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**LA THÈSE A ÉTÉ
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THE RETRIEVAL OF THE PHYSICAL WORLD
IN THE
POETRY OF PHILIP LARKIN

By

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A Thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
University of Ottawa

Terrence Anthony Whalen 1979



UNIVERSITÉ D'OTTAWA
UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:

I gratefully acknowledge the excellent advice and the exceptional goodwill of Dr. R. G. Collins, Professor of English, University of Ottawa.

CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I Development of Style and Critical Reception	1
II The Boredom and Sadness of the World	53
III Imagism and the Physical World	89
IV The Physical World: Agnostic Wonder	155
V Placing Larkin.	
(A) Larkin: A Recapitulation	213
(B) Poetry and the Physical World: An Emerging Tradition	220
Works Consulted	263

CHAPTER I: DEVELOPMENT OF STYLE AND CRITICAL RECEPTION

CHAPTER I: DEVELOPMENT OF STYLE AND CRITICAL RECEPTION

David Timms begins his book on Philip Larkin with the assertion that "Philip Larkin is the best poet England now has."¹ This kind of comment on his stature is finally beginning to have some currency. Martin Scofield, for instance, testifies that Larkin "has come to be considered by many people as the best British poet writing today";² and Hermann Peschmann says that Larkin is "quite simply the most important poet of his generation".³ Donald Davie honours Larkin's achievement by calling him "the effective unofficial laureate of post-1945 England",⁴ and even his detractors (and they are legion), people such as Arthur Oberg, allow that Larkin is a "figure larger than other poets who happen to be around".⁵ Philip Larkin, without question, has risen to the stature of a major contemporary poet.

Beyond critical recognition, the esteem in which Larkin is held by other poets shows in the public praise accorded him by such figures as W. H. Auden, Roy Fuller, Ted Hughes, Thom Gunn, Seamus Heaney, John Betjeman, Alan Brownjohn, and Robert Lowell.⁶ Additionally, his distinction as a poet-critic has resulted in the honour given him in his commission to edit The Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse.⁷ The last poet to be accorded that recognition was William Butler Yeats, in 1936. And as recently as 1976 Larkin was awarded the prestigious "Shakespeare Prize" (for outstanding British contributions to European culture), a compliment which

was last given to an English poet when it was awarded to John Masefield in 1938. These distinctions -- and the list is by no means complete -- are an index of the recognition which Larkin finally enjoys, a recognition which has not come easily.

The most telling truth about Larkin's rise to prominence is that it has not been until the seventies that he has received from the world of criticism the degree of recognition which he deserves.⁸ And in spite of an increase in the number of critics who are willing to praise his work, such late recognition remains somewhat subdued by a tradition of countervailing negative criticism. While Larkin has always had a large readership and is a poet whose books are bought and read by the public, his reception by the world of criticism, on the other hand, has been an uneven one. His more appreciative critics have become bitter about this fact. In a symposium on contemporary poetry which was held in 1972 in the pages of The Review, Clive James noted that:

Perhaps the most encouraging thing about the last ten years is the way Larkin has emerged into unassailable uniqueness despite criticism's failure to do its job. Criticism has never managed to demonstrate -- although reviewing has managed to assert -- Larkin's quality as a poet; it has cavilled, carped and higgled at his work but has been unable to celebrate his felicities except in parenthesis.⁹

While this is not universally true -- John Wain, D. J. Enright, Anthony Thwaite, and Donald Davie, for example, were all loudly advocating and defending Larkin's talent in the fifties

3

and sixties --, the evidence, for the most part, supports James' indictment of the critical world. The carping and cavilling and niggling of which he speaks continues on into the present. In a lecture given at Oxford on March 12, 1975, John Wain, after a close analysis of Larkin's "How Distant", felt compelled to say:

I apologise for the ponderous shredding out of this beautifully lucid poem; my excuse must be the monumental thick-headedness with which Larkin's poetry is often approached; there is no explanation, however otiose, that is not needed by somebody.¹⁰

Larkin, then, has arrived at his new stature as a major contemporary poet with the aid of only a handful of advocate critics and an appreciative reading public. And to an extent he has arrived despite what James has referred to as "all the boom, bust and sweaty rumble of the literary roller derby".¹¹ However, before taking a shorthand look at some of the more prominent perspectives of Larkinian criticism, it is worth our bringing the poetry into focus by way of a brief analysis of his development as a poet.

If we do not count Larkin's XX Poems (1951), which was published in a limited edition of 100 copies,¹² he has four volumes of poetry in the public view. They include The North Ship (1945), The Less Deceived (1955), The Whitsun Weddings (1964), and High Windows (1974).¹³ It is standard practice to view Larkin as a poet who develops away from what Roger Bowen has referred to as the "self-conscious lyricism"

of The North Ship to a more mature, "spare tone"¹⁴ in The Less Deceived, a tone which is then sustained in the volumes which follow. The growth of Larkin's sensibility, his development as a poet, is also seen centrally as having to do with a movement away from the influence of Yeats and towards discipleship under Hardy. This shift is seen both by Larkin's critics and Larkin himself as the discarding of an early romantic impulse for the sake of a more tough-minded maturity. When The North Ship was reprinted in 1966, it contained an 'introduction' in which Larkin claimed his new discipleship under Hardy's influence, and referred to the early influence of Yeats with a sense of embarrassment. He noted that "The predominance of Yeats in this volume deserves some explanation.", and told how Vernon Watkins visited "the English Club" in Oxford in 1943 and "swamped us with Yeats". Larkin was enthusiastic and impressed, and

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.

Larkin included in the reprint an additional poem, one from XX Poems entitled "Waiting for breakfast", which, he said, he added as a "coda" and which "shows the Celtic fever abated and the patient sleeping soundly".¹⁵ And indeed it does. The first stanza reads like a pastiche of Eliot:

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.¹⁶

In its sharp rendition of feeling made precise through an objective correlative, the poem is quite different from the characteristic poem "XXIV" of The North Ship where the "Celtic fever" Larkin refers to is running very high:

Love, we must part now; do not let it be
 Calamitous and bitter. In the past
 There has been too much moonlight and self-pity;
 Let us have done with it; for now at last
 Never has sun more boldly paced the sky,
 Never were hearts more eager to be free,
 To kick down worlds, lash forests; you and I
 No longer hold them; we are husks, that see
 The grain going forward to a different use.

There is regret. Always, there is regret.
 But it is better that our lives unloose,
 As two tall ships, wind-mastered, wet with light,
 Break from an estuary with their courses set,
 And waving part, and waving drop from sight.¹⁷

The major difference in sensibility between the two poems lies in the more empirical, more visual-concrete realism of the later "Waiting for breakfast". Long after Larkin came under the influence of Hardy's poetry, he was to claim that

When I came to Hardy it was with the sense
 of relief that I didn't have to jack myself
 up to a concept of poetry that lay outside
 my own life -- this is perhaps what I felt
 Yeats was trying to make me do. One could
 simply relapse into one's own life and
 write from it.¹⁸

Larkin here coincidentally gives us an appropriate distinction between the two poems just quoted. Poem "XXIV" appears to be written out of a "concept of poetry", a notion that the poetic requires the infinitely sad theme registered in the language of romantic refrain. It is a poem, therefore, which is held together by a cliché form. "Waiting for breakfast", on the other hand, while not thematically exciting, is crafted in such a way that the emotion expressed is more individual. Its individuality is assured by the empirical base of its setting. Larkin's development as a poet is very much in accordance with this kind of a shift in perspective; away from the palely romantic and toward a more solid grounding of his attention to the immediate physical world.

The standard view is that it is due to the influence of Hardy that we find in The Less Deceived, as Hermann Peschmann put it, "a new note of personal authenticity and ironic questioning of experience".¹⁹ For the most part, this is true, and if we add to this view three other important facts, we can begin to realize the reality of Larkin's fuller development.

First, there is the additional fact of his connection with the Movement group, a group whose loosely similar aims had their effect on Larkin's poetic; second, Larkin's shift to the ironic stance is a bit less sudden than the standard view allows; and thirdly, there is the continuation of a more tempered romantic impulse in Larkin's more mature work. This latter fact is the one most usually overlooked by his critics,

and will become important to our concerns in this study.

One of the difficulties in placing Larkin in the Movement group lies in the fact that the group tends to be uniformly considered a pretty smug lot. The term "Movement" has become a label for a group who now suffer the scorn of critics such as Ian Hamilton, who has said that; "Today, looking back on the poets included in New Lines (the Enright team, plus Thom Gunn), it seems difficult to conceive of aridity more notable than theirs."²⁰ And A. Alvarez has pinned the Movement identity to Larkin's poetry by referring to "Church Going" as a kind of set-piece. In his popular The New Poetry (1962), he has said;

The pieties of the Movement were as predictable as the politics of the thirties' poets. They are summed up at the beginning of Philip Larkin's 'Church-going':

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

This, in concentrated form, is the image of the post-war Welfare State Englishman, shabby and not concerned with his appearance; poor -- he has a bike, not a car; gauche but full of agnostic piety; underfed, underpaid; overtaxed, hopeless, bored, wry.²¹

The tendency has been to see the Movement group as an inhibited species, low-key and bored and, if at all animated, animated by a severity of irony. This view has recently been ably contested by Blake Morrison but in spite of that, it still remains a standard way of viewing Larkin's work to see it as the glib product of the Movement.²²

If the Movement can be said to have an effect on Larkin's development, it is an effect which transcends the rigid confines of Alvarez's caricature and is related to an essential growth toward a quality of realism. When Robert Conquest wrote his introduction to New Lines (1956), the anthology which was meant to publicize the Movement poets, he was anxious to underscore the fundamentally empirical base of the poetry. He said:

If one had briefly to distinguish this poetry of the fifties from its predecessors, I believe the most important point would be that it submits to no great systems of theoretical constructs nor agglomerations of unconscious commands. It is free from both mystical and logical compulsions and -- like modern philosophy -- is empirical in its attitude to all that comes. This reverence for the real person or event is, indeed, a part of the general intellectual ambience (in so far as that it is not blind or retrogressive) of our time.²³

(my emphasis)

It was this essentially "empirical" intensity of mind, a conscious attention to the physical world, which was to become the fundamental perspective of Larkin's poetry after

The North Ship.

An attention to the physical world itself as source of poetic inspiration, as opposed to the world of art, the "poetic" world, was at the theoretical base of the Movement poetic as Conquest saw it. It is the same intimacy with the immediate which Larkin saw as the honest center of Hardy's poetic. If Larkin chooses to account for his development as

a poet by way of saying that after The North Ship, "I looked to Hardy rather than Yeats as my ideal, and eventually a more rational approach, less hysterical and emphatic, asserted itself",²⁴ we should add that the basic empiricism of that approach was also nourished by his connection with the Movement. Much later we will see that he can be connected with the Imagists and with D. H. Lawrence, in this empirical bias.

The quality of realism which Larkin's poetry develops toward is also aided by an ambience of irony which can be associated with the Movement. In part, the Movement poets were reacting against the romantic temperament of much of the poetry of the forties. As Blake Morrison has said:

The important thing as far as the development of the Movement is concerned is that from the mid-forties on Amis and Larkin were to be increasingly set against the fashionable neo-Romanticism of the day, and to work towards a poetry that was tougher, more sceptical, and deliberately down to earth.²⁵

In their scepticism the Movement poets were characterized by an anonymous reviewer as "anti-phoney" and "anti-wet" (anti-romantic).²⁶ Much Larkinian criticism has tended to turn these terms toward the negative, and mistake a quality of frankness in his poetry for a kind of cynicism. More of that later. The important point about irony in relation to Larkin's development is that it is a quality which can be found even in the early work, taming the romantic impulse. At the same time, it is a quality which is not as thoroughgoing in the later work as many would have us believe.

We said earlier that the standard view of Larkin's development was that, as a result of the influence of Hardy, he suddenly found a more ironic voice, a voice which is audible in the tones of The Less Deceived, and one which is in direct opposition to what Roger Bowen characterized as the "self-conscious lyricism"²⁷ of The North Ship. Even though that volume is, overall, a romantic one, Blake Morrison has qualified that view of it by pointing to a slightly deeper level of meaning in poem "III". Morrison shows how Larkin has taken the opening lines of Arnold's "Dover Beach" ("The sea is calm tonight/The tide is full, the moon lies fair") and compressed them just as he also debunks them:

The moon is full tonight
And hurts the eyes,
It is so definite and bright.²⁸

In other words, small as it might be, there is nevertheless evidence here which points to the fact that Larkin's irony is already quietly present, in at least some of the poetry, as early as 1945. Additionally, both Roger Bowen and Peter Ferguson have very recently written articles based on their reading of XX Poems. The title of Ferguson's essay is "Philip Larkin's XX Poems: The Missing Link", a title which is intended to indicate that the limited edition of this 1951 volume of poems provides us with the bridge from the early romanticism of The North Ship to the more ironic disposition of The Less Deceived. It is pointed out in this article, and also in Bowen's "Poet in Transition: Philip Larkin's

XX Poems", that many of the poems in XX Poems were later published again in The Less Deceived; and the number is substantial -- thirteen of the twenty. Bowen notes that, properly viewed, "the 16 new poems which make up that volume (The Less Deceived) only pursue the style Larkin had begun to develop in XX Poems". Bowen sees that style as characterized by a "controlled use of metaphor" and a "confidence in the ironic voice".²⁹ The upshot of this revised delineation of Larkin's development is that one can now see that his growth to maturity of style was more gradual than was previously assumed. Added to Morrison's discovery of Larkin's early irony, the insight helps to scramble further the blunt view that Larkin's development is toward an irony which is first employed in The Less Deceived.

Equally important is the fact that Larkin's early romantic impulse is still present in The Less Deceived. Its quality is altered, but it is there, transformed into a more able presentation through craft, and richer than the "Celtic fever" which animates The North Ship. What begins to emerge is the realization that Larkin's development as a poet is quite other than a simple shift from the thoroughgoing romantic to the thoroughgoing ironic. His growth is one which has been a blossoming attributable to the deepening of the roots of two impulses, the romantic and the ironic. This view is not the less accurate for being unusual, but since it is unusual it is best briefly explained by way of a short demonstration of what we mean by the "romantic" impulse in his mature work.

In a comment Larkin once made in response to a question posed by Ian Hamilton, he gives us a hint as to the nature of his development:

HAMILTON: One final, rather broad question. How would you characterize your development as a poet from The North Ship to The Whitsun Weddings?

LARKIN: I suppose I'm less likely to write a really bad poem now, but possibly equally less likely to write a really good one. If you can call that development, then I've developed. Kipling said somewhere that when you can do one thing really well, then do something else. Oscar Wilde said that only mediocrities develop. I just don't know. I don't think I want to change; just to become better at what I am.³⁰

"I don't think I want to change, just become better at what I am." In that final comment Larkin gives us, very casually, a way of accurately understanding that his development is a matter of further refining what he already does well. Rather than singularly a shift from a romantic to an ironic impulse the evidence of the poetry suggests a versatility of attention, an ability to discipline both impulses by way of an extraordinary talent for engaging the weight and texture of the physical world in the explorative thought process of the poems. This is the most important fact about Larkin's development as a poet. The view of him as only an ironic poet has been responsible for the most lop-sided, patch-eyed criticism of his work to date. It is a central concern of this study to develop a more just criticism of his work in this regard. Larkin's poetry is, in Robert Conquest's words, "empirical

in its attitude to all that comes", ³¹ to say which is decidedly not, at the same time, to imply that it is muted, unromantic, or coldly objective. As caveat to those critics who would see The Less Deceived as indicative only of Larkin's growth to scepticism and irony, the single example of "Wedding Wind", from that volume, stands as startling evidence against such simplification:

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

Now in the day
 All's unravelled under the sun by the wind's blowing.
 He has gone to look at the floods, and I
 Carry a chipped pail to the chicken-run,
 Set it down, and stare. All is wind
 Hunting through clouds and forests, thrashing
 My apron and the hanging cloths on the line.
 Can it be borne, this bodying-forth by wind
 Of joy my actions turn on, like a thread
 Carrying beads? Shall I be let to sleep
 Now this perpetual morning shares my bed?
 Can even death dry up
 These new delighted lakes, conclude
 Our kneeling as cattle by all-generous waters? ³²

"Wedding Wind" is not entirely representative of the contents of The Less Deceived; it is less ironic, more open to experience than some other poems in the volume. But it is a poem which, in its dramatic lyricism, absence of irony, and cautious reach toward a beauty of significance out of the ordinary, stands as an indication of the survival of Larkin's more

romantic impulse beyond The North Ship.

There is none of the "self-conscious lyricism" of the poems we find in The North Ship, but neither is there only a "spare tone".³³ What we have here is a rare instance in which we can trust the tale, and also trust the teller; the poem is an excellent example of Larkin as "better at what I am". By contrast with poem "XXIV" of The North Ship, which is written out of a "concept of poetry", and written as a result, with worn lines like "There is regret. Always, there is regret", "Wedding Wind" is markedly more concrete and well crafted. The strong sense of immediacy in the poem is reminiscent, for example, of D. H. Lawrence.

Its able grasp of a living consciousness of the physical world is also reminiscent of Ted Hughes' "Wind"³⁴, a poem which similarly enacts a notion of existence as both strongly physical and wondrous. This is an aspect of Larkin's work which has been pretty well pushed to the side by a tradition of criticism which sees him as a less engaged, more withdrawn poet than an association with either Lawrence or Hughes would seem to imply.

The inwardness of the speaker, and her sense of wonder in sexual fulfillment, is well caught in the quality of nervousness which is also present in the symbolically sparse and violated surroundings. The religious impulse, hinted at in the feeling of awe and in the analogical structure of the language ("candlelight", "beads", "kneeling as cattle"), is gestured toward without being fully embraced. There is the

reserve here of a poet who has acquired a quality of scepticism. But it is not a scepticism which is merely ironical, reticent, or detached. "Wedding Wind" is a poem written out of a romantic impulse which has been matured by a qualifying empiricism of perspective. In terms of Larkin's development, it stands as evidence of the persistence of an open, more risky impulse in his poetry after The North Ship. The survival of this tendency in Larkin's poetry, in spite of his tutelage under Hardy and his connection with the Movement group, is usually overlooked by his more negative critics. It is therefore appropriate that we note "Wedding Wind" immediately prior to a discussion of the major critical responses to Larkin's work, for if there is a predominant note in Larkin criticism, it is the one which claims that he is basically a glib, ironic, and detached writer.

