; the whole poem is a celebration of the release of savage and gross sensuality.

"Dublinesque" is composed in the typical Larkin manner. From the quietly observed, detailed setting evolves a beautifully simple conclusion, richly evocative and charged with restrained emotion. The incident which sparks the poem is the funeral procession of the prostitute whose retinue (dressed in brightly-coloured hats and dresses) adds just the right touch of incongruity. Surrounding the procession is an "air of great friendliness" and a suggestion of vitality. The ladies do not walk somberly; they skip rhythmically behind the coffin, almost in the manner of a Negro funeral in New Orleans.

Down stucco sidestreets,  
Where light is pewter  
And afternoon mist  
Brings lights on in shops

Of Kitty, or Katy  
 As if the name meant once  
 All love, all beauty.

"The Cardplayers" is a violent and striking contrast, not only to "Dublinesque" but also to most of Larkin's other poems. Larkin's usual poetic technique is one based on intellectual response to events. Experience is removed and clarified by the working of the creative mind. Both The Less Deceived and The Whitsun Weddings contain poems which have violent experience as their point of origin: for example, "Whatever Happened", "Deceptions", and "Sunny Prestatyn" all spring from man's violent actions. In these poems, however, the violence is once-removed. One is more concerned with the effects of brutality than with the actual happening. The poet comments on the event after it has happened. The bestiality and scatological intensity of "The Cardplayers" is immediate and in the present tense.

#### THE CARDPLAYERS

Jan van Hogsneuw 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,

Above race-guides and rosaries,  
A funeral passes.

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

There is an air of great friendliness,  
As if they were honouring  
One they were fond of;  
Some caner a few steps,  
Skirts held skilfully  
(Someone claps time),

The final stanza balances the sadness of death against the vitality of the first three stanzas. The juxtaposition of life and sex with death suggests the complexity of the seventeenth century association of death or "dying" with sexual climax. The final haunting beauty of the closing stanza is both a comment on the insignificance of man (one is not even sure of the dead woman's name) and a salute to passing love and vanished loveliness.

And of great sadness also,  
As they wend away  
A voice is heard singing.

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  
 Toward 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 names of all the characters relate to functions of the body and are deliberately unpleasant or obscene -- Hogspear, Dogstoerd, and Prijck, urinating in the street, "belching" out smoke, drinking to excess, snoring, breaking wind. Their actions are wholeheartedly unrefined and lacking in grace. In the midst of all this someone is singing songs about love. In lines 12-13 the queen of hearts, symbol of romantic love, is spattered by an errant missile of mucus intended for the fire. The last line summarizes what man is made of. The four elements of the ancients (air, earth, fire and water) dominate the poem and are paralleled earthily in man's flatulence, the clay pipe, the burning tobacco and

urine. The final juxtaposition of "Rain, wind and fire" (fire representing passion) shows their close proximity in the human body. The act of love is a partner to that of defecation and urinating. Love is both of the soul and of the body, of the spirit and of the baser elements. The animalistic side of one's make-up is not to be denied; indeed, it may even be desired. The unthinking "bestial" act, pure sensory response, requires no justification.

In the March 17, 1972 issue of New Statesman appeared a fine long poem, "The Building". This poem has (as has been pointed out by several critics, most notably David Timms) close similarities in imagery, theme and style to "Church-Going". Unlike the building described in the latter poem, which was immediately recognizable by its unmistakable churchly attributes, the nature of this "building" is carefully hidden at first from the reader. It is defined by extraneous details and by what it is not ("what keep drawing up / At the entrance are not taxis"). The people "restless and resigned" are seemingly out-of-place, "caught / On ground curiously neutral"; they are "Here to confess that something has gone wrong". With the realization that the many-floored building is a hospital comes the knowledge that this "error of a serious sort" is both physical and spiritual. This unnatural, unfamiliar world into

which the sick people have been projected is contrasted to the world outside..