The most persistent and the most negative label which is attached to the poetry of Philip Larkin is one which, for various reasons, tags him as a poet of detachment. The label is a convenient allocation of given Movement traits to Larkin as their finest graduate. An anonymous reviewer's description of the Movement in 1954 is one which many subsequent critics work from in their analyses of Larkin's poetry. That reviewer provided a stereotype mould in which his work is still cast by more recent critics:

It (the Movement) is bored by the despair of the 'forties', not much interested in suffering, and extremely impatient of poetic sensibility, especially poetic sensibility

about "the writer and society". So it's goodbye to all those rather sad little discussions about "how the writer ought to live", and it's goodbye to the Little Magazine and "experimental writing". The Movement, as well as being anti-phoney, is anti-wet; sceptical, robust, ironic, prepared to be as comfortable as possible in a wicked, commercial, threatened world which doesn't look, anyway, as if its going to be changed much by a couple of handfuls of young English writers.³⁵

The adjectives he uses; "bored", "impatient", "anti-wet; sceptical, robust, ironic", are not used in a disparaging manner, but are meant here, rather, as description. Yet it is from that very cluster of words and the accumulation of them into the tagging of a specific psychological type, that much of the negative criticism of Larkin finds its genesis. Much Larkin criticism, that is, is aimed at the psychological base of the poetry, a base which is mistakenly seen as embodying some of the least engaging of the Movement poets' traits. Consequently, the notion of Larkin as an urbane, bored, glib and detached writer was a prominent one on university campuses in England during the late fifties and early sixties. It is a view which John Wain attempted to dispel in his essay, "Engagement or Withdrawal? Some Notes on the Work of Philip Larkin".³⁶ But for all of its ability to demonstrate Larkin's novelistic talent as a poet, a talent which is, in "The Whitsun Weddings", also a participant ability having to do with Larkin's fundamentally empathetic imagination, the view of him as a sour poet of withdrawal persisted

and persists. M. L. Rosenthal, in his influential The Modern Poets (1960) had said of Larkin that he

is typical of a younger group of self-snubbers and self-loathers (who, nevertheless, have never thought to put down their wretched mirrors). He is forever promising to be a wit and then appealing to the reader to pity him instead. It is another turn-on that petty bitterness about life that Betjeman too sometimes exhibits -- not a world's sorrow and loss of meaning, but the sullenness of a man who finds squalor in his own spirit and fears to liberate himself from it.³⁷

And in his later book, The New Poets (1967), Rosenthal was to say that a "fundamental lugubriousness marks, and mars, much of Larkin's writing despite its colloquial ease and half-confessional naturalness".³⁸ More recently, Calvin Bedient has given us what amounts to a portrait of Larkin as a poet of withdrawal. In his Eight Contemporary Poets he condemns him with faint praise:

Poet though he is of the essential absence from life itself, he yet makes himself present as regret that it must be so; and for all his defeatism it is easy to find him a sympathetic figure as he stands at the window, trying not to cloud it with his breath, mourning the winter casualties, concerned to be there even though convinced beyond all argument that, like everything else, his concern is gratuitous.³⁹

The figure Bedient creates here is but a slight variation on a portrait given in an earlier essay, where he renders Larkin as "a wise ghost", who "observes life half wistfully, half

coldly, from the further side".⁴⁰ This kind of comment becomes staple fare in the world of reviewing. An anonymous reviewer in The Virginia Quarterly Review, for example, sees Larkin as "a somewhat bitter swan plunging down the waters of the so-sad Thames".⁴¹ And Eric Homberger refers to Larkin as "The saddest heart in the postwar supermarket".⁴² While some critics see him as a sort of poet as cry-baby, others, such as J. M. Newton, see him as maudlin-perverse. In a review of The Whitsun Weddings, Newton has said that there is no "delicate generous spirit struggling against defeat" in Larkin's poetry, but only "a rather mean sourness and misery and putting these into poetry seems to be the poet's way to feeling a little more comfortable and complacent with them".⁴³

The view that Larkin is a poet who is withdrawn from the world is as much the result of a certain notion as to what his themes are as it is also of the notion that his ground-tone is one of despair. Geoffrey Thurley says of "Mr. Bleaney" that it is a poem which "really adumbrates the great theme of all of Larkin's work: failure".⁴⁴ And Martin Seymour-Smith says that "Larkin's subject is self-deprecation, sexual defeat, decay".⁴⁵ All in all, it has become a firm convention in the world of Larkin criticism to see him as a profoundly pessimistic poet.⁴⁶

Larkin is seen as a detached writer because cynical, or bored, or sad, or defeatist. Collected together, the comments quoted above project an image of him as a poet of misery, a bored and detached pessimist who at best is a moaner and at

worst is downright soured and Swiftian. This view of Larkin as a withdrawn pessimist remains current today, and is the view which most obscures his real achievement. Interestingly, on this point, Larkin, who is otherwise extremely reticent about his own work, has addressed the critics who see him as a dreary connoisseur of failure. In an interview with Ian Hamilton, he has said:

One thingg [sic] I do feel a slight restiveness about is being typed as someone who has carved out for himself a uniquely dreary life, growing older, having to work, and not getting things he wants and so on -- is this so different from everyone else? I'd like to know how all these romantic reviewers spend their time -- do they kill a lot of dragons, for instance? If other people do have wonderful lives, then I'm glad for them, but I can't help feeling that my miseries are overdone a bit by the critics.⁴⁷

The good-humoured question, "do they kill a lot of dragons, for instance?" is one which Larkin asks as a way of indicating that he, at least, considers himself to be a realist, neither a poet of "bleak wanhope",⁴⁸ nor a lotus-eater. I shall later attempt to show that the record of the poetry itself bears out the truth of Larkin's claim that his "miseries are overdone a bit by the critics". Taken as a whole, each volume of Larkin's work contains poems which are relentless in their attention to the dismal aspects of human experience. Larkin is a poet who deals frankly with transiency and death as themes. But additionally, each volume also contains poems which manage to praise life while at the same time keeping a

steady eye on its bleaker aspects. The error of the "romantic reviewers" is that they identify Larkin's sensibility as only an ironic one. It is a mistake which we have already seen as involved in one version of his development as a poet. The result is a tendency on the part of these critics, to emphasize a tone of sardonicism in Larkin's poetry, at the expense of other tones which also inform his work. We can later demonstrate that the sardonic is a tone which Larkin often introduces in his poetry only for the sake of dismissing it as inadequate to the demands of experience.

As opposed to the view of Larkin as a detached writer, there is another prominent view which sees him as a poet of the ordinary, a celebrator of common humanity, a poet whose colloquial style gives the average person access to his poetic world. It is a view which is generally a more complimentary one. Anthony Thwaite has said of Larkin that "In a straightforward Wordsworthian sense, he is a man speaking to men (though his detractors might put it that he is a chap chatting to chaps)."⁴⁹ John Betjeman titles his review of "The Whitsun Weddings" with the words, "Common experiences", and says that Larkin "has certainly closed the gap between poetry and the public which the experiments and obscurity of the past fifty years have done so much to widen",⁵⁰ while in the culminating paragraph of his pamphlet on Larkin, Alan Brownjohn states that Larkin's is "a poetry which catches and makes beautiful the stuff of the experience of common men in the twentieth century".⁵¹ The poetry itself testifies to the accuracy of

these claims. Larkin's poems are everywhere populated with ordinary people living their plain lives. His "Show Saturday" and "To the Sea", both from the recent High Windows, are poems which are especially brilliant in their celebration of the rituals of ordinary life, and in "Born Yesterday", from The Less Deceived, the speaker wishes for the newborn infant (Sally Amis) an untroubled, ordinary happiness:

May you be ordinary;
 Have, like other women,
 An average of talents;
 Not ugly, not good looking,
 Nothing uncusomary
 To pull you off your balance,
 That, unworkable itself,
 Stops all the rest from working.
 In fact, may you be dull --
 If that is what a skilled,
 Vigilant, flexible,
 Unemphasised, enthralled
 Catching of happiness is called.⁵²

As we can see from this poem, Larkin does at times, trust the values of the commonplace; and it is therefore apposite of Richard Swigg, for example, to call him the "Laureate of the Ordinary",⁵³ or of Hermann Peschmann to say that he is "the poet of l'homme moyen sensuel, the Laureate of the Common Man". Peschmann adds that "Perhaps one should add though, 'of the Common Contemporary Man'."⁵⁴ But if, for the most part, this view of Larkin's identity is a complimentary one, which is intended to indicate the democratic and untroubled way in which he is capable of showing what Peschmann refers to as a "compassionate tenderness for the suffering of others",⁵⁵ it is also an identity for which some critics have taken him to

task, claiming that it renders his work pedestrian and evasive.

A. Alvarez is the most influential critic to have seen Larkin's resort to the ordinary in a disagreeable light. He has very sharply criticized what he perceives to be the attentions of the Movement poets, and he feels that Larkin typifies their desire to restore "poetry to the realm of common sense". He claims that in "Church Going" Larkin has tried to show that "the poet is not a strange creature inspired; on the contrary, he is just like the man next door -- in fact, he probably is the man next door".⁵⁶ In that poem it is the ostensible mediocrity of the speaker which Alvarez objects to. He registers a worry that Larkin's speaker represents a mentality which is evasive, one which is neither alert to the world outside of England, nor to the urgency of the modern Zeitgeist. In the end, Alvarez's development of his objection builds into yet another kind of case against Larkin, one which is cast in terms of Larkin's timidity in matters of psychological depth. That is a case I shall deal with shortly. To continue with the record of those who dislike his attention to ordinary experience and ordinary values, there is Richard Swigg's observation in Poetry Nation Review, written in the critical tradition of Larkin-as-psyche-failure;

Indeed, what marks Larkin off so distinctly from Auden's fumbblings about the value of being ordinary is the deathly inadequacies which his contempt and clarity of purpose bring him to celebrate. His is not just the case of the Philistine mind which yearns for some semi-tragic prestige to gloss over his own reluctance to see beyond his

undeveloped, withered feelings: Larkin's Philistinism is, more unpleasantly, an aspect of a very purposeful mind dedicated to the breaking down, the dissolving away into multiplicity, ambivalences, of direct or definite feeling.

Swigg later says in his essay that what he finds ultimately repulsive in Larkin is his "total numbing of distaste for the vulgarized".⁵⁷ For Swigg, Larkin's attention to the ordinary is really nothing more than a fascination with the cheap and tawdry, the preoccupation of a decadent mind. If Swigg sees Larkin's Philistinism as a kind of mental disease, a less dogmatic, but more casual critic, the poet Charles Tomlinson, sees Larkin's descent to the ordinary as indicative of "a provincial laziness of mind adopted as public attitude and as the framework for an equally provincial verse".⁵⁸ And speaking of Larkin's untroubled attitude to modernity as an aspect of form and of matter, John Press aligns Larkin's sensibility with that of John Betjeman:

His distaste for elaborate speculation about the nature of poetry, his warm approval of Betjeman's passionate, exclusive love for 'Dear old, bloody old England,' his longing backward look at the prelapsarian innocence of English poetry in the days before the cosmopolitan heirs of Symbolism brought obscurity into the world, all point to one conclusion: that Larkin is a classic example of the provincial poet.⁵⁹

Unlike Alvarez, Swigg, and Tomlinson, John Press is not interested in attacking Larkin; he is simply anxious to mark off

the circumference of Larkin's sensibility. Within the bounds of that circle, one which is narrowed to "most unpromising material -- the boredom, the inadequacy, the pointlessness, the nagging anxiety of suburban life in our day", Press finds Larkin to be "a poet who has endured 'a wretched width of cold' with unfailing dignity and self-awareness".⁶⁰

As we can see, such variations on the theme of Larkin's ordinariness can in fact differ widely in assessments of his accomplishment as a poet. Perhaps the most interesting variation of the perspective is the one which characterized Larkin as not only laureate of the common man, laureate of ordinary experience, but as the candid laureate of the new post-war Welfare State England. Many analyses of Larkin's achievement take this perspective on the poetry. Significantly, they all stress his honesty, his willingness to confront an England which is immediately before his eyes. A. Kingsley Weatherhead, for example, sees the focal point of Larkin's poetry to be not simply the poetry of ordinary life, but the poetry of the common humanity of an England which has been "distinguishable for a generation or so", an England in which "the eagles and trumpets are gone" and the whole nation has settled down to ordinary life. Speaking of the sixties, Weatherhead notes that,

During these years the glorious and the flamboyant have gradually been edged out of life, corporate and private, in favor of the safe, reasonable step, the considered decision, the committee report; it is as though Britain realized that it had lost its

youth and was determined to be sensible, to watch its weight and its savings, and not catch cold. And there has developed a way of life, not less wise, certainly not a whit less moral, but less, so-to-say, photogenic; in a word, ordinary.⁶¹

On the basis of this perception of the contemporary English social temperament, Weatherhead sees Larkin, a poet who "will not countenance a split between life and poetry",⁶² as the spokesman of that temperament; an intelligent man who tells the grey truth. As a result Weatherhead can appreciate the beauty which Larkin evokes in the ordinary humanity of a poem such as "The Whitsun Weddings",⁶³ with its immediacy and appreciation of ordinary ritual. He finds Larkin to be a poet capable of finding moments of beauty in the midst of the new prosaic order of English life.

Another critic, Frederick Grubb, finds what he calls Larkin's "provinciality" to be precisely what makes for the sanity of his view of reality:

There is a rationale behind Larkin's provinciality which must be distinguished from the parochial. The parochial is the glorification of prudence, chosen through self-interest, mediocrity or fear. A dirty word to the mass media, the provincial is the trust in roots, the refusal to be gulled, the reservation of respect and enthusiasm before the glamorous and the seductive, which characterizes the man who is determined to start from the minimal, the known, the dependable in his own thought and experience.⁶⁴

It is these characteristics of sensibility which Grubb finds in the attitude of the speakers in Larkin's poems. Of

"Afternoons", for example, he says that it "is typical of poems whose kindly stoicism is British in its refusal of angst"; and although he registers a fear that Larkin might "end as the John Betjeman of Little England", he might well be reassured by his own good evidence, evidence which concludes that even though Larkin's subject is "man and man: live and let live", he is not the poet of cliché experience. Grubb sees Larkin preeminently as the poet who pierces the illusions of "the paradis artificiel" and shows us the "reality of anxiety and fear" which, as in "Wants", lies just slightly behind our lives. It is in this "downright honesty" of Larkin's perceptions, an honesty which very often pierces the veil of ordinary or common illusions, which makes him more than a "John Betjeman of Little England".⁶⁵

This quality of "honesty" is the one most often referred to by those critics and reviewers who respond appreciatively to Larkin's work. Speaking, for instance, of the "cumulative effect" of Larkin's poetry, Stephen S. Hilliard has recently said that:

For me, his ability to face and live in a world of limited and uncertain meaning is provocative; he accepts what drives other poets to evasion or despair. I was attracted to Larkin by the wit and beauty of his verse, but I have come to value more its clear-voiced honesty at a time when many of us conceal ourselves in rhetoric or retreat into silence.⁶⁶

Larkin, far from simply hiding within the citadel of the commonplace, is really a poet whose candid attention to common

experience takes on a classical purport in its recognition of life as it is lived, not as transformed into "rhetoric". And this is perhaps the most stimulating version of Larkin's accomplishment to date. As this study will eventually attempt to show, Larkin is above all a poet of witness, and his alertness to the visage of the physical world is a scrupulous one. He is a poet who writes out of a strong conviction that the function of art is to record one's perceptions of the experiential world, not to simply express emotional states or abstract ideas. To that extent, the view of him as a poet of the commonplace and the ordinary is one which is consonant with his own essentially empirical temper of imagination.

Perhaps the most influential critic to praise the rightness of Larkin's consent to the ordinary, his facing up to the realities of present day England, is Donald Davie. Again, it is the accuracy of Larkin's picture of English life which Davie responds to. We recognize, he says, that "the England in his poems is the England we have inhabited".⁶⁷ And speaking of the landscape in "The Whitsun Weddings", Davie finds Larkin to be unconventionally calm about the clutter which other poets so naturally become hysterical about:

And for Larkin indeed this seems to be one of the rules of the game; there is to be no historical perspective, no measuring of present and past. Canals and smashed cars come along with hedges and cattle simply because they come along like that in any railway journey through England, as we all know. And precisely because poem after poem since The Waste Land has measured our present (usually seen as depleted) against our past

(usually seen as rich), Larkin's refusal to do this is thoroughly refreshing -- at last, we recognize with relief, we can take all that for granted, take it as read. It's in this that Larkin differs from John Betjeman, whom he admires; Betjeman is the most nostalgic of poets, Larkin the least.⁶⁸

For Davie, it is the contemporaneousness of Larkin's glance which is interesting. Davie, in an attempt to underline Larkin's quiet realism -- as opposed, oddly, to the escapism of Ted Hughes -- says that he admires Larkin's willingness to accept the fact that, in England, landscape is now totally neutralized by industrialism, and that in the words of Mairi MacInnes, "Humanity has covered all."⁶⁹ Though worried about a potential passivity in the stance, Davie is nonetheless respectful of the fact that "Larkin, as regards landscape and architecture and indeed literature also, agrees to tolerate the intolerable for the sake of human solidarity with those who don't find it tolerable at all."⁷⁰ In other words, Davie considers Larkin's tolerance of squalor to exist in the name of his respect for the human being above all else. By comparison, other writers seem to Davie to be escapist. For him, Larkin's apparent provincialism is nothing more than an honest facing up to the diminished reality of contemporary England. Davie would agree with Frederick Grubb's claim that "Larkin is the antidote of an exile",⁷¹ a poet who confronts reality by staying home to pay witness.

Lolette Kuby's book on Larkin, An Uncommon Poet For the Common Man (1974), insofar as it deals with Larkin's focus on

ordinary experience, is in sympathy with the kind of insights which we have witnessed in the criticism of Grubb and Davie. "In Larkin's poems", she says, "the problems of the twentieth century are not issues. They are the things his personae handle, the sights they see, the way they think." For Kuby, Larkin's preoccupation with the everyday is far from pedestrian. The note of caution on which she ends her book is one that most appreciative critics of Larkin would consent to. It is crucial to any understanding of his work in terms which involve the "ordinary" and the "common". She says:

Perhaps to speak of Larkin's poetry as appealing to the common man or the "middle-brow public" is to miss the mark. It implies an uncomplicated poetry of pap ideas and 'pop' language. What Larkin actually appeals to is the common in man, the common denominators of his humanity, the essential processes of his psychology, his disillusionments, his conflict as an individual with society, and his conflict as a unique consciousness with the unconscious forces of nature, time, change, and death, and he does so in highly complex poetry whose meanings are not easily exhausted.⁷²

Like Grubb and Davie, Kuby is anxious to underscore the realization that there is a kind of candour in Larkin's attention to the everyday, and that the attention does not exclude him from the realm of thematic depth. His themes are rooted in the ordinary, but are enriched by it, not toppled to the pedestrian. His frank realization of essentially where he lives, and his ability to evoke the recognizable ambience of contemporary life, have earned for Larkin his loudest notes of

praise. That praise, unfortunately, is often drowned, to recall the words of Clive James, in the "boom, bust and sweaty rumble of the literary roller derby".⁷³

There is also a good deal of noise in that derby which has to do with the question of Larkin's mental timidity. It comes from a critical view which sees his achievement as limited by a fear of psychological exploration. Based on a narrow view of what makes for relevant poetry in our time, A. Alvarez finds Larkin to be, in effect, lacking in adventurousness. In almost Catch-22 fashion, if Larkin is considered by critics such as M. L. Rosenthal and J. M. Newton to be a poet of mental squalor, Alvarez, on the other hand says that his work is wanting because of its quality of reserve. The title of Alvarez's introduction to The New Poetry is "The New Poetry, or Beyond the Gentility Principle". It could well be retitled "Beyond Larkinism", because what Alvarez claims is that Larkin is too genteel a poet. In the context of the following comment, we can see what that means:

My own feeling is that a good deal of poetic talent exists in England at the moment. But whether or not it will come to anything largely depends not on the machinations of any literary racket but on the degree to which the poets can remain immune to the disease so often found in English culture: gentility.⁷⁴

In Alvarez's thesis, Larkin is symptomatic of that "disease" in that in his essentially Movement alliance with "common sense" he is not a poet of risk, not a poet of "extremity". His relative calmness of bearing is irrelevant to the crisis

realities of our time. Alvarez sees "gentility" as psychologically timid, given the darksome discoveries of modern psychoanalysis. He offers a blueprint for contemporary poetry, while at the same time disclaiming that it is one:

I am not suggesting that modern English poetry, to be really modern, must be concerned with psychoanalysis or with concentration camps or with the hydrogen bomb or with any other of the modern horrors. I am not suggesting, in fact, that it must be anything. For poetry that feels it has to cope with pre-determined subjects ceases to be poetry and becomes propaganda. I am, however, suggesting that it drop the pretence that life, give or take a few social distinctions, is the same as ever, that gentility, decency and all the other social totems will eventually muddle through.⁷⁵

Alvarez's terms bring with them a distinction between the poet who is "enislanded"⁷⁶ (Larkin being in this category) and poets who are more explorative and cosmopolitan, such as Ted Hughes. He argues this distinction by way of a comparison of two poems, Larkin's "At Grass" and Hughes' "A Dream of Horses". He finds Larkin's poem about retired race horses to be "elegant and unpretentious and rather beautiful in its way", while the horses in Hughes' poem have a "violent, impending presence", a primitive reality to them. He continues, "they reach back, as in a dream, into a nexus of fear and sensation". The poem is seen as representative of the "new depth poetry, the openness to experience"⁷⁷ which Larkin is seen as incapable of exploring. Larkin is restricted in scope, too circumscribed by his common sense and gentility. This

analysis returns us, in roundabout fashion, to the picture of Larkin as a poet of withdrawal, a poet of restrictive common sense, and in final irony, a poet too stable for large contemporary significance.

The limitation of Alvarez's thesis lies in the fragility of its base in the analysis of the two poems. Larkin's poem is really one about old age. It is not a poem which takes as its intention the exploration of the dark recesses of consciousness. Alvarez is comparing apples and oranges. Had he referred to "Wedding Wind", or "If, My Darling", for instance, he would see that Larkin is as alert to the mystery and vulnerability of consciousness as any contemporary. Additionally, Larkin does not consciously write in the tradition of Confessional verse. His accomplishment as a poet lies in a quite other direction -- we might say an opposite one, as this study will attempt to demonstrate. He is simply not as noisy about the theme as some of his critics might wish him to be. Alvarez's argument, in its eagerness to endorse the poetry of Hughes, also overlooks interesting similarities which can be drawn between the work of the two poets, but we shall return to that connection later. His view of Larkin as a genteel recluse is finally more important in the power it has had in critical circles than in the accuracy or rigour of its claims. It is a view which abets the common notion that Larkin is a poet of detachment, pale and timid in his perspective on experience.

Alvarez's jealous regard for the poetry of Hughes is only matched by his praise for the poetry of the Confessionals, especially the work of Robert Lowell.⁷⁸ Larkin supposedly pales by comparison, and yet it is those comparisons which more sympathetic critics have made along these lines that most ably answer Alvarez's thesis. Indeed the criticism of this order has managed to accent Larkin's more subtle psychological effects. Roger Bowen, for instance, unwittingly upends Alvarez's claims in an analysis of Larkin's ability to create a strongly living sense of psychic intensity in his poem "Deceptions". The mind of the rape-victim in the poem is characterized by Larkin as "open like a drawer of knives". Bowen praises Larkin's ability to imagine the "almost Plath-like pain of her mind" and his unguarded registration of the moral-psychological complexities of the scene. He finds Larkin's sympathy -- both for the victim and the rapist -- to be poignant, and adds that the poem "reverberates with contemporary significance for poet and reader".⁷⁹ Alvarez has said of Lowell that he has dealt with his "disturbances" quite "nakedly, and without evasion".⁸⁰ The implication of Bowen's analysis of "Deceptions" is that Larkin, in a different poetic manner, has done precisely the same thing. And the security of that judgement is perhaps the more solid, given that Bowen is not consciously in argument with Alvarez's thesis.

Alan Brownjohn more directly meets Alvarez's objection to Larkin in his essay "English Poetry in the Early Seventies". He compares W. D. Snodgrass' poem "The Operation" with

Larkin's "Ambulances", and finds a quality of "reticence" in Larkin's poem which, far from being the mere expression of gentility, is a quality which gracefully holds the poem back from exhibitionism. Larkin's reticence is seen as a quality which is capable of "possessing, yet withholding, features of extremity":⁸¹

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

Then children strewn on steps or road,
Or women coming from the shops
Past smells of different dinners, see
A wild white face that overtops
Red stretcher-blankets momentarily
As it is carried in and stowed,

And sense the solving emptiness
That lies just under all we do,
And for a second get it whole,⁸²
So permanent and blank and true.

Brownjohn finds this anchoring of the terrifying epiphany in the ordinary, casting of the perception of death as rising suddenly out of the context of "daily living", to be indicative of a "reticence that manages an infinite, and infinitely disquieting, suggestiveness".⁸³ He finds Snodgrass' poem to be melodramatic by comparison, too much given to Confessional egocentrism.

From stainless steel basins of water
They brought warm cloths and they washed me,
From spun aluminum bowls, cold Zephiran sponges, fuming;
Gripped in the dead yellow glove, a bright straight razor
Inched on my stomach, down my groin,

Paring the brown hair off. They left me
White as a child, not frightened.

In the thin, loose, light, white garments,
The delicate sandals of poor Pierrot,
A schoolgirl first offering her sacrament.⁸⁴

For Brownjohn, the poem is too noisy. The poet, he says, "is adopting the posture of a martyr to drastic experience". He notes that "the camera certainly homes with melodramatic vividness on that razor" and says that the second stanza (at least the part quoted) is "turning self-pitying".⁸⁵ In the end, Brownjohn allows that the Snodgrass poem redeems itself somewhat in its descending stanzas, but his point about Larkin's finer "reticence" stands firm. His view of Larkin is one which ably answers the Alvarez thesis. Larkin is a poet who, rather than evading the experience of extremity, deals with it in a manner less strident than we are used to in our experience of Confessional poetry.

Brownjohn's way of answering Alvarez is very adept, but equally adequate is Anthony Thwaite's somewhat more general approach to the question of "relevance":

The fact that Larkin hasn't, in his poems, confronted head-on the death camps or the Bomb (or Vietnam or Che Guevara) doesn't make him, by definition, minor. His themes -- love, change, disenchantment, the mystery and inexplicableness of the past's survival and death's finality -- are unshakeably major.⁸⁶

To Thwaite's comment we might add that Larkin is as sensitive as any to the registration of personal and cosmic pain, indeed

his "romantic reviewers"⁸⁷ think him obsessed with it. But the registration of that pain is more quietly crafted, as Alan Brownjohn has shown. And Larkin's attention to the physical world and to the more "ordinary" aspects of life, give his poetry a wider scope than is the case in Confessional poetry. Additionally, as the following comment by Larkin himself might show, the manner of the extremists can be one which simply wears thin:

Whether one finds the recent emphasis on violence and insanity discouraging depends, I suppose, on what your view of poetry is. If these are genuinely what a writer finds poetic then of course he must deal with them. For some, I fear, they have become simply fashionable properties.⁸⁸

It is significant that Emily Dickinson is a poet whom Larkin much admires. Her quiet intimacy with the reader is in kin with Larkin's own quality of "reticence" (one recalls here John Bayley's observation that Larkin's "intimacy is that of the lounge-bar, never the psychiatric couch".⁸⁹). In reviewing one of Dickinson's volumes, Larkin has said that,

[Dickinson's] successes, when one comes to think of them, are when she is at her least odd, her most controlled. This is worth remembering in an age when almost any poet who can produce evidence of medical care is automatically ranked higher than one who has stayed sane: 'very mad, very holy' as the natives say in one of Evelyn Waugh's novels, and we must take care not to copy their way of thinking. Poetry is an affair of sanity, of seeing things as they are.⁹⁰

This sentence, "Poetry is an affair of sanity, of seeing things as they are", can be said to express the mature intention of all of Larkin's work.

W. H. Auden bequeathed a scathing comment on "our makers" in 1972. He saw our poets as writers who,

even at their best are so often morose or
kinky, petrified by their gorgon egos.

We all ask, but I doubt if anyone
can really say why all age-groups should find our

Age quite so repulsive.⁹¹

It is a harsh judgement, but in an age when, as Larkin has said, there is an "emphasis on violence and insanity", and when death by suicide has become a common way to crown a poet's career, it is devastatingly appropriate. Larkin is a poet who is capable of expressing a kind of health in the midst of this malaise, a poet who resists absorption in the self by way of an unusually quickened attention to the physical world outside his ego. The criticism of his work to date has not managed to explore the full implication of this focus of his work. As we have seen, the major complimentary emphasis on his work has been in terms which relate his sensitivity to the ordinariness of the life which surrounds him. It is a view which is turned toward the negative by those critics who see that sensitivity as limited, provincial, or evasive of the crisis-mentality of our time. And the view of Larkin as a poet of detachment is the one which is most prevalent and most limiting of his achievement and, in this

case we might say, his person. It is a label which critics attach to his work for various reasons; because he is a cynical swaggerer, the bored product of the Movement; because of his pervasive mood of sadness; or because of a groundtone of pessimism and despair which many find to be the cumulative impression his work conveys.

A wider critical perspective remains to be developed for Larkin; a major means of achieving this is by a careful examination of his unusual concern with the physical world and its specific detail, with experiential reality as a vital stimulus to poetry. This is the thread in his work which involves the whole fabric. To pay attention to Larkin's comments on art, and to the poetry as attentive to the physical world, is to be led to a recognition of the tradition in which he writes. It is one which has its twentieth century roots in Imagist theory and is also one which D. H. Lawrence is richly connected with. It is pointless to upbraid Larkin for not writing in a Confessional mode, as A. Alvarez has done. If we venture co-operatively into his work using Larkin's own comments on art and those of other artists of an empirical tradition as a guide, we are led to an understanding of the complexity of his work. It is a complexity which, once understood, abruptly leaves behind idle commentary on his bleakness, and tasteful speeches on how the poet should or should not write. If we venture this degree of co-operation with the work, it enables us to offer a more just criticism than has thus far been conventionally granted in the world of Larkin criticism.

Above all, it gives us the opportunity to appreciate the work while also analyzing its complexity of craft.

The method by which this study will emphasize Larkin's durable grasp of the physical world is through close analysis of pertinent poems, the majority of which are to be found in the volumes after The North Ship. The only place where a volume is given exceptional attention is in the chapter entitled "The Physical World: Agnostic Wonder". This is because High Windows is the volume which is coincidentally most appropriate to the theme dealt with in that chapter. As mentioned before, Larkin is not a poet who develops simply from an early "romantic" to a later "ironic" disposition. His mature work is both sophisticated in irony, and strongly empirical in its cautious reach toward the more romantic. As a result, the poetry after The North Ship, with the exception of High Windows, is treated without developmental divisions.

Chapter Two, "The Boredom and Sadness of the World", confronts the conventional tradition of Larkin criticism which sees him as an essentially aloof poet. As this is the tradition which is at complete loggerheads with our interests here, it is necessary to blunt its edge before proceeding. It is a view which mistakes the complex nature of Larkin's irony, failing to recognize an exploratory aspect to its place in his overall intention of discovering the intelligible in the physical world. Related to this mistake is a notion that Larkin's other characteristic tone is one of sadness. This point will be examined in the light of Larkin's own recognition

of the importance of the tone to his view of life, and as opposed to the critics' claim that it is his dominant, and dominantly passive, tone.

Chapter Three, "Imagism and the Physical World", proceeds past the objections to Larkin's poetic personality, and into the rich connection which his work has with the Imagist theorists of the early part of the century. By co-operating with Larkin's own views on art, and relating them to the similarly empirical bias of the Imagists and to given theoretical comments of Wallace Stevens, we can come to an understanding of the complex epiphanic nature of Larkin's work -- a recognition which leads us to a realization of the negative capability which is central to his disposition as a poet of the physical world.

Chapter Four, "The Physical World: Agnostic Wonder", involves a widening of concern. Larkin's retrieval of the physical world as a vital stimulus to poetry is also seen as bringing with it a retrieval of wonder. In this connection, D. H. Lawrence is seen -- in his similar insistence on the need for a recognition of the physical world as being an alive and present focus for all art -- to be a figure behind Larkin's work. Lawrence's example, in large measure, accounts for the agnostic wonder which is central to Larkin's work. Indeed the wonder is so central that it upends all easy commentary on his bleakness.

Chapter Five, "Placing Larkin" emphasizes the importance of Larkin's achievement in terms of its provision of an option

for meaning which has not been provided by the Modernist tradition which preceded him, nor the Confessional one which is contemporaneous with his work. Additionally, it relates Larkin's achievement to the work of three other contemporaries: Ted Hughes, R. S. Thomas, and Thom Gunn. Different as all four poets are from one another, they share a common conviction that the physical world is the most vital source of poetic inspiration in their work. Significantly, their craft is an empirical one, and can be as readily connected with that of the Imagists and of D. H. Lawrence -- as we found to be the case in Larkin's work. Their focus on the physical world brings with it a similar capacity for the wonder which we find to be at the center of Larkin's imagination. Consequently, they can be said to share in Larkin's movement past the all but terminal pessimism of the Modernist tradition, and to provide an option for meaning which is not made available in the contemporary tradition of Confessional verse.

NOTES: CHAPTER I.

¹David Timms, Philip Larkin (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1973), p. 1.

²Martin Scofield, "The Poetry of Philip Larkin," Massechussets Review, 2 (1976), 370.

³Hermann Peschmann, "Philip Larkin: Laureate of the Common Man," English, 14 (1976), 57.

⁴Donald Davie, Thomas Hardy and British Poetry (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 64.

⁵Arthur Oberg, "Larkin's Lark Eggs: The Vision is Sentimental," Stand, 18, No. 1 (1976), 21. Oberg feels that Larkin has become a major poet only because there are no great poets visible to contest the matter. "During the past fifteen years," he says, "Larkin has been to British poetry what Robert Lowell is to American poetry--a figure larger than other poets who happen to be around, a writer whose body of work has taken on a force and resonance often beyond what it can bear (21)."

⁶In Philip Larkin, David Timms relates: "In a recent (1972) broadcast of tributes to Larkin on his fiftieth birthday, W. H. Auden called him 'a master of the English language.' Roy Fuller, who, like Auden, has been Professor of Poetry at Oxford, also recorded his admiration of Larkin's work in this broadcast, as did Larkin's distinguished, and very different contemporary, Ted Hughes (p. 2)."

And the praise does not stop there. In a reply to a question posed to him by Ian Hamilton on the state of poetry in England, Thom Gunn remarked that "it seems awfully dreary. There are a few totally unconnected people whom I think are very good, Ted Hughes, Donald Davie, and Philip Larkin." See "Four Conversations," an interview with Ian Hamilton in London Magazine, 4 (Summer 1964), 68. Seamus Heaney has written an appreciative analysis of Larkin's poetry in which he praises Larkin as the poet of "composed and tempered English nationalism." See "Now and in England," Critical Inquiry, 3 (1977), 486. John Betjeman wrote an appreciative review of The Whitsun Weddings (see Note #50), and Alan Brownjohn has written a pamphlet on Larkin's work (See Note #8). Robert Lowell, in a review of Larkin's The Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse, noted that "When I read Larkin first in 1956, he made other styles obsolete." (See "Digressions from Larkin's 20th-Century Verse," Encounter, 40 (1973), 66-68.

7

Philip Larkin, The Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973). For the most part, the reviews of the book have been negative. Reviewers have seen Larkin's inclusion of many minor poets at the expense of major Modernist poets to be irresponsible. For an example of a review which follows this standard line, see Stephen Spender's comments in Spectator, 31 March, 1973, pp. 394-5. In the same line--but with indignation--there is Robin Skelton's editorial comment in Malahat Review, No. 27 (July 1973) in which he says that Larkin's selection is "a compilation which no knowledgeable person can contemplate without dismay" and "When we get down to the matter of authors included and excluded it is hard not to gasp with astonishment (5)." The tone of Skelton's remarks is representative. Larkin's selection is seen by many as an affront to established modern critical taste. There are more even tempered reviews of the book, though they are few in number. See, for example, George Woodcock's "Old and New Oxford Books: The Idea of an Anthology," in Sewanee Review, 82 (1976), 119-30. and John Wain's "Art, if You Like," in Encounter, 34 (1970), 68-71.

8

This might be partly due to the fact that in the period stretching from 1973 to 1975 there was much publishing activity. In 1973, David Timms' book was published, and Larkin's Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century Verse appears. Timms' book was a good, basic introduction to Larkin's work. Published in paperback and in the Oliver and Boyd "Modern Writers" series, it was given the opportunity to reach a wide audience. It has had good reviews. Clive James, for example, said that "it can be strongly recommended. The scholarship is meticulous and the commentary is gratifyingly sane." See "Wolves of Memory," rev: of High Windows, Encounter, 42 (1974), 67. Then Phoenix published a special "Philip Larkin Issue," a double issue (Nos. 11-12, Autumn and Winter, 1973-74), which included worksheets of Larkin's "At Grass" and over a dozen articles and reviews which, for the most part, were written by well known critics. In 1974 Larkin's High Windows appeared, and became the subject of reviews on both sides of the Atlantic. One of the noticeable shifts in the early seventies was the increase in attention paid to Larkin in the United States. Journals such as Sewanee Review, Contemporary Literature, and Southern Review began to carry essay articles on Larkin, and a doctoral dissertation on Larkin's poetry by Lolette Kuby was published in 1974 under the title: The Uncommon Poet for the Common Man: A Study of

NOTES CONT'D: CHAPTER I.

Philip Larkin's Poetry (The Hague: Mouton). In 1975 Alan Brownjohn wrote a 32 page pamphlet for the Longman Group's British Council "Writers and Their Work" series. Even this external look at the publishing activity of a two year period in the mid-seventies shows a considerable surge in attention to Larkin's work.

⁹Clive James, "The State of Poetry -- A Symposium," The Review, Nos. 29-30 (Spring-Summer 1972), 108.

¹⁰John Wain, "The Poetry of Philip Larkin: A Lecture given at Oxford on March 12, 1975;" rpt. in Malahat Review, No. 39 (July 1976), 97.

¹¹Clive James, 108.

¹²Peter Ferguson relates that: "To the best of my knowledge, the only surviving copy of XX Poems currently not held in a private collection is the copy held in the British Library Reference Division, where it may be read by holders of reader's tickets." See "Philip Larkin's XX Poems: The Missing Link," Agenda, 14, No. 14 (1976), 53. Ferguson quotes from a few of the poems in his article, so there is at least a partial view of the volume possible. Additionally, Roger Bowen quotes from it on two separate occasions. See "Poet in Transition: Philip Larkin's XX Poems," Iowa Review, 8, No. 1 (1977), 87-104., and "Death, Failure, and Survival in the Poetry of Philip Larkin," Dalhousie Review, 58, No. 1 (1978), 79-94.

¹³Philip Larkin, The North Ship (1945; rpt. with intro. London: Faber and Faber, 1966); The Less Deceived (1955; rpt. Hessele: The Marvell Press, 1966); The Whitsun Weddings (1964; rpt. London: Faber and Faber, 1968); High Windows (London: Faber and Faber, 1974). All future references to Larkin's poetry in volume form will be to these editions. They will be abbreviated, respectively, as follows: T. N. S., T. L. D., T. W. W., and H. W.

¹⁴Roger Bowen, "Poet in Transition," 87.

¹⁵Philip Larkin, The North Ship, pp. 9-10. For a more detailed account of the connection between Watkins and Larkin, see Larkin's tribute to Watkins, "Vernon Watkins: an Encounter and a Re-encounter," in Vernon Watkins: 1906-1967,

NOTES CONT'D: CHAPTER I.

ed. Leslie Norris (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), pp. 28-34.

¹⁶T. N. S., p. 48.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 37.

¹⁸Philip Larkin, "Philip Larkin Praises the Poetry of Thomas Hardy," Listener, 25 July 1968, p. 111.

¹⁹Hermann Peschmann, p. 50.

²⁰Ian Hamilton, "The Making of the Movement," in Michael Schmidt & Grevel Lindop, ed., British Poetry Since 1960: A Critical Survey (Oxford: Carcanet Press Ltd., 1972), p. 72. The essay first appeared in New Statesman, 23 April, 1971. The most unfortunate aspect of Hamilton's comments lies in the fact that he did not intend to include Larkin in them. His essay has, therefore, an oddness of structure. After all of the limiting remarks, Hamilton's final paragraph contains the following comment: "Conspicuously absent from the foregoing 'reappraisal' is any comment on the poet whose contributions to New Lines seems to me to have any lasting potency; at one level, it could be said that Philip Larkin's poems provide a precise model for what the Movement was supposed to be seeking (p. 73)."

²¹A. Alvarez, The New Poetry (1962; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967), pp. 24-25.

²²Blake Morrison has written a two-part essay on the Movement titled "The Movement: A Re-assessment." It appears in Poetry Nation Review 1, 4; No. 1 and in Poetry Nation Review 2, 4, No. 2. (PN Review does not date its volumes. It supersedes Poetry Nation, which ceased publication in 1976. The first number after the new title refers to the No. of the new production and the number which follows it is a hangover from the previous journal. PN Review began production in 1977. By deduction, Morrison's essay appears in that year.). Morrison's essay is written partially in reply to Ian Hamilton's essay on the Movement (See Note #20). Hamilton had charged that the Movement was created by a group of self-seeking philistines anxious for publication. He viewed an anonymous Spectator article (October 1, 1954) which praised the group, as "advance publication" for Robert Conquest's New Lines. Morrison upends this "conspiracy

NOTES CONT'D: CHAPTER I.

theory" by showing that the bonds between Amis, Davie, Montgomery, Wain, and Larkin grew by virtue of common ties of university, social background, intellectual interests, and their shared view of the writer's attitude to his audience. By indicating, in a convincing fashion, that the Movement was a milieu, not a conspiracy at a printer's office, Morrison has pointed to a seriousness which is ignored by Hamilton's essay.