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 --

The concreteness, the solid mundane detail of the real world stands out next to the deliberately unfinished quality of the previous description of the hospital's interior. (The first five stanzas are themselves certainly not abstract; however, the random sampling of details given presents a curiously fragmented and dream-like picture which carries with it a sense of alienation, almost like a familiar scene -- complete with the very ordinary ingredients of waiting people, cups of tea, magazines -- viewed from a bizarre and strangely new angle.) In a startling reversal, the firm reality of the outside world loses its solidity and the hospital, which because of its dream-like (or nightmarish) characteristics should be unreal, emerges as reality and the outside world becomes the dream.

-- 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.

The poem rises to its climactic final statement just as the "lucent comb" of the hospital building rises above the "close-ribbed streets" surrounding it. This building, like the church of "Church-Going", is a centre attempting to ward off death. The physical struggle of the hospital to fight death and mortality becomes much the same as the church's efforts to bestow immortality (and thus defeat death) through spiritual belief.

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 ....

Many of Larkin's poems have the knack of simultaneously presenting both the inside and outside view of things. "The Old Fools" (The Listener, February 1, 1973) takes such a look at old age. The sneering description of the title and the

sickening detail of physical old age -- "pissing oneself, the mouth hanging open dribbling, "ash hair, toad hands, prune face" -- all make one believe that the poet is expanding upon Jaques's comment on old people "Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything". The first two stanzas repeatedly ask: how can the old not realize the extent of their physical decrepitude and all that sorry condition stands for? How can they not know that:

... these are the first signs:

Not knowing how, not hearing who, the power

Of choosing gone. Their looks show that they're for it:

Oblivion is near at hand, oblivion disastrously unlike that sort of nothingness we have experienced before and which ends in "the million-petalled flower" of birth.

The final two stanzas attempt to answer why the old do not dissolve into insanity at the immediate prospect of death, why they can keep on going despite physical disintegration. The answer is that inner resources sustain them. Inside their heads blossoms their real world; they actually are living "where all happened once".

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.

This image of light belies (at least for the time being) all that has gone before. The warmth of life is symbolized in these lines by a lamp, a fire burning, the sun appearing from behind rain clouds.

In the last stanza the imagery turns cold and bleak; the dominant metaphor is of a mountain and the "lighted rooms" become more and more distant.

For the rooms grow farther, leaving  
Incompetent cold, the constant wear and tear  
Of taken breath, and them crouching below  
Extinction's alp, the old fools, never perceiving  
How near it is. This must be what keeps them quiet:  
The peak that stays in view wherever we go  
For them is rising ground.

The aged are so near "Extinction's alp" they are unaware of its meaning. They cannot see the peak which is obvious to the younger people who stand further from it. For them, with their bent posture and slow progress, the immediate slope is not the journey's end. Mixed with the obvious disdain for

the "old fools" is an unwilling respect; they are attacking what they optimistically see as "rising ground". Their refusal to give in is not at all sensible and perhaps not even a conscious act of defiance. It is a foolish but gallant gesture. At the end of the poem it is still uncertain why the old persevere and the poet still cannot make up his mind if such an oblivious denial of our fate is admirable. He is only too aware, however, that he, like all of us, will one day be presented with answers to all the uncomfortable questions the poem raises.

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.

The Less Deceived, The Whitsun Weddings and the later uncollected poems attempt to reconcile the contradictions in man's nature. Man's element is time, but he can never control or even understand it. He desires love and personal companionship, but at the same time he wants freedom. He conceives a pure and unearthly view of love, but part of his love is the animal instinct of sexual desire. Man is above all mortal. As an individual, he makes little impact in life or in death.

Yet somehow as part of a race each brief life carries with it a sense of continuity and immortality of a kind. Larkin's poetic eye records the current scene both with the "more comprehensive soul" of Wordsworth's poet and the dispassionate accuracy of the photographer. Each of the poems depicts a different facet of the same general theme. Some are panoramas, some close-ups, and some appear to have been detailed with a microscope. The end result is not a lifeless, monotonous series of identical stills but a montage showing the variety of response possible to the "unquickened world" of twentieth century man.