²³Robert Conquest, New Lines (1956; rpt. New York: MacMillan, 1967), p. xv.

²⁴Philip Larkin, Letter to Judith Anne Johnson, quoted by David Timms, p. 55. Timms' source: Judith Anne Johnson. "The Development of Philip Larkin's Poetry," Unpublished M. A. dissertation, North Dakota State University, 1965, pp. 29-30.

²⁵Blake Morrison, Part One, 26.

²⁶Anon. "In the Movement," Spectator, 1 October, 1954, p. 400. Ian Hamilton (See Note #20) identified this reviewer as Anthony Hartley. Blake Morrison disagrees (See Note #22), and claims that it was written by J. D. Scott.

²⁷Roger Bowen, "Poet In Transition," 87.

²⁸Blake Morrison, Part One, 27.

²⁹Roger Bowen, "Poet In Transition," 87. Bowen gives a list of the thirteen poems from XX Poems which later appeared in The Less Deceived. The following is the list, given in order of their sequence in The Less Deceived. The number after the title indicates the number of the poem as listed in XX Poems: "Wedding Wind" (I), "Coming" (XII), "Dry Point" (XI), "Next Please" (III), "Going" (XIX), "Wants" (XVIII), "No Road" (XIII), "Wires" (XVI), "Spring" (VIII), "Deceptions" (IV), "Latest Face" (V), "If, My Darling" (XIV), and "At Grass" (XX). Bowen states that "Of these, only 'Wedding Wind,' 'Spring,' and 'Wants' had titles in XX Poems, while 'Dry-Point' was originally called 'Etching' (103)."

³⁰Philip Larkin, "Four Conversations," Interview with Ian Hamilton, London Magazine, 4 (November 1964), 72-73.

NOTES CONT'D: CHAPTER I.

- ³¹Robert Conquest, p. xv.
- ³²T. W. W., p. 21.
- ³³Roger Bowen, "Poet In Transition," 87.
- ³⁴For an analysis of Hughes' poem, see below p. 228.
- ³⁵Anon. "In the Movement," 400.
- ³⁶Wain's essay was printed in Critical Quarterly, 6 (1964), 167-68.
- ³⁷M. L. Rosenthal, The Modern Poets (1960; rpt. New York: Galaxy Books, 1965), p. 222.
- ³⁸_____, The New Poets (1967; rpt. London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 234. Rosenthal continues: "It [lugubriousness] is related to the question-begging assumption, only completely saved from dreariness by his witty effects, that most of life is nothing much (p. 234)."
- ³⁹Calvin Bedient, Eight Contemporary Poets (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 94. Bedient tends to be condescending in his treatment of Larkin. He characterizes him as a "neighbourly snowman, he sometimes wears his hat toppled jauntily, and smiles and makes you laugh. Notice the drooping carrot nose in the mockingly titled 'Wild Oats.' (p. 69)." William H. Pritchard, in a review of High Windows, refers to this passage in Bedient's book and rejoins: "If I were the recipient of praise such as this I would feel it necessary to respond, in the words of one of the best new poems from High Windows, 'In a pig's arse, friend.'" See "Larkin Lives," Hudson Review, 28 (1975), 303.
- ⁴⁰_____, "On Ted Hughes," Critical Quarterly, 14 (1972), 108. Bedient compares Hughes to Larkin, noting that; "Hughes is a nihilist on the scuffling, muscled side of nothingness, the opposite kind from, say Philip Larkin, who has long since become a wise ghost. Larkin observes life half wistfully, half coldly, from the further side (108)."

NOTES CONT'D: CHAPTER I.

⁴¹Anon, "High Windows by Philip Larkin," rev. of High Windows, Virginia Quarterly Review, 52, No. 2 (1976), 50.

⁴²Eric Homberger, The Art of the Real (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1977), p. 74.

⁴³J. M. Newton, "...And a More Comprehensive Soul," rev. of The Whitsun Weddings, Cambridge Quarterly, I (Winter 1965-66), 98.

⁴⁴Geoffrey Thurley, The Ironic Harvest: English Poetry in the Twentieth Century (London: Edward Arnold, 1974), p. 147.

⁴⁵Martin Seymour-Smith, Who's Who in Twentieth Century Literature (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977), p. 205. I use this source as a way of indicating that the view of Larkin as a poet of failure has taken on all of the authority of legal description.

⁴⁶Philip Gardner, one of Larkin's most commonly referred to critics, once expressed the view that Larkin is a poet who is dark in outlook. See "The Wintry Drum: The Poetry of Philip Larkin," Dalhousie Review, 48, No. 1 (1968), 88-89. Gardner admires Larkin for the honesty with which he faces the drabness of reality. For Gardner, Larkin is a pessimistic poet, and this is what makes him a powerful one. What is interesting is the fact that his essay has become a locus classicus of Larkinian criticism, is constantly referred to by other critics as proof of Larkin's dark vision.

⁴⁷Philip Larkin, "Four Conversations," 73.

⁴⁸The phrase belongs to John Press, who has said of Larkin: "To blame Larkin for his bleak wanhope is to misinterpret the nature of his poetry. A poet owes complete fidelity to the truth as he perceives it, however dispiriting or shameful it might be." See Rule and Energy: Trends In British Poetry Since The Second World War (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 105.

⁴⁹Anthony Thwaite, "The Poetry of Philip Larkin," in Martin Dodsworth, ed. The Survival of Poetry (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 37.

NOTES CONT'D: CHAPTER I.

⁵⁰John Betjeman, "Common Experiences," rev. of The Whitsun Weddings, Listener, 19 March 1964, p. 483.

⁵¹Alan Brownjohn, Philip Larkin, Writers and Their Work (London: Longman Group for the British Council, 1975), p. 32.

⁵²T. L. D., p. 24.

⁵³Richard Swigg, "Descending To The Commonplace," PN Review 2, 4, No. 2 (1978), 3.

⁵⁴Hermann Peschmann, 57.

⁵⁵Ibid., 51.

⁵⁶A. Alvarez, The New Poetry, p. 25.

⁵⁷Richard Swigg, 11.

⁵⁸Charles Tomlinson, "Poetry Today," in Boris Ford ed., The Pelican Guide to English Literature, No. 7: The Modern Age (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 458.

⁵⁹John Press, p. 98.

⁶⁰Ibid., pp. 105-106.

⁶¹A. Kingsley Weatherhead, "Philip Larkin of England," ELH, 38 (1971), 616-17.

⁶²Ibid., 630.

⁶³T. W. W., p. 21.

⁶⁴Frederick Grubb, A Vision of Reality: A Study of Liberalism In Twentieth-Century Verse (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1965), pp. 226-227.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 233 and 234 respectively.

NOTES CONT'D: CHAPTER I.

⁶⁶Stephen S. Hilliard, "Wit and Beauty," rev. of High Windows, Prairie Schooner, 49 (1975), 270.

⁶⁷Donald Davie, p. 64.

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 65.

⁶⁹This is the last line of MacInnes' poem, "Hardly Anything Bears Watching." Davie quotes it in full on p. 67 of his book. The poem is about the speaker's chagrin over the fact that all "things" are covered with the marks of the human and therefore have "lost their intense surprise" (l. 3). The speaker is depressed about this reality. Larkin is not, argues Davie, and herein lies his forte as a writer. Larkin's view of the industrialized landscape is an accurate one, especially given that "Britain as a whole is the most industrialized landscape in the world (p. 70)."

⁷⁰Donald Davie, p. 69.

⁷¹Frederick Grubb, p. 226. Grubb continues: "Where Gunn seeks enfranchisement in America, Porter salvation in London, and Hughes in the zoological gardens, Mr. Larkin has stayed put in Hull (p. 226)."

⁷²Lolette Kuby, p. 108. The title of Kuby's book is a bit misleading. Her central focus is on Larkin's anti-romantic vision and is therefore in the tradition of criticism which sees him as a darkly ironic writer. Chapter Five, "Disillusion of Reality," and Chapter Six, "Belief Must Die", provide the reader with her central insights into Larkin's work.

⁷³Clive James, p. 108. For context, see above p. 3.

⁷⁴A. Alvarez, The New Poetry, pp. 27-28. This image of Larkin travels a lot. Richard Murphy has said: "A glass case in a room called 'The English Tradition' is where some people, Americans especially, think that Philip Larkin's poetry belongs: they imagine he is a kind of old-fashioned taxidermist who fluffs up the wings of dead ducks, like iambic pentameter and rhymed quatrain, for a public devoted to almost extinct birds." See "The Art of Debunkery," rev. of High Windows, New York Review of Books, 15 May 1975, p. 30.

NOTES CONT'D: CHAPTER I.

⁷⁵Ibid., pp. 27-28.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 26.

⁷⁷Ibid., pp. 30-31.

⁷⁸Alvarez often states this preference for the Confessionals. His book The Savage God: A Study of Suicide (1971; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974), could be said to be written in tribute to Sylvia Plath. For Alvarez's comparison of Larkin and Plath see his review of The Less Deceived in Beyond All This Fiddle (New York: Random House, 1968), pp. 85-87.

⁷⁹Roger Bowen, "Death, Failure and Survival in the Poetry of Philip Larkin," 93.

⁸⁰A. Alvarez, The New Poetry, p. 29.

⁸¹Alan Brownjohn, "English Poetry In The Early Seventies," in Michael Schmidt and Grevel Lindop, ed., British Poetry Since 1960: A Critical Survey (Oxford: Carcanet Press, 1972), p. 247.

⁸²T. W. W., p. 33.

⁸³Alan Brownjohn, p. 247.

⁸⁴As quoted by Brownjohn, pp. 246-47.

⁸⁵Alan Brownjohn, p. 247.

⁸⁶Anthony Thwaite, p. 54.

⁸⁷Philip Larkin, "Four Conversations," 73.

⁸⁸_____, "The State of Poetry--A Symposium," The Review, Nos. 29-30 (Spring-Summer, 1972), 60.

⁸⁹John Bayley, "Too Good For This World," rev. of High Windows, Times Literary Supplement, 21 June 1974, p. 653.

NOTES CONT'D: CHAPTER I

⁹⁰Philip Larkin, "Big Victims: Emily Dickinson and Walter de la Mare," rev. of The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed. Thomas H. Johnson, and The Complete Poems of Walter de la Mare, New Statesman, 13 March 1970, p. 368.

⁹¹W. H. Auden, "Ode to the Medieval Poets," in Damian Grant, ed., Poetry 1973 (Hull: Hull Printers Ltd. for The Critical Quarterly, 1973), p. 5.

CHAPTER II: THE BOREDOM AND SADNESS OF THE WORLD

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The critical view of Larkin as a poet who is cynically and/or sadly detached from the world is the one which is both the most persistent and the least accurate. It is a view which is directed at the psychological base of the poetry, and sees it as expressive of a poetic personality which is inadequate to the demands of experience. In the criticism of this order, Larkin's ironic manner is usually seen as a shield against experience, and his sadness as an expression of withdrawal.¹ On both counts Larkin has been severely misjudged. He is more curious about, more engaged by, and more in empathy with the experiential world than his critics have given him credit for. The inadequacy of the view of him as a detached writer has its origin in a failure to understand the complexities of his quality of impersonality as a writer. At its centre, of poise that impersonality has a sophisticated ironic manner, an impulse to praise, and a conscious philosophy of sadness.

Since it is easy to confuse terms like "detachment" and "impersonality", it is worth making a basic and operative distinction. We can say that the purely detached writer is like the artist described by Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, a craftsman who is "beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence".² He is a cold figure, aloof and separate from the chaos and struggle of the world. Only the adroitness of his craft makes his supreme boredom and smugness at all

tolerable. On the other hand, the impersonal writer is more involved with the world, struggles more with its tensions and conflicts, and for that reason is paradoxically more secure and more human in the wisdom of his poise. His work has its genesis in a fresh and demanding contact with life, yet is strangely calm in the demeanour of its final artistic form. This is the quality of impersonality which informs Larkin's work. The logic of its process was once caught by D. W. Harding in an attempt to account for the oddly engaging coolness of Isaac Rosenberg's work:

This willingness--and ability--to let himself be new-born into the new situation, not subduing his experience to his established personality, is a large part, if not the whole secret of the robustness which characterizes his best work... It was Rosenberg's exposure of his whole personality that gave his work its quality of impersonality.³

Given the tenacity of the claim that Larkin is a poet of detachment, it is the more difficult to demonstrate a quality similar to Rosenberg's impersonality in his poetry. But it would be less than fair not to admit at the outset that given lines of Larkin's poetry help sustain the claim that he is pretty bored with it all. Lines like the following from "Dockery and Son", for example, especially strike the reader who is inclined to see the major Larkin tone as one of caustic withdrawal:

Life is first boredom, then fear.
Whether or not we use it, it goes,
And leaves what something hidden from us chose,
And age, and then the only end of age.⁴

And the Swiftian cynicism of these lines from "This Be The Verse", is not entirely engaging:

Man hands on misery to man.
It deepens like a coastal shelf.
Get out as early as you can,
And don't have any kids yourself.⁵

Even Larkin's advocates are uncomfortable with the boredom, sadness and cynicism of lines such as these.⁶ Both examples would seem to give a basis for the impatience which Charles Tomlinson registered when he claimed that Larkin is too given to a "tenderly nursed sense of defeat".⁷ Yet, having said that, one must nevertheless insist on the importance of a clear and basic truth; namely that the speaker in any poem, and especially in a Larkin poem, is not necessarily the author. Larkin himself has said that "What I should like to do is write different kinds of poems that might be different people."⁸ So any given persona is best seen as an exploration of the possibilities of personality rather than the direct statement of the poet's own. Shakespeare is not MacBeth. Further, in his more dramatic poems Larkin explores the question of the very adequacy -- or inadequacy -- of given personality traits in their relation to the demands of experience. For the sake of argument we can consent to a tendency toward a wryness of manner in Larkin's "established personality". Having accepted that, it then becomes possible to demonstrate the way in which he is capable of leaving that safe anchorage and venture the "exposure of his whole personality" to a more open and enriching contact with the world

of experience.

On this point, "Church Going" can be said to be a representative poem. Its subtle modulation of tone and interplay between what amounts to two basic personality traits, one ironic, the other more open, gives it a paradigmatic importance which is not diminished by virtue of its present status as an anthology chestnut. To understand the purchase which Larkin has on the wry manner of the speaker in that poem is to realize the far wider range of his poetic personality, one which animates all of his work. The central point worth making about the speaker in "Church Going" is that his initial boredom of demeanour is only the "established personality" which, in its detached laziness, is seen as inadequate to the demands of experience. In the very first stanza, the speaker is cast as obnoxiously smug. As a result, it is easy to overlook a more serious and sensitive identity which is almost successfully concealed behind his ironic mask.

Once I am sure there's nothing going on
 I step inside, letting the door thud shut.
 Another church: matting, seats, and stone,
 And little books; sprawlings of flowers, cut
 For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff
 Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;
 And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,
 Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off
 My cycle-clips in awkward reverence.⁹

His scepticism of manner verges on the totally cynical. His list of observations is glibly tossed off in the diction of a wry reporter. We are almost convinced -- by phrases like "some brass and stuff up at the holy end" -- that he is

tiredly above it all, that the scene is unworthy of his attention. But in a telling moment of off-guardedness he takes his cycle clips off in "awkward reverence". It is from the recognition of what this gesture means that the poem builds its more serious base. There is more to this person than a disposition of boredom and irony. The intention of the poem is to discover what that is. On one level the poem is an exploration of the self, with the church acting as an immediate stimulus, an agitator which chips away at the speaker's inadequate ironic cleverness. As the exploration proceeds what we witness is the gradual ascension of a more sensitive and more serious voice. That voice indicates the existence of an odd doubleness of identity in the speaker.

Throughout the poem the process of contemplation is thus given as a dialogue between two voices of a single personality. One voice is sceptical and often turns to the caustic, while the other is more sensitive and struggles toward praise. In a sense the voices are in direct analogy to the two major impulses in Larkin's poetry: the ironic and the romantic. These two impulses erupt and subside, sometimes competitively, sometimes co-operatively, at every turn in the psychological drama which is the poem. In the three final stanzas, the two impulses are welded together into the expression of a richer, more unified sensibility than the one which we have seen at the beginning of the poem. At this point the ironic reserve and the reverence adjust and temper each other, giving a further coherence to both:

I wonder who
 Will be the last, the very last, to seek
 This place for what it was; one of the crew
 That tap and jot and know what rood-lofts were?
 Some ruin-bibber, randy for antique,
 Or Christmas-addict, counting on a whiff
 Of gowns-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh?
 Or will he be my representative,

Bored, uninformed, knowing the ghostly silt
 Dispersed, yet tending to this cross of ground
 Through suburb scrub because it held unspilt
 So long and equably what since is found
 Only in separation -- marriage, and birth,
 And death, and thoughts of these -- for which was built
 This special shell? For, though I've no idea
 What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth,
 It pleases me to stand in silence here;

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 ever 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 early defensive irony is now transformed into a satirical good humour. The reference to the "ruin-bibber" and to the "Christmas-addict" are not only evocative of absurd contemporary types; the very fact that the speaker feels pressured to mock them also shows a desire on his part to protect the sanctity of the ground. The irony is here in the name of the reverence which follows in the final two stanzas. The humour in the poem is no longer simply clever. It is now both protective of the sanctity of the place and a ballast to the praise which the last stanza embodies.

When the speaker characterizes himself as "Bored, uninformed", he evokes an image of a wryly detached person.

It is an image, of course, which has a corresponding relation to the poet himself, and one which has been taken at face value by many of Larkin's critics.

In the context, however, the statement is supremely ironic. It might describe the speaker as we initially meet him in the first stanza, but it does not do justice to the person who also says that "It pleases me to stand in silence here" and who then rises to what John Press has aptly termed the "weighty splendor"¹⁰ of the last stanza.

What throws many of Larkin's readers off is the surface effect of his irony, an effect which sometimes makes it appear that there is no "hunger" in himself to be more serious". As we can see, in the instance of "Church Going", that is quite simply not the case. To insist on one aspect of a writer's tone as expressive of his music is selective and beside the point. That Larkin is a poet whose work is highly ironic does not mean of necessity that he is also detached. Larkin himself has often implied that the writer must needs have an irreverence so that his praise will not seem pious. He once said, in apparent echo of Oscar Wilde, that in Stevie Smith's poetry "the silliness was part of the seriousness",¹¹ In a similar vein, he has praised Auden for his "unique blend of dedication and irreverence",¹² and in one of his many tributes to the jocular aspect of Betjeman's art, he comes close to a description of his own:

Betjeman is serious: his subjects are serious, and the fact that his tone can be light or ambivalent should not deceive us into thinking he does not treat them seriously. His texture is subtle, a constant flickering between solemn and comic, self-mockery and self-expression... He offers us, indeed, something we cannot find in any other writer -- a gaiety, a sense of the ridiculous.¹³

(my emphasis)

In another instance he was to say that "Readers find it exceedingly difficult to combine the notions of being serious and being funny."¹⁴ We can safely add that this fact has come home to roost in the criticism of his own poetry for one of the fundamental misconceptions regarding Larkin's poetry is that his mocking surface tones are the expression of a boredom and cynicism, rather than an efficacious guard against pomposity. Often, when Larkin is at his most ostensibly sarcastic, he is moving carefully and ironically toward praise. Irony in Larkin's poetry is a device of exploration, not a shield expressing a recoil from the world. What we notice of Larkin's speaker in "Church Going" and in a long list of other of his poems is a driving curiosity about his surroundings. In spite of the somewhat inhibited demeanor, the wry cleverness and off-hand manner, the curiosity of the speaker in "Church Going" impels him to explore a setting which, on first sight, seems nothing short of a physical and metaphorical ruin. In the last analysis, the speaker's scepticism, and the scepticism of the poet, are exceptionally explorative. It agitates reality, is part of an over-all

strategy of discovery, a desire to contact an intelligibility to the physical world.

Larkin is not a poet of cold detachment, and yet it is obvious that many of his poems, "Church Going" included, identify a speaker who seems solitary. This is true of many of his personae. The speaker in "Here", for example, states a preference for "Isolate villages, where removed lives/ Loneliness clarifies". And in "Vers de Société" there is the expression of a desire to stay clear of society, the "forks and faces" of dinner parties, and spend time instead, "Under a lamp, hearing the noise of the wind,/ And looking out to see the moon thinned/ To an air-shaped blade."¹⁵ There just is a loner quality in many of Larkin's speakers. But this should not be confused with a kind of Prufrockian withdrawal. Solitude, in Larkin's poetry, is never expressed as the product of what Thom Gunn calls "sitting irresolute all day at stool/ Inside the heart."¹⁶ As we have seen in "Church Going", solitary being can involve an active state of imaginative thinking, one in which the immediate world is constantly present as stimulus, is constantly provoking curiosity. Hence, in a more recent poem, "High Windows", we can see that although the speaker is obviously a solitary figure, his identity in this regard does not make him passive or removed:

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

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

To happiness, endlessly. I wonder if
 Anyone looked at me, forty years back,
 And thought, That'll be the life,
No God anymore, or sweating in the dark

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

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

Here, as in "Church Going", the contemplation seems to rise inevitably from the speaker's sensitive alertness to the physical world around him. Larkin has said of Betjeman that in his poetry "the eye leads the spirit",¹⁸ a comment which could be said to describe this poem. Interestingly, the eye leads the spirit into deep contact with life, leads it away from an initial sardonic blindness. Simply to "see a couple of kids" leads the speaker into what amounts to a deep existential epiphany, and away from a detached glibness of stance. The speaker's empirical curiosity leads him from what starts as an idle-minded glance, to a more fulfilling moment of vision. The mawkish tone and diction can easily waylay us from the realization that it is an intensely explorative poem. Here, as in "Church Going", there is a curiosity about the physical world and the manner of one's perception of it.

At first glance the young people's liberation from old sexual mores is consented to in the easy colloquial tone. The matter-of-fact complacency of the speaker's acceptance of the new values is not questioned in the first stanza. As a unit of thought the stanza has a finality about it which seems to close the case on a superficial level of judgement. The ostensibly bored commentator seems too tired -- if not too lazy, to move any further. But although the stanza ends, the sentence continues. In an arabesque of form it accumulates an undertone of scepticism and regret which rises to the explicit in the surprising final stanza. Again, as in "Church Going", the seemingly caustic and detached manner of the speaker is finally subdued by a more serious and more sensitive one. "High Windows" is a poem which enacts the fits and starts of a mind intent on working its way through appearance to something more substantial. The earlier tone of glib and defeatist acceptance is ultimately cast in an ironic structure and undercut by the lyrical pondering of eternity which closes the poem. Behind the last stanza we might even be hearing a bent echo of Shelley's Adonais:

The One remains, the many change and pass;
 Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly:
 Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,
 Stains the white radiance of Eternity.¹⁹

Not untypically, the language in the earlier stanzas of Larkin's poem is expressive of the speaker's cynical disbelief. Like the speaker in "Church Going", he is now past all of this

supposed superstition. As a result the quasi-religious gesture which concludes the poem is understandably an attenuated one indeed. But for all of that it is there, guarded, but attempted. Larkin is often typified as an agnostic, and the label, as far as labels go, is quite accurate. Nevertheless, in the context of this and others of his poems, there is an imaginative energy which tramples any complacency one might be tempted to associate with the term. The speaker is cautious of his vision ("that shows/ Nothing, and is nowhere"); he realizes the fragility of his gesture. Yet when all the motives for despair are considered, he is still compelled by the "sun-comprehending glass" and by what is beyond it: the "deep blue air" which is "endless". Even if the moment of epiphany is qualified by the sense of its potential emptiness, it is for all of that a vision which helps him to order his experience. Significantly, the moment is not one of religious transcendence, but a beauty momentarily caught out of the immediate physical world, a suggestion of possibilities which transcend the "nothing" which he initially feels when he glances at the "couple of kids". The speaker in Larkin's "Water" says that if he were "called in/ To construct a religion" he would stress the importance of water:

And I should raise in the east
 A glass of water
 Where any-angled light
 Would congregate endlessly.²⁰

The image is worth looking at because it is analogous to the implications which are also suggested by Larkin's immediate and starkly visible windows, windows which are seen as having "sun-comprehending glass". The suggestion in both instances is that a kind of natural, perceptible beauty in the physically immediate world can have an edifying effect on the imagination, one which suggests more than it conveys, even though it might not provide the underpinning for anything traditionally religious or mythical. It may not be as confidently based as Shelley's "dome of many-coloured glass", but it precariously infers a similar beauty. It is for this reason, perhaps, that the speaker in "High Windows" uses his image of high windows, "Rather than words", to understand his feeling that life might -- or could be -- more edifying than the "going down" into meaninglessness which he finally sees as the fate of the young couple. Ironically, their sexual licence was initially seen as "freedom". Because of the rising epiphany of the last stanza, their going "down the long slide/ Like free bloody birds" is, by a final critical contrast, a reduction downward.

As in "Church Going", a surface manner of wry detachment is upended by the speaker's innate curiosity. His sceptical viewpoint, while initially given to cynical glibness, ultimately becomes the agent of his more reverent and more romantic explorative concerns. Again the ironic and the romantic impulses are in tandem. The movement of both poems is one of cautiously searching for the edifying in the actual, the

immediately visible physical world. And these two poems are in large measure paradigmatic of Larkin's work as a whole in that they indicate a sophisticated interplay between a surface irony and an ascending seriousness. The physical world in the poems, as is usual in Larkin's work, is the dramatic stage upon which the contemplative exploration takes place.

D. W. Harding indicated the distinction of Rosenberg's impersonality as being the result of a willingness to "be new-born into the new situation, not subduing his experience to his established personality". We can see that even in Larkin's more solitary poems, he can be said to share in that distinction. Harding said that it was the "exposure of his whole personality that gave his work its quality of impersonality" and again the analogy is appropriate. The whole personality of a Larkin poem usually includes a driving curiosity about the physical world, one which continually chips away at a deceptive mask of boredom. And when the mask is crumbled, the concluding note is often one of praise. The mistake which too many of his critics have made is to misjudge the mask for the whole personality.

The case for Larkin's emotional commitment to the human world is relatively much easier to make. John Wain has already ably demonstrated Larkin's novelistic "power to put himself in other people's places, to guess what it must be like to live their lives, to have 'knowledge of the human heart'". He demonstrated this some time ago, in a close analysis of "The Whitsun Weddings", a poem which he sees as

all the more compassionate because of a quality of detachment in the speaker. Wain avers that while it may appear that the speaker is distanced from the people in the wedding parties, he is in fact deeply involved. He says that,

In a sense the poet's involvement is greater than theirs; he sees and understands just what it is that each participant feels, and then puts them together to form one complete experience, felt in its directness by no one, yet present in the atmosphere and available to that imaginative contemplation that makes art.²¹

And on the basis of this particular poem, most would agree that Larkin's empathetic mastery is assured. Many critics have followed Wain's example and argued for the value of the poem along these lines.²² Indeed, while "Church Going" remains Larkin's most popular anthology piece, "The Whitsun Weddings" is the poem which has earned the largest critical acclaim. Almost all agree that as the train approaches London with its cargo of newly-weds, Larkin rises to the moment with the expression of a deeply compassionate note of praise and celebration;

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

There we were aimed. And as we raced across
Bright knots of rail
Past standing Pullmans, walls of blackened moss
Came close, and it was nearly done, this frail
Travelling coincidence; and what it held
Stood ready to be loosed with all the power
That being changed can give. We slowed again,
And as the tightened brakes took hold, there swelled
A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower
Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.²³

We can add to the recognition of this delicate epiphany by making a point which, developed, helps further to diminish the claim that Larkin is a poet of aloofness. His negative critics aside, what distinguishes these lines is a controlled tenderness of emotion, a risked gesture of sensitivity which successfully avoids the melodramatic and the cloying. Importantly, that tenderness is not unusual in Larkin's work, not momentarily caught here and there. In much of his poetry which deals with the human, this quality is overlooked by those who are distracted by the ironic glibness of Larkin's poetic surfaces. As we have seen, that surface can be a deceptive one. Just as it thinly veils a deeper curiosity and seriousness about the world in the more contemplative poems, it veils a tenderness of feeling in many of the more humanly based ones. Similarly, the irony becomes, in the last analysis, a valuable stratagem in the poem's overall intention of deeper expression. "Born Yesterday" is a good example of this interplay at work:

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.

But if it shouldn't, then
 May you be ordinary;
 Have, like other women,
 An average of talents;
 Not ugly, not good looking,

Nothing uncustomary
 To pull you off your balance,
 That, unworkable itself,
 Stops all the rest from working.
 In fact, may you be dull --
 If that is what a skilled,
 Vigilant, flexible,
 Unemphasised, enthralled
 Catching of happiness is called.²⁴

For all of the surface cleverness of the poem, the deeply felt tenderness is assured. The ostensible brutality of rude lines like "may you be dull" is diminished by the feeling which is assured in the magically appropriate image, "Tightly-folded bud", and in the syntactic and adjectival earnestness of the concluding lines. That the speaker displays a scepticism regarding "the usual stuff/ About being beautiful" indicates an unsentimental honesty in his struggle to reach, even strain after, firmer values. The poem is completed with an expression of good faith and concern for the child which is not dependent on a twisted sense of the real world. What we see at work here is not a cynicism, but an energetic and enlivened honesty to fact and to feeling. The irony in the poem is both an explorative device, and a springboard for the tenderness felt. Rather than an inhibiting device, the irony is a protection against the insult of sentimentality. Larkin once said that Leslie Stephen "gave Hardy his poetic credo in a sentence that is really all anyone needs to know about writing poetry". That sentence included the directive: "The ultimate aim of the poet should be to touch our hearts by showing his own."²⁵ Those who mistake Larkin's irony as a shield against the world and against feeling might be surprised that he would

prepare us for the reverence which the poem will eventually spring. The clever surface of the poem not only keeps the despairful ugliness somewhat at bay, it also draws us into the brutal facts of the old people's lives. Typically, the movement of sensibility progresses past the apparent brutal wryness. The final tone is one of deep compassion and bewildered reverence. The poem very soon moves beyond the dehumanized picture of people drooling and pissing themselves. The entire third stanza expresses a reverence for the so-called "fools" and an agnostic allowance and hope that their lives have accomplished a perfection which transcends their physical debasement;

Perhaps being old is having lighted rooms
 Inside your head, and people in them, acting.
 People you know, yet can't quite name; each looms
 Like a deep loss restored, from known doors turning,
 Setting down a lamp, smiling from a stair, extracting
 A known book from the shelves; or sometimes only
 The rooms themselves, chairs and a fire burning,
 The blown bush at the window, or the sun's
 Faint friendliness on the wall some lonely
 Rain-ceased midsummer evening. That is where they live:
 Not here and now, but where all happened once.
 This is why they give

An air of baffled absence, trying to be there
 Yet being here.

As in "Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album",²⁷ there is the expressed hope that time does not simply debase, it also distills. This is the speaker's only stabilizing thought in the situation. Curiously, when he asks "Why aren't they screaming?" we don't at that early juncture in the poem, notice that the panic is really his own. The respect which

he learns for the old "fools" is based on a delicate grasp of their calm, as opposed to his fear. The tenderness expressed for the old people is entirely missed if the reader is waylaid by the irony of the title. Were it more blandly titled "The Young Fool", it would flatly miss the telling play of irony. The contrast between aged wisdom and youthful naiveté, old poise with young panic, is made devastatingly resonant by the title as phrased. Again, as we have noted in other of Larkin's poems, the speaker's wryness will never, on its own, be adequate to the mystery and possible beauty of existence, the kind of majesty which is risked in the image of life as described in a line from the second stanza: "the million-petalled flower/Of being here". In the final analysis, "The Old Fools" is a deeply tender poem. Its note of praise in spite of its fearful grasp of ugliness gives it a quality which Larkin appreciated in the similarly close-up poetry of Wilfred Owen: a "deep and unaffected compassion", a "visionary compassion".²⁸

Gathered together, the evidence shows that, far from being a detached and merely ironic writer, Larkin is a poet whose ironic manner is an explorative and disciplining one; and that he is also a poet capable of deep emotional risk. He has himself, in an interview, spoken of the function of irony in poetry.

He described what he considered to be the two most important forces at work in the poet's psyche. It is a statement -- like many of his others -- which casts a

brighter light on his work than many of his critics"

comments:

The poet is perpetually in that common human condition of trying to feel a thing because he believes it, or believe a thing because he feels it.

Except when springing from those rich and narrow marches where the two concur, therefore, his writing veers perpetually between the goody-goody-clever-clever and the silly-shameful-self-indulgent, and there is no point in inclining towards one kind of failure rather than another. All he can do is hope that he will go on getting flashes of what seems at the time like agreement between their opposed impulses.²⁹

A good deal of Larkin's achievement lies precisely in the enactment of the balance which he is here emphasizing. In all of the poetry which we have looked at thus far, there is that continual play between the "goody-goody-clever-clever" and the "silly-shameful-self-indulgent". And as we have seen, one impulse enriches and matures the other, growing from, and returning to an authentic center in each of the poems. His irony is the agent of a fundamental respect for the world, curiosity about it, and compassion for its humanity.

If Larkin's irony is not simply an expression of a cold detachment from the world, neither is his tone of sadness purely an expression of a weak withdrawal from it. Nonetheless, one of the most characteristic tones in Larkin's work is that of sadness. Along with his tone of praise, and his tone of humour, it contributes significantly to his overall

orchestration of feeling. Just as there are poems in which the groundtone is one of humour, or praise, there are also ones in which a basically sad tone is almost exclusively struck, though the instances are rare. The flexibility of Larkin's tonal effects usually involve at least two of his three major notes. "Sad Steps",³⁰ a poem whose very title invokes the heaviness which we often associate with the emotion of sadness, is a poem which ranges from the sad to the humorous, to the note of praise.

Most critics refer to Larkin's sadness in one way or another. Some see it as the expression of a passive quality of pessimism, and some see it as an expression of a basic aberration of personality, evidence of an immature self-absorption.³¹ One recollects D. H. Lawrence's remark on England's painters, who he said "so often suck on their sadness like a lollipop, mournfully, and comfortably",³² because in its statement of his own taste, here undeveloped analytically, he voices the kind and the quality of objection which is raised by Larkin's critics about his sadness. The objection, that is -- like some instances of the objections raised about Larkin's ironic tone -- is again aimed at the psychological base of the poetry. If we look closer at Larkin's poetry and pertinent items of his criticism, we begin to see a thoughtful coherence to his use of the tone, one which allows us to understand why he has registered an objection with his critics about their distaste.³³

Not surprisingly, Larkin seems to have given the matter of tone a good deal of thought. His scrutiny of the matter indicates that he sees it as the basic emotion which connects us compassionately with other human beings. For Larkin, to know sadness is to realize one's humanity, and the humanity of others, in a profound sense. Given what he says of sadness in Hardy's novels, we can see that he considers it the most serious and philosophical of emotions:

The dominant emotion in Hardy is sadness. Hardy was peculiarly well equipped to perceive the melancholy, the misfortune, the frustrating, the failing elements of life...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 could be demonstrated that Hardy associated sensitivity to suffering and awareness of the causes of pain with superior spiritual character.

It would follow, therefore, that the presence of pain in Hardy's novels is a positive, not a negative quality -- not the mechanical working out of some pre-determined allegiance to pessimism or any other concept, but the continual imaginative celebration of what is both the truest and the most important element in life, most important in the sense of most necessary to spiritual development.³⁴

Many of these analytical comments are pertinent to Larkin's own work. His comment, for instance, that Hardy's sadness is not the outgrowth of a "pre-determined allegiance to pessimism" is the one which is most solidly applicable. We have already seen a capacity on Larkin's part for striking the more positive note. Additionally, his "sensitivity

to suffering" has become, for many of his readers, the hallmark of his work.³⁵ And Lolette Kuby, in her book on Larkin has dealt at length with Larkin's "awareness of the causes of pain".³⁶ But the analogy stops there. Larkin, for example, trusts the comic spirit more than did Hardy, and on the evidence of the poetry, would seem to disagree with Hardy's conviction that "Tragedy is true guise, Comedy Lies." It is for this reason that Larkin's sadness is often free of the unalleviated, insistent quality of chagrin which we find in Hardy's work. But apart from the contrasts and similarities which we can draw between the two writers on the point, the more striking thing about Larkin's comments is that they indicate a good deal of scrutiny of the emotion, its relation to the writer's existential perspective, and to the development of sensibility.

If we move from the external nature of the comments he has made above, and return to the poetry itself, we can see that Larkin's expression of the sadness of life is connected with his basic view of the incompleteness, the imperfection of life. In Larkin's view of the human condition, what connects us all is the fact of the discrepancy between our spiritual wants and their failure to be satisfied. Just as we struggle for the harmony of fulfillment, time and death effortlessly conspire against us. This all sounds very Hardy-esque, and it might be partly what draws Larkin to his work. But the difference between the two writers on this point is largely one of tone. Briefly, we can say that:

Larkin's sadness is simply less thoroughgoing, is alleviated by a stronger perception of the beneficent aspects of life. But, as in Hardy, Larkin's work is everywhere struck by the focusing power on life, which the fact of death triggers. As the speaker in "Next, Please" firmly states:

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.³⁷

Although there is, as Frederick Grubb put it, "nothing of the grovelling before death"³⁸ in Larkin's work, as we have already seen in "The Old Fools" and earlier in "Ambulances", the intransigent fact of death is one of his major thematic concerns. Larkin's centralizing focus on the connecting bond of human transiency thus becomes a perspective in which the pathetic aspect of human imperfection is seen as evocative of -- and demanding of -- the emotion of sadness. If the human experience of the world is scarred with a thwarted natural desire for perfection, death serves as a reminder of the failure of that desire, not the attainment of it. This existential truth gives to life a quality of sadness, one which flows through the world as a particularized version of Wordsworth's "still, sad music of humanity".³⁹ Wordsworth's phrase is the more apt because it suggests a fact of life which is both outside the self, and yet deeply connected with one's own humanity. It is a music which Larkin has transcribed with an unusual degree of poignancy in his work as a

whole, but in "Home is so Sad" it is the focus of his most central thematic concern:

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

 And turn again to what it started as,
 A joyous shot at how things ought to be,
 Long fallen wide. You can see how it was:
 Look at the pictures and the cutlery.
 The music in the piano stool. That vase.⁴⁰

This poem gives a special legitimacy to the claim that Larkin is a poet of common humanity. In the context of the present discussion, we can see most centrally what gives us a common bond: the basic fact of our transiency and ultimate defeat. There is nothing maudlin in the tone of this poem. If it is sad, it is not entirely pessimistic or entirely defeatist. Any pessimism which is involved in its viewpoint is a strong pessimism, not a weak expression of despair.⁴¹ There is too much compassion and too much praise of small courage in the poem for that kind of selfishness to concern us.

The sadness of humanity is embodied in the visible scoriae of the objects in the home, like the "wear on a threshold"⁴² which he so much responded to in Hardy's work. The objects speak with a naturally symbolic effect. The selflessness of the speaker, the entirely compassionate bearing of his person, is assured by the way in which the objects filter through his consciousness in a clarifying and suggestive way. He is there as a witness to the fact of the human,

lends us his eyes for the sake of the motion outward to the physical world. We recall again Larkin's comment that "the eye leads the spirit"⁴³ in Betjeman's discoveries, and here, the speaker encourages us on the same journey. "Look", he says, "at the pictures and the cutlery. / The music in the piano stool. That vase." The physical world comes close to speaking for itself, and the function of the speaker is to bring the reader in close enough contact with it that the abstraction seems to issue from the details of the scene. The viewpoint on the scene is coloured by the viewer's sensibility, but his sensibility is also coloured by what is viewed. The essential consonance of viewer and viewed in this case indicates an occasion of insight into the "still, sad music of humanity" which is made the more intelligent by its contingency on the fact of the physical world. Putting all of this together, moves us a long distance from the claim that Larkin is somehow self-absorbed in his sadness.