## CONCLUSION

In a review of a critical work on Thomas Hardy, Larkin commented

... it surely cannot be denied that the dominant emotion in Hardy is sadness. Hardy was particularly well equipped to perceive the melancholy, the misfortunate, the frustrating, the failing elements in life. 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 be all withered in a few days. Any approach to his work, as to any writer's work, must seek first of all to determine what element is peculiarly his, which imaginative note he strikes most plangently, and to deny that in this case it is the sometimes gentle, sometimes ironic, sometimes bitter but always passive apprehension of suffering is, I think, wrong-headed. Having established as much, the real critic of Hardy could, I think, develop a thesis concerning the two-fold value Hardy placed on suffering: first, he thought it was 'true'. ('Tragedy is true guise: Comedy lies'); secondly, it would be demonstrated that Hardy associated sensitivity to suffering and awareness of the causes of pain with superior spiritual character.<sup>1</sup>

This statement can be applied without much reservation to the poetry and novels of Philip Larkin himself, for his perceptive recording in them of "this unquickened world" is "the continual celebration of what is both the truest and most important element in life, most important in the sense of most necessary to spiritual development."<sup>2</sup> At the base of Larkin's writing

1. Philip Larkin, "Wanted: Good Hardy Critic", Critical Quarterly, Vol. 8, No. 2, 1966, p. 178.

2. Ibid, p. 178.

is the continual awareness of this most fundamental aspect of human life.

This overwhelming sense of sadness is not readily evident as the central focus of the poems in The North Ship. Indeed, it seems what that volume of poetry lacks in many instances is a well-defined sense of personal belief as well as experience. The distinctive voice of the poet is often obscured by the youthful imitations of Auden and Yeats. The young poet of The North Ship had yet to determine himself the "imaginative note" he struck most effectively. The North Ship has considerable inherent value besides its interest as a stage in the development of a distinguished poet. Its literary merit lies not so much in the creation of individual poems (although many are exceptionally able in technique and finely finished) as in the strength and poetic vigour of particular lines and the effectiveness of specific images.

That the most important element of Larkin's two novels is pain and sensitive reaction to pain can hardly be questioned. The material of the novels provides a framework for the later poetry and fills in the background of the world Larkin sees man inhabiting. Both novels are well constructed and both can be said to create "real people in real places". The characters of John and "Jill" are keenly observed and fully presented even though the minor characters of Jill do not succeed. Larkin's developing skill in character presentation

is obvious, though, in A Girl in Winter. The supporting characters of that novel are much more real than those in Jill and Larkin's portrayal of the character of Katherine Lind indicates that in the second novel he is far more able to suggest complexity of character. While John's emotional reactions are usually quite straightforward, Katherine's are more complicated. For example, Katherine's justifiable hatred of her boss, Anstey, is at first sharp and clear. But after Katherine discovers his tender relationship with Miss Parbury she is faced with the very human realization that few emotions can be so sharply defined as her hatred for Anstey. She has to balance simultaneously two states of mind. Larkin's controlled precise style, is admirably suited to lucid expression of these subtle shades of character presentation.

Besides being noteworthy achievements in themselves, Jill and A Girl in Winter denote a second stage of development in Larkin's writing. The bitter discoveries of John Kemp, the young hero of Jill, in his travelling from innocence to experience, parallel Larkin's acknowledgement of pain as the focal point of his writing. That this sorrow must be accepted stoically is the major point made in A Girl in Winter. Beneath the bleak world picture and the restraint of the carefully controlled style of the novels one always feels the wealth of compassion the writer has for his characters.