An additional point is worth making with regard to the quality of Larkin's sadness. It is one which can easily be overlooked because of the heaviness, weightiness, which we associate with the emotion. The essential sadness of the human condition gives to it also an air of beauty which is peculiarly and almost correspondingly atoning, as the markedly more genteel poets of the nineties so often reminded us. In a less forlorn way, there is the presence of this insight in Larkin's viewpoint. One notices for example, that in the praise of the human attempt at life, the "joyous shot at how

things ought to be," and in the strange quality of beauty which is left behind in the objects, there is the registration of a profound appreciation of human life. This sense of an ambiguous quality in life, an odd mixture of the ugly and the beautiful, is too often overlooked in the criticism of Larkin's poetry. And that blending is overlooked because there is so much confusion of his sadness of tone with a stock notion that it expresses a despair with life and a withdrawal from experience. But the sharp recognition of death and failure in Larkin's poetry is not a signal of despair. As we have already seen, on more than one count he is more courageous than this. In a comment he once made concerning Betjeman's growing preoccupation with death, he perceives a quality in Betjeman which is distinctly appropriate to his own;

Fear of death is too much of a screaming close-up to allow the poetic faculty to function properly, but demands expression by reason of its very frightfulness. Nonetheless, it benefits his [Betjeman's] poetry; making the colours brighter and the beauties more transiently poignant by contrast, giving a seasoning of honesty and a grim sense of proportion that 'reconciled' writers all too often lack.⁴⁴

One would worry that the quoting of the poet's own words begs the question, were it not for the fact that the poetry bears out a remarkable alliance with the kind of paradox which is stated here: "Home is so Sad" is a poem which achieves precisely the delicacy of its poise. And we can't help noticing

the reference to death in Larkin's passage as a "screaming close-up". In what must be more than a coincidence, the speaker in "The Old Fools" asks, "Why aren't they screaming?" The extent to which the speaker can answer that question, is intimately connected, as we have seen, with the coexistent realization of a quality of beauty in life which, in the poem, is abstractly phrased as "the million-petalled flower of being here". Additionally, it is particularized in the dance of images which is at the poem's center of reverence, the collection of the old people's memories into the "lighted rooms/ Inside [the] head", the interwoven moments of partially graspable beauty:

Setting down a lamp, smiling from a stair, extracting
 A known book from the shelves; or sometimes only
 The rooms themselves, chairs and a fire burning,
 The blown bush at the window, or the sun's
 Faint friendliness on the wall some lonely
 Rain-ceased midsummer evening.

To repeat Larkin's statement of Betjeman's paradoxical viewpoint, the fact of death in this poem, its "screaming close-up" reality, is not simply morbid; it provokes a deeper and more appreciative recognition of the beauty of life. To recognize Larkin's highly conscious awareness of this paradox is to further recognize an intelligent coherence to his basic philosophy of sadness. It also points to a fundamental inadequacy in that kind of Larkin criticism which attitudinizes about proprieties of sensibility. If we step aside from that kind of criticism, and observe the quiet epiphanies

of the poetry itself, we witness an important fact about his work as a whole: that sadness in Larkin's poetry is there as a function of a deep commitment to the human world and an honest perception of the paradoxical quality of its visage. It is an expression of his engagement with life as much as it is a foil for his sense of the beautiful. Seen this way, it can be said to give his work a sense of proportion, even a realism. That sense of proportion includes a delicate sense of the beauty of life, and of its undeniable transience.

Gathered together, the evidence of the poetry clearly shows that Larkin has been unfairly appraised as a poet of bored detachment and sad withdrawal. His ironic cleverness is the function of a sophisticated curiosity about the world, just as it is also a tempering device for his romantic impulse and his instinct for praise. His tone of sadness is clearly not his only tone, and it is not, when present, expressive of a self-absorption. On the contrary, it is expressive of a basic motion outward to the world of shared human experience, and like his creative scepticism, aids him in the transcendence of the "gorgon ego"⁴⁵ of which Auden spoke. Larkin is not a poet detached or withdrawn. Indeed, as the next chapter will show, he has paid the physical world the supreme compliment of taking it as the source of inspiration for both his poetic and his poetry.

NOTES: CHAPTER II.

¹See above, pp. 15-20.

²James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, (1916; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 215.

³D. W. Harding, "Aspects of the Poetry of Isaac Rosenberg," Scrutiny, 3 (1934), 363-64.

⁴T. W. W., p. 3.

⁵H. W., p. 30.

⁶Anthony Thwaite, for example, says that he gets a bit fed up with "what might be called the Yah-Boo side of Larkin's work--a side not often apparent, which he shares sporadically with his admired (and admiring) fellow undergraduate and old friend from St. John's, Kingsley Amis." See "The Poetry of Philip Larkin," in Martin Dodsworth, ed., The Survival of Poetry: A Contemporary Survey (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 50. Patrick Swinden, in a review of High Windows, says that this kind of "Kingsley Amis-inspired (or is it the other way round?) mud pies Larkin likes to throw" are perhaps only the "price we have to pay for Larkin getting the silliness out of his system and thereby leaving the good poems free from infection." See Critical Quarterly, 16 (1974), 281.

⁷Charles Tomlinson, "Poetry Today" in Boris Ford ed., The Pelican Guide to English Literature, No. 7: The Modern Age (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 459.

⁸Philip Larkin, (transcription from BBC Radio 3), "Not Like Larkin," Listener, 88 (1972), 209. The occasion was a program which celebrated Larkin's fiftieth birthday. The editor(s) note that a few poets "read their favourite Larkin poems," and Larkin read his "The Explosion." In his introduction to the reading, Larkin said: "As regards the future, I doubt if writers get better after they're fifty, and I don't suppose I shall be any exception. Can one find fresh things to say, or fresh ways of saying them? Will one 'develop?' There is a great pressure on writers to 'develop' these days: I think the idea began with Yeats, and personally I'm rather sceptical of it. What I should like to do is write different kinds of poem that might be by different

NOTES CONT'D: CHAPTER II.

people. Someone said once that the great thing is not to be different from other people, but to be different from yourself(209)."

Neither is this simply a recent conviction of Larkin's. In the interview with Ian Hamilton and in the context of speaking about "Church Going," Larkin said that "The poem is seeking an answer...I think one has to dramatize oneself a little. I don't arse about in churches when I'm alone. Not much, anyway(74)." (See Chapter One, Note #29).

⁹T. L. D., p. 28.

¹⁰John Press, "The Poetry of Philip Larkin," Southern Review, 13 (1977), 138.

¹¹Philip Larkin, "Frivolous and Vulnerable," New Statesman, 28 September 1962, p. 417.

¹²_____, "W. H. Auden (1907-1973)," New Statesman, 5 October 1973, p. 479. Larkin speaks of the "English Auden" and the "American Auden," and asks; "What held the two together? First, his unique blend of dedication and irreverence: poetry is a fine thing, but the poet--even one of Auden's stature--mustn't give himself airs ('in the end, art is small beer'). Secondly, a love of the English language...Thirdly, a personal toughness and isolation (p. 479)."

¹³_____, Introduction to John Betjeman: Collected Poems, compiled by The Earl of Birkenhead (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), p. xxxviii.

¹⁴_____, "Betjeman En Bloc," rev. of John Betjeman: Collected Poems, Listen, 3 (Spring 1959), 15.

¹⁵H. W., p. 35.

¹⁶Thom Gunn, "Lines For a Book," The Sense of Movement (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), p. 30. The poem includes the lines; "Though the mind has also got a place/It's not in marvelling at its mirrored face/And evident sensibility."

¹⁷Ibid., p. 17.

NOTES CONT'D: CHAPTER II.

¹⁸Philip Larkin, John Betjeman: Collected Poems, p. xiii. Larkin says; "with Betjeman the eye leads the spirit: he tells us that he came to the Christian religion by means of church architecture and formal ritual."

¹⁹Percy Bysshe Shelley, Adonais, stanza 52, ll. 460-64, 1821; rpt. in Carlos Baker, ed., Selected Poetry and Prose of Shelley (New York: Scribners, 1951), p. 306.

²⁰T. W. W., p. 20.

²¹John Wain, "Engagement or Withdrawal? Some Notes on the Work of Philip Larkin," Critical Quarterly, 6 (1964), 175.

²²Critics who have dealt with the poem in more than a passing manner include: David Timms, James Naremore, J. R. Watson, C. B. Cox, John Press, A. Kingsley Weatherhead, and Donald Davie. For a thorough analysis of the poem, see John Reibetanz, "'The Whitsun Weddings': Larkin's Reinterpretation of Time and Form in Keats," Contemporary Literature, 15 (1976), 528-40. Reibetanz connects the poem with Keats' great ode--in its theme of the relationship between art and life, its elaborate stanzaic form, and its largely pastoral setting. Each poem has a central symbol--Keats' urn and Larkin's train. Reibetanz finds Larkin's poem remarkable for its realism, its contemporary eye for the recognition of beauty out of the experience of the prosaic. For further commentary on "The Whitsun Weddings," see below, pp. 196-99.

²³T. W. W., p. 21.

²⁴T. L. D., p. 24.

²⁵Philip Larkin, "The Puddletown Martyr," rev. of Young Thomas Hardy, by Robert Gittings, New Statesman, 18 April 1975, p. 514. The full quote from Leslie Stephen is: "The ultimate aim of the poet should be to touch our hearts by showing his own, and not exhibit his learning, or his fine taste, or his skill at mimicking the notes of his predecessors (p. 514)." Regarding the emotional vulnerability of his own poetry, Larkin once remarked: "I always think that the poems I write are very much more naive--very much more emotional--

NOTES CONT'D: CHAPTER II.

almost embarrassingly so--than a lot of other people's. When I was tagged as unemotional it used to mystify me; I used to find it quite shaming to read some of the things I'd written." ("Four Conversations," 74-75).

²⁶H. W., p. 19.

²⁷T. L. D., p. 13.

²⁸Philip Larkin, "The Real Wilfred," rev. of Wilfred Owen, by Jon Stallworthy, Encounter, 44 (1975), 74. Larkin says: "To the reader of poems, conscious of their unique element of visionary compassion, he seemed a genius of high and extraordinary nature. To endure the Great War, and not only to endure it but accept it in a way that made possible a mature artistic expression of it, while at the same time both passionately abhorring its horrors and winning the Military Cross--all this argued a personality at once robust and selfless, a spiritual nature both strong and deep (74)." And later; "From lacking any 'touch of tenderness' he became the spokesman of a deep unaffected compassion (80)."

²⁹_____, "Context: Philip Larkin," London Magazine, I (February 1962), 32. One guesses that Larkin had Elizabeth Wordsworth's "Good and Clever" in mind when he made this comment. He included her poem in his The Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century Verse, p. 26.

If all of the good people were clever,
And all the clever people were good,
The world would be nicer than ever
We thought that it possibly could.

But somehow 'tis seldom or never
The two hit it off as they should,
The good are so harsh to the clever,
The clever, so rude to the good!

So friends, let it be our endeavour
To make each other understood;
For few can be good, like the clever,
Or clever, so well as the good.

NOTES CONT'D: CHAPTER II.

³⁰H. W., p. 32.

³¹See above, p. 17.

³²D. H. Lawrence, "Christs in Tifol," in Diana Trilling, ed., The Portable D. H. Lawrence (New York: Viking, 1946), p. 606.

³³See above, p. 19.

³⁴Philip Larkin, "Wanted: Good Hardy Critic," rev. of Thomas Hardy: The Will and the Way, by Roy Morrell, Critical Quarterly 8 (1966), 177-78.

³⁵See above, p. 21.

³⁶Lolette Kuby, An Uncommon Poet For The Common Man: A Study of Philip Larkin's Poetry (The Hague: Mouton, 1974). See Chapter II, "Hardy Themes," and Chapter III, "The Limitation and Implementation of Free Will."

³⁷T. L. D., p. 20.

³⁸Frederick Grubb, A Vision of Reality (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1965), p. 229.

³⁹William Wordsworth, "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," 1798; rpt. in Russell Noyes, ed., English Romantic Poetry and Prose (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 260.

⁴⁰T. W. W., p. 17.

⁴¹Interestingly, Larkin himself has registered a worry about this kind of limitation in the work of one of his favourite writers, William Barnes. Comparing Hardy and Barnes, he was to say: "Indeed the imaginative delicacy of his [Barnes'] conceptions...at times was superior to Hardy's, though if his work has a deficiency, it is in lacking Hardy's bitter and ironical despair: Barnes is almost too gentle, too submissive and forgiving." See "The Poetry of William Barnes," rev. of The Poems of William Barnes, ed. by Bernard Jones, Listener, 16 August 1962, p. 257.

NOTES CONT'D: CHAPTER II.

⁴² Thomas Hardy, as quoted by Philip Larkin in John Betjeman: Collected Poems, p. xxix.

⁴³ Philip Larkin, John Betjeman: Collected Poems, p. xxxvii.

⁴⁴ _____, "Betjeman En Bloc," 19.

⁴⁵ W. H. Auden, "Ode to the Medieval Poets." For context, see above p. 37.

CHAPTER III: IMAGISM AND THE PHYSICAL WORLD

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Larkin's poetic personality is a flexible one. His personae vary from one poem to another, and his tones shift and blend in many combinations. But if there is a disposition of mind which is central to all of his personae, it is a basically empirical one. Robert Conquest has said of the poetry of the Movement that it was "empirical in its attitude to all that comes".¹ If we explore that suggestion in Larkin's work further, it leads us to a recognition of a rich connection between his work and the theories of the Imagists. In both his criticism and his poetry Larkin shows an Imagist bias, a recognition of the importance of the physical world as stimulus to the ultimately epiphanic nature of poetry. If we examine the complexity of Larkin's craft from this viewpoint, we are led to an understanding of the complex nature of his world view, one which takes us far past the comfort of describing it in easy abstractions. To recognize the complexity of Larkin's epiphanies and their variation in the dark and light quality of their moments is to leave behind simplistic notions like the one which claims that he is a poet of a bleak nature. Further, we begin to realize that Larkin's view of experience is characterized above all by a qualifying agnosticism, a tentativeness that resists simplistic conclusiveness.

Larkin's is a poetry of visual participation in the observable physical world. As we have already seen in the previous chapter, his speakers often beckon the reader into a beholding process. "Look", says the speaker in "Home is so Sad",² at "the pictures and the cutlery./ The music in the piano stool. That vase." This kind of invitation to witness is not simply an accident of form in Larkin's work, it is the result of an epistemological conviction that the truth -- as Larkin sees it -- is inseparable from an empirical alertness of mind ("When I see a couple of kids",³ begins the speaker in "High Windows"). In an important and central way, Larkin's speakers are like the people on the train in "The Whitsun Weddings"; they are "loaded with the sum of all they saw".⁴ What we as readers see is the product of the engagement of an empirical intelligence and a sensitive poetic personality with the physical fact of the world. We are involved in the process by proxy, join the perceptual journey in accordance with the degree of our own willingness to respond to the substance and the suggestiveness of the world as he presents it. The reader ventures little distance in the world of Larkin's poetry, unless he participates in the speaker's empirical glance. Any concentrated experience of Larkin's poetry includes the visual process of looking, noticing, gazing, even staring at the world, as it is carefully recreated in its engaging detail. The most trivial sorting of Larkin's lines in this regard gives evidence of at

least his insistence on the importance of the process:

For the moment, wait,
Look down at the yard. Outside seems old enough:
Red brick, lagged pipes, and someone walking by it
Out to the car park, free.

("The Building")⁵

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

("An Arundel Tomb")⁶

My swivel eye hungers from pose to pose--

("Lines On A Young Lady's Photograph Album")⁷

The eye can hardly pick them out
From the cold shade they shelter in,
Till the wind distresses tail and mane;

("At Grass")⁸

The eye sees you
Simplified by distance
Into an origin,

("Solar")⁹

Latest face, so effortless
Your great arrival at my eyes,

("Latest Face")¹⁰

One shivers slightly, looking up there.

("Sad Steps")¹¹

and I
Carry a chipped pail to the chicken-run,
Set it down, and stare.

("Wedding Wind")¹²

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

("Here")¹³

In what amounts to a habit of beholding visual sensitivity, Larkin aligns his art with an honoured tradition of empirically oriented poetry, one which reaches backward throughout most of the great poetry of the English speaking tradition. The centre of gravity in Larkin's poetry is the physical world as it suggestively manifests itself on the stage of his sensitive and personal imagination. He is not simply a poet who has an ability of concrete expression, a talent for crisp metaphor -- though he is a genius in that regard also.

T. S. Eliot was a master of that kind of skill, but his quality of realism and his relation to the world of substance is of an utterly opposite nature to Larkin's. There is a deeper commitment in Larkin's relation to the physical world, and it is a commitment which is demonstrable in his reaction to the relatively more abstract nature of Modernist art.

Larkin attempts a retrieval of a living consciousness of the physical world in his work, a retrieval which he quite consciously sees as paled to extinction by the Modernist tradition of which Eliot was part. Larkin's poetry, in its empirical attitude, its empirical epistemology, directs us toward the world, and contains as a result a good deal of the semblance of its substance, its weight and texture.¹⁴ In these terms, the Modernist tradition is a relatively more subjective tradition, and a more restrictively intellectual and inwardly gazing one. Additionally, it is a tradition more concerned with the technique of art, and more obscurely finds its base in other works of art -- especially those of

the past. When we read T. S. Eliot's The Wasteland¹⁵ we are directed more to other works of art than to view the recognizable physical world. Eliot's is not an empirically biased poetry, it is a culturally and mentally biased one. There is a mythic vigor to the world of Eliot's poetry, but relatively little of the feel of the world itself.

For all of the circumscribed limitations of the Modernist tradition, its narrowness in spite of a brilliance of craft, it is still fashionable in many critical and academic circles to consider contemporary writers as relatively stunted figures next to the Modernist giants. Indeed, one of the major critical shibboleths of our time is that there is nothing artistically new under the sun; that Joyce and Eliot -- if not the entire company of the Modernists -- have taken the craft of poetry, and of narrative fiction, as far as they can go. But Larkin, and a host of other contemporary critics and poets, speak with a voice of dissent. For them the Modernist revolution was a revolution of technique only, an elaborate movement of art into the narrow discussion of itself. Worse still, it was a damnation of the real world in the name of craft. Larkin is a revolutionary poet -- or a counter-revolutionary one -- in his adoption of a poetic and a strategy of form which aims to subdue craft below the level of content, and to use technique as a method of relaying to the reader his forays into the immediate physical world. Larkin's poetry makes an effort to discover the physical world as still intelligible.

The bias of his work is therefore more empirical, less mentally subjective, than the bias of the Modernists.

One of the major proponents of the empirically biased attitude to art in the past century was Thomas Hardy. We are already somewhat aware of Larkin's recognition of his debt to him in precisely this regard. Additionally, we know that Larkin has learned much on this point from the example of Betjeman. But we begin to realize that Larkin is a writer who responds to the empirical bias of many writers, and that his work is amenable to the critical tenets of many empirical theorists, including those of Wallace Stevens, and, most central to our more analytical interests here, the Imagists.

To invoke the wisdom of the Imagists is to move forward, for the most part without the blessing of Larkin's critics.¹⁶ As we shall see shortly, Larkin himself has abjured all connection with one of the major Imagist theorists, Ezra Pound. And while one can only conjecture that it is really the Symbolistic Pound to whom Larkin objects, Larkin's critics seem to have taken his words in a categorical way. This perhaps accounts for the firmness with which Alun R. Jones -- in rejecting a mild suggestion of M. L. Rosenthal's on the issue -- states flatly that:

Indeed, if the younger British poets have anything in common at all--and their work is excitingly diverse--it is in their complete rejection of the Imagist-Pound-Eliot tradition and their consummate craftsmanship as poets.¹⁷

But rejections are often blessedly tainted with indirect absorptions, and some of the Imagists' convictions about the necessity for an empirical epistemology of poetry are in almost precise consonance with Larkin's critical convictions. Additionally, whatever the extent of Larkin's direct connection with their aims and methods, the more interesting point is that their theories are strikingly apposite to the achievement of his art, and can usefully underline the complexity of his craft.

When critics examine the continuity of his work with earlier twentieth century traditions, it is usual for them to associate Larkin's style with that of the Georgians.¹⁸ If we think of his attention to provincial themes, his trust in the voice of personal feeling, and the relative accessibility of his language and style, it is an association which has a logic to it. But in the crisply empirical viewpoint of his work, he can also be legitimately connected with the Imagists. Colin Falck once said that it was the Imagists who "cranked the engine of twentieth-century poetry even if it was left to others to take the car on its journey".¹⁹ Larkin, very like Stevens, is a poet whose empirical journey takes him far past the limitations of Imagist practice, but the Imagist spark has helped both poets to crank their engines.

Briefly to survey anew some of the Imagists' comments on art in the context of Larkin's criticism and his poetry is to recognize a kinship of aim which will help us to illuminate

some of his finer poetic effects. For if the Modernist-Symbolist tradition is one which more abstractly mines reality for analogy and metaphor, the Imagists are more concerned with confronting meaning face-on as it emerges from the physical world in co-operation with the actively receptive observant consciousness.²⁰ Larkin's rejection of the former tradition is separable from a distinguishable connection with the latter. Indeed, if we move toward this latter connection by way of examining his reasons for rejecting the Modernist-Symbolist tradition, we begin to see the grounds for making the analogy in the first place.

Larkin registered an objection to the Modernists in a comment he made in 1955; one which has risen to the stature of being his most commonly quoted statement on art:

As a guiding principle I believe that every poem must be its own sole freshly created universe, and therefore have no belief in 'tradition' or common myth-kitty or casual allusions in poems to other poems or poets, which last I find unpleasantly like the talk of literary understrappers letting you see they know the right people.²¹

(my emphasis)

For Larkin, the poem embodies the act of a personality confronting the newness of the physical world. Its validity is based on the perceptible presence of a fresh impulse from the world as registered by an empirically biased imagination. This is opposed to a merely cerebral journey through books. Almost ten years after the statement just quoted, he was to say:

What I do feel a bit rebellious about is that poetry seems to have got into the hands of a critical industry which is connected with culture in the abstract, and this I do rather lay at the door of Eliot and Pound...I think a lot of this 'myth-kitty' business has grown out of that, because first of all you have to be terribly educated, you have to read everything to know these things, and secondly you've got somehow to work them in to show that you are working them in. But to me, the whole of classical and biblical mythology means very little, and I think that using them today not only fills poems full of dead spots but dodges the writer's duty to be original.²²

(my emphasis)

We recall that Larkin has claimed it was Hardy who turned the "duty to be original" into a liberating example for him, that when he read Hardy it was with a "sense of relief" that he learned one could "simply relapse into one's life and write from it".²³ It is perhaps out of the kind of casual grounding of art in the world of personal sensation of which Hardy speaks in the following statement that Larkin finds sanction for his objection to the Modernists. The statement comes from Hardy's 1901 "Preface" to Poems Of The Past And The Present:

Unadjusted impressions have their value, and the road to a true philosophy of life seems to lie in humbly recording diverse readings of its phenomera as they are forced upon us by chance and change.²⁴

While there is a good deal of craft in the work of both Larkin and Hardy, they share a conviction that the initial

motivation of the work must be from the stimulus of the sensational world. Neither poet is concerned with what Larkin refers to above as "culture in the abstract", to the detriment of the essentially honest basis in one's own history of experiential impressions. Larkin's critics and reviewers continually chide him for not producing more poems, more volumes, and some see the relative smallness of his output as indicative of a feckless attitude to art.²⁵ But it can be argued that he is simply following the conscience of his Muse, a conscience which dictates that reticence is preferable to contrivance, and that the poet must patiently await the natural stimulus of the world of experience. On this point, and in seeming echo of Hardy's words, Larkin has said as recently as 1972 that:

I seem to have spent my life waiting for poems to turn up. A negative attitude perhaps, but writing isn't an act of the will. All you can do is try to make sure that when something does arrive, you aren't too tired or busy or anything else to do it justice.²⁶

For Larkin and for Hardy, the poet's work is seen as the chronicle of his selected moments of actual experience, recorded as a process of interaction between the poet's empirical, and highly personal, imagination and his world. In a sense, this is a conviction which is at least as old as the Romantics. But it is one which Larkin has felt was lost in the essentially evasive manoeuvre of the Modernists into the technology of craft. In the context of his role as a

jazz critic, Larkin has made a comment which shows that he considers all forms of Modernist art to sever the tie of this connection. In doing so, it peverts the healthy bond which is possible -- and necessary -- between art and life. He registers an annoyance with the Modernist jazz musician, Charlie Parker, and rejects his art along with that of Pound's and Picasso's. He has said of the technical cleverness of all three artists, that:

I dislike such things not because they are new, but because they are irresponsible exploitations of technique in contradiction of life as we know it. This is my essential criticism of modernism, whether perpetuated by Parker, Pound or Picasso: it helps us neither to enjoy nor endure.²⁷

In this view, Modernist art is seen as an art of alienation. The artist is removed from the world and removed from his audience. It is for this reason, among others, that Larkin admires the differently colloquial manner of Betjeman. Speaking of the "aberration of modernism that blighted all the arts", Larkin has said that it was Betjeman who retrieved it from "the loop-line that it took away from the general reader" by knocking over "the 'No Road Through to Real Life' signs that this new tradition had erected".²⁸ Collected together, Larkin's objections to Modernist art amount to a scepticism regarding any form of art which is not based on a living connection with the experiential world. In their uneven preoccupation with craft, the Modernists are seen by Larkin as disconnected from the recognizable physical world,

from their audience, and ultimately from what he perceives to be the function of art: to help us "enjoy" and/or "endure" life.

For all of the reservations which Larkin has expressed concerning the uneven relationship between form and content in Modernist art, it goes without saying that he is himself a craftsman of the first order. Larkin nowhere states that the example of other ~~works of art~~ should be ignored. Many of his own poems are enriched by their knowledge of other works. But craft in Larkin's work aspires to be transparent, does not wish to call attention to itself. Indeed, this is why many of his critics are waylaid into misreadings of his work by a surface simplicity in some of his mannerisms, especially ones of tone. When Larkin is writing on the work of other writers he is usually alert to the degree to which they evoke the visage of the physical world in either a transparent or a cloudy way. As a critic he is impatient with works which are given to too much narrative noise. In the midst of many of Larkin's comments on writers as different otherwise as William Barnes, Auden, Betjeman, and Hardy, there is a shrewd registration of the quality of the imagery, its relation to the furniture of the writer's physical world. To recognize this critical inclination of Larkin's, and to notice the similarity of his critical phrasing to the language of the Imagist theorists, is to begin a journey toward more specific connections which he has with their aims and methods.

In an easily assembled shower of phrases from Larkin's critical work which follows, the reader will recognize a kinship between Larkin's pencilling of empirical graces and the similarly pictorial bias of the Imagist theorists. In a recent comment on "the poet" Larkin has stressed the need for the poet "to recreate the familiar".²⁹ And particularly of Barnes, he has said that his "view of nature is clear... and shining, full of exquisite pictorial natures".³⁰ His empirical bias is shown, in a negative context, in his comments on Auden's Homage To Clio. In a review of that volume, he regretted the intrusion of a new "abstract windiness" into Auden's style, censoriously noting that Auden's poetry needed to find "root again in the life surrounding him rather than in his reading".³¹ We are already aware of his recognition that in Betjeman "the eye leads the spirit",³² and we can add to his lauding of this fact his claim that Betjeman holds a "belief that a poem's meaning should be communicated directly and not by symbol",³³ and his notice of Betjeman's "astonishing command of detail, both visual and circumstantial".³⁴

Appropriately, we can conclude the shower with his tribute to Hardy's ability to "often be extremely direct"³⁵ in his treatment of the physical world. In his recognition of Hardy's talent for "a kind of telescoping of a couple of images",³⁶ he points to a quality of Hardy's craft which makes us realize -- or perhaps simply to remember -- that Hardy is a major figure in the maintenance of the imagistic

base of English poetry. It is a base which the Imagists were theoretically attempting to salvage after what they perceived to be the dissolution of its presence in the poetry of the latter part of the previous century.

On such evidence we recognize in Larkin's concerns, and in his phrasing of them, a connection with the language of T. E. Hulme, and Ezra Pound. Phrases such as "extremely direct", or "exquisite pictorial natures", and the "telescoping of a couple of images", are consonant with -- if not in echo of -- the terminology of the Imagist theorists.

If we go back to the Imagist theorists, we can recall their desire to animate again the empirical basis of thought and art, and in that aim we can recognize many of Larkin's similar concerns. Thus, in a language which is in kinship with Larkin's own critical standards, there is Hulme's comment that:

Poetry...is not a counter language, but a visual concrete one. It is a compromise for a language of intuition which would hand over sensations bodily. It always endeavours to arrest you, and to make you continuously see a physical thing, to prevent you gliding through an abstract process.³⁷

(my emphasis)

For Hulme, this is not a mere matter of contriving a concrete metaphor in the work, but rather has to do with the empirical authenticity of the thought process which the poem embodies. The poem is conceived as a recreation of the physical world as perceived in a moment of unusually alert attention to the

meaning of its face. Hulme was therefore to say that "Whenever you get an extraordinary interest in a thing, a great zest in its contemplation...you have justification for poetry."³⁸ And when he tried to create a critical litmus test for the authenticity of any given poem in this regard, he said that a quality of "freshness" is visible, a freshness which is difficult to sham: "Freshness convinces you, you feel at once that the artist was in an actual physical state. You feel that for a minute."³⁹ It is a comment which is in step with Pound's directive that the poet must "use his image because he sees or feels it, not because he thinks he can use it to back up some system of ethics or economics",⁴⁰ a comment which -- somewhat ironically -- sounds like a pre-Modernist version of Larkin's scorn of "myth-kitty". Much of Larkin's poetry even centrally and exclusively contains a good deal of that "zest" and that "freshness" of which Hulme speaks. By way of a brief example of its presence in his work, there is the virtual tumble of detail from the physical world, which is at the living base of his poem, "Show Saturday". It is a poem which has a crowded life of its own, a Breughel-like grasp of the immediacy of life's plural detail:

In the main arena, more judges meet by a jeep;
The jumping's on next. Announcements, splutteringly loud,

Clash with the quack of a man with pound notes round his hat
And a lift-up board. There's more than just animals:
Bead stalls, balloon-men, a Bank; a beer-marquee that
Half-screens a canvass Gents; a tent selling tweed,
And another, jackets. Folks sit about on bales

Like great straw dice. For each scene is linked by spaces
Not given to anything much, where kids scrap, freed,
While their owners stare different ways with incurious faces.

The wrestling starts, late; a wide ring of people; then cars;
Then trees; then pale sky. Two young men in acrobats' tights
And embroidered trunks hug each other; rock over the grass,
Stiff-legged, in a two-man scrum. One falls: they shake hands.
Two more start, one-gray-haired: he wins, though. They're

so much fights

As long immobile strainings that end in unbalance
With one on his back, unharmed, while the other stands
Smoothing his hair. But there are other talents--⁴¹

The "zest" continues in a celebratory rendering of a freshly animated imagery of objects, people, and their gestures. In its observation of the plural tumble of life it is reminiscent of what Randall Jarrell has termed the "empirical gaiety"⁴² of William Carlos Williams' art. And it is an effect which Larkin often manages, one which is attributable to his empirical curiosity of mind and his kinship with the Imagists' view of the poem as the act of the mind in close contact with the physical world. Boredom with the world is its utterly polar opposite.

But it is neither the conviction of the Imagist theorists nor of Larkin that poetry is only the act of the empirical imagination in continual representation of the world's plenitude. We could say that the mistake of many of the Imagist poets was that they mistook simple selection of objects for actually saying something profound. Nonetheless, it is central to Larkin's view that the quality of freshness be there as part of the poem's authenticating reality, and at the same time the expressive dimension of the poem must

transform the empirical glance into something much larger. For Larkin, an impression of the world is at the stimulating base of the poem, but there is also a process of thought regarding the impression which must be conveyed.⁴³ In a sense, Larkin could be said to take the Imagist theorists more seriously than did many of the Imagist practitioners.

Larkin's Imagist impulse is one which is visible in the process of empirical thought which is embodied in each of his works separately. Each both evokes the world and ponders it without leaving it behind. It is for this reason that his symbolic effects are natural, and seem to rise inevitably from within the context of the poem's individual setting. We have already seen this grace of form at work in the exploratory empiricism of "Church Going", "The Old Fools", and "High Windows". Interestingly, the symbolism which this kind of poetry embodies is that which Pound described as the "perfect symbol". Pound describes it in his "Credo" of 1912:

Symbols.--I believe that the proper and perfect symbol is the natural object, that if a man uses "symbols" he must so use them, that their symbolic function does not obtrude; so that a sense, and the poetic quality of the passage, is not lost to those who do not understand the symbol as such, to whom, for instance, a hawk is a hawk.⁴⁴

Larkin is a master of exactly this kind of an effect, and it is one which he admires in the work of Hardy and Betjeman. The physical visage of the church in "Church Going", for

instance, is empirically rendered as evidence of the speaker's thematic point about the decline of traditional belief. A survey of its details shows it to be a living index of the decline of all the values which it once more vigorously embodied. And in Larkin's evocation of the physical fact of the hospital in "The Building", the empirical imagination registers it as a naturally symbolic expression of the human desire to build it physically and spiritually into a substitute cathedral:

Higher than the handsomest hotel
 The lucent comb shows up for miles, but see,
 All round it close-ribbed streets rise and fall
 Like a great sigh out of the last century.
 The porters are scruffy; what keep drawing up
 At the entrance are not taxis; and in the hall
 As well as creepers hangs a frightening smell.⁴⁵

The circumstantial contemplation of the poem proceeds from here through another ten stanzas. As the speaker wanders through the hospital's sights, he gathers images of the fearful faces of the entering patients. The gestures of the patients accumulate into a powerful imaginative logic, one in which the stock natural symbolism of the hospital as substitute church, is finally questioned. On the basis of the speaker's witness of the setting, he deduces that the proper metaphor for the hospital is that of a prison. "O world", says the speaker in the sixth stanza, "Your loves, your chances, are beyond the stretch/ Of any hand from here!" And as the cumulative impression of the hospital reaches a cohering moment of integrity, he expresses the meaning of the

building in a manner of saddened empirical discovery. The hospital is a natural symbol, not of healing, but of the undeniable existential fact of death. In keeping with its consistent use of natural symbolism, the speaker concludes his experiential journey through the physical details of the place, by saying of the patients that:

All know they are going to die.
 Not yet, perhaps not here, but in the end,
 And somewhere like this. This is what it means,
 This clean-sliced cliff; a struggle to transcend
 The thought of dying, for unless its powers
 Outbuild cathedrals nothing contravenes
 The coming dark, though crowds each evening try
 With wasteful, weak, propitiatory flowers.

Thematically, the poem deals with the inadequacy of modern man's attempt to outbuild death with a new faith in medicine and technology. Ironically, the very attempt to defeat death is seen as an evasion of its presence. All of the appearance of control is an illusion. And yet the fix we are in is that religious illusions are seen as even less adequate. Up the street from the hospital is a "locked church". The natural symbolism of that fact is compelling evidence for the speaker's case. Hence, in a contemplation in which the physical world is intimately involved in the process of thought, the speaker accumulates the empirical evidence into a dismally accurate conclusion, given the circumstances. To use the words of a speaker in another of Larkin's poems, what is "In every sense empirically true"⁴⁶ about the hospital is its visible testimony of our pathetic weakness in the face of

the mortality which it tries to outbuild. The "wasteful, weak, propitiatory flowers" complete the foray into reality as an embodied epiphany, the discovery of a telling clue. The flowers, in their naturally symbolic effect, indicate the fragility of the human being, its sad beauty. They project a sadly ironic truth. For all of their smallness, there is more meaning in their failure than in the illusion of longevity which the "clean-sliced cliff" unsuccessfully projects.

It was Stevens who said that "much of the world of fact is the equivalent of the world of imagination",⁴⁷ which is an empirical conviction that is at the center of this poem, as it can also be said to underline a good deal of Larkin's poetry as a whole. Nonetheless the world of fact is uninteresting unless sifted and rearranged into meaning by the unifying intelligence of the poet. Additionally, the poet's coloring of the fact of the world by his poetic personality gives it a dimension which takes it still further past a mere suspension of objects. The Imagist practitioners quite often settled for this more rudimentary form of art.⁴⁸

Neither Larkin nor Stevens claims that the poem of reality, the poem of empirical fact, is an objectively verifiable medium of truth. Stevens has said that "poetry is an unofficial view of being",⁴⁹ and Larkin would agree. But it is worth noticing that poetry of this order does mimic the inductive method, can be said to be more directly experiential than more confidently mythic poetry. On the basis of that

distinction, it can be said to be, in its continual contact with the energizing stimulus of the physical world, given to a quality of negative capability. It is patient with the details of its vision and at least attempts to resist abstractions which do not rise from the experiential world. One takes it that this is what Larkin had in mind when he said that each poem should be its "own sole freshly created universe".⁵⁰ The poet's personality, as transformed into his impersonal poetic personality, is deeply involved, and hence the poem is coloured in its perspective. But the interaction between the personality and the physical world is an engaged and curious one. In poetry of this nature, negative capability plays a central part.

Given the nature of Larkin's art, its complex use of different personae and its conception of each individual poem as its "own sole freshly created universe", the critic who is anxious to delineate the world-view of the work as a whole, is in peril of not only mistaking one persona for the entire personality, but of mistaking one "freshly created universe" for the entire universe of the poet's work. With that methodical difficulty clearly in view, we can proceed with our examination of Larkin's Imagist impulse without fear of jeopardizing our view of him as a less bleak poet than his critics have so far claimed him to be.

To assert again the importance of the poet's personality in the creation of the poem of reality, we can say that it is precisely the poetic personality of the poet which enables

him to realize a meaning in what he sees. It is the emotional coloring of the personae which gives a uniqueness to the particular vision of the physical world. Thus, it is the familiar ironic persona of Larkin's "Mr. Bleaney" which colours the world which that poem embodies. The world perceived in the poem is one which that particular persona has an inclination to recognize. Paradoxically, the persona's limitation of perception is his very qualification for the uniqueness of the moment of vision. The poem is worth looking at with this fact in mind.

Larkin finds the reality of the sub-heroic Mr. Bleaney indexed in the physical details of his room.. The prosaic quality of Bleaney's existence is captured in the speaker's beholding empirical consciousness. His eye collects impressions in a journey toward comprehension:

Flowered curtains, thin and frayed,
Fall to within five inches of the sill,

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

Behind the door, no room for books or bags--
'I'll take it.' So it happens that I lie
Where Mr. Bleaney lay, and stub my fags
On the same saucer-souvenir,⁵¹

The objects which are selected to comprise the contemplation have all of the freshness and realistic presence which Hulme stated as necessary to the image. But the ordering of the images, the connecting of the spaces between them, is the

cohering process which gives the poem its true brilliance. And the poem beckons us to participate in that process. There is a unifying quality in all of the central images, an essence which is recognized and abstracted. At the same time the process of thought is stated in the natural symbolism of the objects just as they are also collected into a perceptible whole. We notice the dearth of aesthetic demeanor in Bleaney's room, and how the "Tussocky, littered" strip of building land shares with the equally tussocky curtains, light bulb, and minimally functional furniture, an unkempt, unfinished quality which physically represents Mr. Bleaney's life. All of these images have an analogous form; they quite naturally represent the protean quality of Bleaney's life. Significantly, it is because the speaker detects a similarly tossed clumsiness in the sky that the somewhat glib persona can consent to an existential respect for Bleaney's unambitious and awkwardly low-keyed existence:

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.

The "frigid wind/ Tousling the clouds", bears an analogous relation to the "strip of land/ Tussocky, littered". Even the sounds are analogous to the similar visage of pictures. Because of this ragged quality which is noticed in all

selected details of the scene, Bleaney's life is perceived as having a kind of sanction for its prosiness which is seen as somehow written into the scheme of things. There are people like Bleaney, says the speaker, just as there are days and settings like the one here evoked. In the poet's foray into reality in this particular "sole freshly created universe", there is a realized recognition of this truth. In terms of Imagist theory, the poem passes the test. There is the illusion that, in Hulme's words, "the artist was in an actual physical state", and in the participating experience of reading the poem, "You feel that for a minute."