Strangely enough it is in the area of emotional response that Larkin's later books of poetry have been most often attacked. Critics have wrongly remarked on the limited nature of his sensibility, labelling him as being possessed merely of "a very pale tenderness of feeling" (J. M. Newton) or "depressed tenderness" (A. Alvarez). One fails to see how such critics could ignore the depth of feeling evoked in so many fine poems; the desolate sense of loss of "Deceptions", the hate and bitterness of "Send No Money", the anticipation and awareness of "The Whitsun Weddings", the sadness of love denied in "No Road", and the fulfillment of love in "Wedding-Wind", to name just a few. It is true that the poems as a whole spring from one common area of feeling, the poet's ever present awareness of man's mortality. (Anthony Thwaite has quite rightly remarked that all of Larkin's post-1946 poetry could be titled 'The Music of Time'.) Within that broad general background, however, Larkin's poems range widely across the bleak landscape of our too short life to comment on the complexity and the ambiguity of human emotional response. He details both the differing responses of separate individuals to emotional situations and the subtle changes in point-of-view of the same individuals to a given choice in life.

A second general misconception (one related perhaps to the first) is that the poems of The Less Deceived and The

Whitsun Weddings are limited, personal and minor in theme.

It is my contention that the concerns of Larkin's poetry are the main concerns of English poetry down through the centuries -- death, love, the passing of time, the destruction of dreams, and the fragile balance between reality and illusion. The impression of "smallness" is given by Larkin's approach to his subject matter. The great majority of his poems are seen from the viewpoint of the individual, the common man: what they lack in magnificent heroic gesture they make up in humanity.

This is certainly not an unrealistic approach to take. For the large bulk of mankind life is as Larkin sees it -- ordinary: the average individual does little of cosmic importance. His major obstacles appear more as disappointments and sorrows to be accepted as the natural order of things rather than monumental tragedies to be overcome in the fashion of the tragic hero. The tragic hero is larger than life, embodying the finer aspects of humanity in his individual response to life's misfortunes. Larkin's subjects (one would hesitate to call them heroes) leave no particular mark as individuals, but survive as a moment in the endless flow of humanity. Philip Larkin defines life in negatives and describes a melancholy and rarely joyous picture of human life. Yet, in "the endless altered people" of "An

Arundel Tomb", in the neglected, quickening waters of "Here", in the yearly brides of "The Whitsun Weddings", in the seasonal ritual of "To the Sea", and the continual surprising hunger in man "to be more serious" of "Church-Going" is implied a statement about the continuity of man rarely associated with his poetry.

Of the uncollected poems published since The Whitsun Weddings (1964) at least three -- "To the Sea", "The Building", and "The Old Fools" -- deserve to be ranked with Larkin's best. The representative sampling I have chosen to comment on indicates that new developments of attitude and style are apparent more as a matter of degree rather than kind. Larkin often drew on colloquialisms in The Less Deceived and The Whitsun Weddings. The language of "The Cardplayers" and "The Old Fools" suggests that this tendency has increased. Also, Larkin's attitude seems to have become slightly more pessimistic. The conclusion of "The Building" is certainly less affirmative than that of "Church-Going" or "The Whitsun Weddings". The twenty or so poems published since 1964 are strong evidence that the well-springs of Larkin's inspiration have not dried up. The recent poems have extended substantially the bleak expanse of his poetic horizons.

In a review of The Whitsun Weddings A. Alvarez remarked about Larkin that "Any moment now someone is bound to pin on him that heaviest of gold medals: the one inscribed 'Great

Poet ". It is certainly not the intention of this thesis to label Larkin in such a manner, but he has, at the very least, carved out for himself an important niche in the history of English writing. His body of work is masterfully crafted, his technique and use of language invariably suited to his subject. His best poems are memorable ones, imaginatively conceived and finely composed. Philip Larkin has above all achieved what any poet must do to be remembered. He has successfully bridged the gap between art and reality, and between the personal and the universal. His work is not only a 'representative voice' of the 50's and 60's in England. It is a compassionate record of suffering which relates to humanity as a whole.

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