This physical orientation of thought and expression in Larkin's work is one of the major grounds on which we can recognize a consonance of his craft -- and of brilliance -- with the Imagists. Both Hulme and Larkin seem to agree that, as Stevens aptly put it, "Accuracy of observation is the equivalent of accuracy of thinking."⁵² Stevens also once said that "The real is the only base. But it is the base."⁵³ That is, we can add, the real is the stimulus, and is an integral part of the thinking process of the poem. And the poet's personality plays a central part in the coloring of the real, just as the real often challenges the color of his view, altering its shade. The Imagist impulse in Larkin's work is always part of a larger interest in personal expression, usually of new personal discovery in the complex conversation of thinking and feeling which takes place between the poet and his world. We see this in the process of thought

which "Mr. Bleaney" expresses. And there is a further point worth noting. Larkin quite typically completes the empirical journey of discovery in that poem with a qualifying agnostic gesture. The speaker says finally, "I don't know", indicating that the epiphany of existential raggedness in the poem is not meant as a controlling perception in the world of his imagination. A good deal of the difficulty which critics have created for the reader who is anxious to note the complexity of Larkin's work comes from the exercise of a conclusiveness of mind which the poet does not encourage. So that in the instance of this poem, while the speaker clearly indicates a bias toward a downward epiphany of existential seediness, he draws back in a final motion of negative capability.

Additionally, of course, as we recall from the previous chapter, Larkin is a poet who writes from a versatile poetic personality, and as we have just seen in "Mr. Bleaney", the persona which he adopts is the one which he finds most appropriate to the setting which he confronts. And his settings are not especially chosen always to be dreary ones, just as the epiphany which rises from the setting does not always match the visage of the setting as we are first led to view it. If, for instance, we turn to "Dublinesque", the "freshly created universe" is, as the poet requires, "freshly...created". The speaker in the poem wears the familiar persona of poignant sadness, and also embodies Larkin's much overlooked instinct for praise. In its registration of a complex moment

of epiphany, it reminds us of the subtlety of the Imagists' views in this regard. Its brilliant achievement characterizes the Imagist requirement that the poem represent a moment of highly suggestive illumination out of the context of the physical world:

Down stucco sidestreets,
Where light is pewter
And afternoon mist
Brings lights on in shops
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 caper a few steps,
Skirts held skilfully
(Someone claps time),

And of a great sadness also.
As they wend away
A voice is heard singing
Of Kitty, or Katy,
As if the name meant once
All love, all beauty.⁵⁴

Wallace Stevens has said that "Poetry increases the feeling for reality."⁵⁵ and in this poem it takes the shape of a feeling for an entire culture. There is an essentially Imagist pictorial visibility to the scene, and the speaker's empirical imagination searches out, and realizes the living reality of its physical world. The juxtaposition of the "race-guides and rosaries" telescopes two contradictory

images between which blossoms an empirically shrewd comment about the life and culture of Dublin. Larkin is here in effortless company with Joyce, giving us an immediate sense of the culture, its physical-spiritual reality. The poem as a whole embodies a moment of epiphany; one in which the ostensible contradictions in the scene are blended musically into an illumination. The illumination is based on a perception of a quality which pervades life in Dublin like the "afternoon mist" which so evanescently suggests its surface. Hence, while the fact of the funeral initially appears in odd contradiction to the gaiety of the funeral party, a gaiety which is caught in the speaker's participation in the liveliness of its visage in the middle stanzas, the empirical intelligence accumulates the particulars of the scene into something more profound. At its center is the recognition of a sadly beautiful quality in the life which is witnessed. As in "Home is so Sad", there is a recognition of a spirited courage in the energy of the people, one which saves the speaker from a simply pathetic conclusion. The sound of the voice "singing/ Of Kitty, or Katy", rises from the scene as audibly appropriate to the imagery. In that sound, and in the sight of the physical world of the poem, it rises as a very Irish version of the "still, sad music of humanity",⁵⁶ one which is as poignantly beautiful as it is also energetic. Larkin's respect for it shows in a rising tone of praise which turns the epiphany to song.

Stevens has said that "Reality is the spirit's true center."⁵⁷ and we can add that the spirit is also the true center of reality in Larkin's world. The close interplay, the conversation, between spirit and the physical world is the fulcrum on which the empirical poise of his poetry rests. His personae, each of which is governed by an astute empirical intelligence, show a willingness to move exploratively into the living detail of actually felt or imagined physical worlds. Larkin himself sees the act of recreating the experience from which the poem takes its inception to be an act of victory over time. From the point of view of our central focus here, his statement on the matter sounds very like an essentially Imagist conviction about the work of art as the expression of life's rarest moments of realization, the poet's moments of epiphany. With the experience of "Dublinesque" still close behind us, we can see the more specifically that the following comment by Larkin has an Imagist ring to it:

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.⁵⁸

We immediately recognize the close connection which he makes between seeing, thinking, and feeling. In this view, each poem recreates a real perception, moves it upward into the

kind of transcendence from time which the work of art, in its qualified way, can assure. In his statement of his preservative instinct, Larkin echoes the Imagist notion, once expressed by Hulme, that "Literature, like memory, selects only the vivid patches of life", and that in a sense "Life is composed of exquisite moments and the rest is only shadows of them."⁵⁹ Larkin's comment on his motivation to preserve not only underlines the accomplishment of "Dublinesque", it brings to mind Pound's famous description of the "Image" and his description of its epiphanic effect of managing a victory over time and place. When the writer successfully conveys the complexity of the experience which Larkin has termed a "seen/thought/felt" one, he approximates the "Image" which Pound had described as:

that which represents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.... It is the presentation of such a 'complex' instantaneously which gives the sense of a sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art.⁶⁰

Both Pound and Larkin, in strikingly similar terminology, express a view of art which is concerned with the registration of a moment of perception in time that seems to transcend our more ordinary awareness of life. Of course, it is a classic definition of the artist that he is the one who sees/thinks/feels more than the people around him, and is able to articulate the complexity of his insights. The artist is the person who makes public his diary of perceptive

moments. They are preserved in what becomes his public chronicle, one which is connected to his diary, and yet different from it in precisely the act of transformation which we have delineated in the previous chapter. "Dublinesque" and a whole series of Larkin's poems ably enact the process involved in the selection of the "vivid patches of life" which he has deemed worth making public. "Dublinesque" is the act of preservation of a thing which is "seen/thought/felt". In the empirical sharpness of its Imagist base, and the characteristic sensitivity of its triumph, it is the registration of a moment of deeply felt connection of the poet with his world. Moments of epiphany are of central importance to Larkin's work. The complexity of his art could be said to lie in precisely the carefully recreated difficulty of perception which these moments embody. As we have seen, many of his central poems are the expression of a large and dramatic realization which seems to rise inevitably out of the empirically alert attention of his speakers. The critic is put in the challenging position of having to recognize the delicacy of momentary insight in each of his poems, without agitating the insight into a cruder form in prose and collecting the moments of the poet's chronicle into a precis form which betrays their true subtlety. This is a risk we take with all forms of art, of course. But in the case of Larkin, the poet's conscious resistance to all forms of large abstraction or "myth-kitty" requires that a corresponding temper of negative capability be brought to bear on the work. Larkin's

epiphanies are often very quietly located amidst the noisier superstructure of a poem, so it is sometimes easy to be distracted from them. Stevens has said that "Poetry is a pheasant disappearing in the brush",⁶¹ and in Larkin's poetry there is often more than one pheasant suggesting a truth, just as it also resists it. We recollect, for instance, the suggestive images which make up the furniture of the old people's minds in "The Old Fools". It is worth looking at that pertinent passage again.

Perhaps being old is having lighted rooms
 Inside your head, and people in them, acting.
 People you know, yet can't quite name; each looms
 Like a deep loss restored, from known doors turning,
 Setting down a lamp, smiling from a stair, extracting
 A known book from the shelves; or sometimes only
 The rooms themselves, chairs and a fire burning,
 The blown bush at the window, or the sun's
 Faint friendliness on the wall some lonely
 Rain-ceased midsummer evening. That is where they live:
 Not here and now, but where all happened once.⁶²

Each memory is an image, and also a suggestive truth, a "pheasant disappearing in the brush". The memories are curiously similar in nature to high moments of poetry, in that deep impulses of meaning are sensed without being fully defined. Larkin seems to entertain an idea about consciousness itself here, and yet quite typically he draws back from it at the same time. Can it be, the speaker seems to ask, that the old people's memories collect into a meaningful wholeness? The speaker can only ponder some such hopeful abstraction, and is unwilling to conclude with a cosy conviction. Like Larkin himself, the speaker is a thinker as

speculator, contemplator, not as abstract philosopher. The philosopher might say that Larkin is here giving us a hint of a Platonic connection between the "here and now" and the world of Ideal Forms "where all happened once". The Jungian psychologist could probably more thoroughly convince us that what we see here is an enactment of the way in which the individual psyche is intimately connected with a collective consciousness. Larkin's work as a whole is more suggestive of this kind of dramatic questioning of large ideas than is sometimes assumed to be the case.⁶³

Nonetheless, quite typically, in the above poem the reader is presented with the rug-pulling "Perhaps" which opens the stanza, and the ironic-respectful comment which closes the poem and the contemplation: "Well/ We shall find out." In other words, the memories which the poet evokes and suggests as powerful are not at the same time accumulated into a case for a conclusive idea. There is a tentativeness in the speaker, and correspondingly in the poet himself. He refuses to be railroaded into reconciliation in the world of categorical abstraction. Larkin's poetry as a whole is powerful in precisely this quality of negative capability, this unwillingness to sell ideas, or put in another way, to do the reader's thinking for him. It is perhaps because of this agnostic disposition of his intelligence that the craft of the Imagists is so flexibly visible in his work in the design of his images.

The advantage of the epiphanic image for the explorative mind is its transcendence of abstraction, its designed refusal to state less than it can suggest. When Pound discussed the image in his essay on "Vorticism" he said that it must embody more than "shells of thought". He said:

The image is not an idea. It is a radiant node or cluster; it is what I can, and must perforce, call a VORTEX, from which and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing.⁶⁴

This dramatic attitude to ideas describes precisely the profoundly anti-intellectual nature of Larkin's epiphanies, both in "The Old Fools" and otherwise in his work. In the passage we have just seen in "The Old Fools", there is the rushing in of ideas, a provocative suggestiveness which draws the reader into the speaker's active contemplation. The mind wearies of abstractions quickly. The imagination, our connection with reality, quickens with the registration of complex mystery, the delicate "pheasant disappearing in the brush". Larkin has been accused of lacking intellectual vigor, but the evidence of the work shows that his anti-intellectualism is a profound one.⁶⁵ It is the deeper hesitation of the empirically-minded and imaginatively more complex poet of the physical world. Stevens' analogous comments on the epiphanic, and therefore more profound, nature of art by comparison to thought are also useful in this context. Speaking of the imagination as a "miracle of logic", he has said:

The truth seems to be that we live in concepts of the imagination before the reason has established them. If this is true, then reason is simply the methodizer of the imagination. It may be that the imagination is a miracle of logic and that its exquisite divinations are are calculations beyond analysis, as the conclusions of the reason are calculations wholly within analysis.⁶⁶

(my emphasis)

But if Stevens' statement is an adequate expression of the truth concerning the relative ineptness of old abstractions to the new divinations of poetry, it is nonetheless possible for the critic to point toward the divinations in a suggestive way. And in the case of Larkin, there is the need to get the critical record straight on just how "exquisite" they are in the first place. We have already seen in such poems as "Ambulances", "Mr. Bleaney", "The Building" -- to name familiar ones -- that the epiphanies move toward sharp and crashing recognitions of a void-like quality which seems to suggest an imbicilic order -- or disorder -- to the scheme of things. The fear of death is registered by the persona in "Ambulances", for example, in the chilling natural symbolism of the ambulance itself. Its meaning is evoked and realized as an index of the "solving emptiness" which is just below the surface of life. It surfaces "momently" in the minds of the women in the poem who are forced to "see/ A wild white face that overtops/ Red stretcher blankets momentarily".⁶⁷ The entire poem moves to the

sudden confirmation of, in the words of another poem, a "sharp tender shock".⁶⁸ Larkin's work is punctuated with such epiphanic shocks, just as it is also punctuated with more seamy ones, such as we have seen in "Mr. Bleaney".

On the other hand, in "Church Going", "The Whitsun Weddings", and "High Windows", we also see that Larkin's epiphanies are often ones of edification. In these instances, the epiphanies are large existential versions of the suggestion of beauty which we have just re-examined in "The Old Fools". Bluntly, we can say that Larkin's epiphanies fall into the two basic categories: the cautiously romantic, and the darkly ironic. Every single poem will in some way crash through the confines of this kind of categorization, but on the far ends of the spectrum, this is very roughly what we see.

Looking over the chronicle of Larkin's epiphanies, the poetry which is in public view, there seems no reason to assume that he -- at any point -- has decided to create poems which will express anything like a conversion or preference for one kind of epiphany over another. In all instances, the moments of epiphany rise from his poems as authentic, and not shammed to further either a pessimistic view of life or a more atoned one. Larkin has never been a dogmatic pessimist, nor a dogmatic optimist, though we are well aware of his critics' view of him as tending toward the former discomfort; just as we are also aware of the basis of that judgement in

a confusion about his poetic personality. And given his insistence on the need for the poet to await patiently, and honestly record his impressions about life as the physical world suggests its momentous messages to him, it doesn't seem that Larkin is interested in giving us a poem which collects all of his epiphanies together. He seems unwilling to write a conclusion to his work for us. It is perhaps for this reason that so many of his critics do him the disfavor of forging one for themselves, and naming it his.

Larkin obviously sees his poetry as one of witness, the preservation of moments of unusual attention to the experiential world. In short, it appears that he has a standing record by now which indicates that he is above all a poet of negative capability and is intent on sticking to his claim that "myth-kitty" has no energetic connection with his work. Nonetheless, if Larkin refuses to nail down his view into a recognizable formula of Metaphysics, his critics are more bold, and many seek to give to him a conclusiveness which he resists in an instinctual way. Hence, we find that many critics are willing to settle for characterizing Larkin's world-view on the basis of one or two poems, and simply ignore the others as somehow beside the point. So that we find Lolette Kuby saying, for instance, that:

Few poets seem further from mysticism than Larkin, particularly since the mystical experience usually is thought of as intuition into the ineffably harmonious, the heart of light.⁶⁹

On the basis of Larkin's "Absences", she offers that Larkin is a poet of "negative mystical experience".⁷⁰ That judgement is in keeping with her overall view of Larkin as a basically dark existentialist writer. Kenneth Moon would seem to agree. He sees "Mr. Bleaney" as a representative poem in this regard, saying that it is paradigmatic in its recognition of the fact that all human venture is trivial when measured "against the scale of the universe".⁷¹

Philip Gardner has recently decided that "The Building" is the representative poem in High Windows and says that "The view we see is drab and local; the regret we feel, universal."⁷² These short examples would seem to show that Larkin is a poet whose dark epiphanies are having more effect on his critics than his lighter ones. Yet we can see that the basis of these judgements lies in selective generalization.

In a sense, given the agnostic nature of Larkin's poetry, and given the complexity of his epiphanies in almost every case, any attempt to nail down his overall view of life is destined to failure. The circumstantial nature of Larkin's individual poems would seem to make nonsense of any attempt fully to abstract a systematic view of life which, the poet tells us, is not there. Any version of Larkin's world-view will have to include both the darker moments and the brighter ones and generalization on the basis of a single-minded attention to the chronicle is destined to failure. Further, because of the temporary, circumstantial nature of Larkin's

art, no single poem can comfortably be said to represent his view. Larkin resists conclusiveness with as much energy as his critics pursue it. As a way of underlining these points it is worth looking at two poems which seem to come to opposite conclusions.

We can proceed by way of relating a fact or two of very recent critical history. Larkin's poem, "The Explosion",⁷³ which is the last in his High Windows, is one which embodies what appears to be a reconciling image of atonement. In keeping with the pertinence of Imagist theory to Larkin's work, we can see that it contains a carefully and beautifully rendered epiphany; perhaps one of the most cl  irvoyant in his chronicle. More than one reviewer has been struck by its edifying dimension, and not surprisingly, those who would seem to agree with Kuby's view of Larkin's previous work as being far "from mysticism", have registered delight and surprise that the reputedly weary poet has managed to accomplish such a well-behaved moment. But then Larkin published a poem titled "Aubade"⁷⁴ almost three years later, in 1977. As the reader will see shortly, it embodies all of the cheerfulness of a funeral. Larkin, it would seem, has let his "romantic reviewers"⁷⁵ down again. And done so quite quickly. The two poems are here placed in sequence and are uninterrupted by critical commentary. In the juxtaposed reading of them, the experience of their strikingly dissimilar attitudes to death, they stand as caveat to all critics who offer conjectures about Larkin's conclusive view.

The Explosion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

One showing the eggs unbroken.

Aubade

I work all day, and get half drunk at night.
 Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare.
 In time the curtain-edges will grow light.
 Till then I see what's really always there:
 Unresting death, a whole day nearer now.
 Making all thought impossible but how
 And where and when I shall myself die.
 Arid interrogation: yet the dread

Of dying, and being dead,
Flashes afresh to hold and horrify.

The mind blanks at the glare. Not in remorse
-- The good not done, the love not given, time
Torn off unused -- nor wretchedly because
An only life can take so long to climb
Clear of its wrong beginnings; and may never;
But at the total emptiness for ever,
The sure extinction that we travel to
And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,
Not to be anywhere,
And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true.

This is a special way of being afraid.
No trick dispels. Religion used to try,
That vast moth-eaten musical brocade
Created to pretend we never die,
And specious stuff that says No rational being
Can fear a thing it will not feel, not seeing
That this is what we fear -- no sight, no sound,
No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,
Nothing to love or link with,
The anaesthetic from which none come round.

And so it stays just on the edge of vision,
A small unfocused blur, a standing chill
That slows each impulse down to indecision.
Most things may never happen: this one will,
And realisation of it rages out
In furnace-fear when we are caught without
People or drink. Courage is no good:
It means not scaring others. Being brave
Lets no one off the grave.
Death is no different whined at than withstood.

Slowly light strengthens, and the room takes shape.
It stands plain as a wardrobe, what we know,
Have always known, know that we can't escape,
Yet can't accept. One side will have to go.
Meanwhile telephones crouch, getting ready to ring
In locked-up offices, and all the uncaring
Intricate rented world begins to rouse
The sky is white as clay, with no sun.
Work has to be done.
Postmen like doctors go from house to house.

"The Explosion" appears to be a rendition of a harmony
of being, a harmony which is based on a recognition of the
efficacy of faith, though dramatized as a living reality

within the minds of the wives, and therefore separate from the speaker. His engaged imagination is nonetheless undeniably present. The epiphany which both the poet and the wives share with the reader, is captured only "for a second", and is powerfully centralized in the image of the men walking "Somehow from the sun towards them, / One showing the eggs unbroken". Unlike the "wasteful, weak, propitiatory flowers" which are projected as the concluding image of defeat at the end of "The Building", the final image of "The Explosion" is one which atones the living with the dead, and loss with a mysterious beauty. The persona is the cautiously romantic one in Larkin's range of poetic personalities, and the tone of the poem ends on a note of praise. On the evidence of this poem alone, Larkin is far from being only the poet of what Lollete Kuby has termed "negative mystical experience". And yet to continue the exercise, on the basis of his most recent poem, "Aubade", this is precisely an appropriate phrase. Very much in the tradition of Larkin's epiphanies in "Next, Please", "Ambulances", "The Building", and a whole series of other poems, the inexorable fact of death rises out of the very hope for life which the title of the poem, in this case, ironically embodies. The night thoughts of the speaker ache through the poem as one large epiphany, a painful realization of mortality which "Flashes afresh to hold and horrify". The sad persona is almost entirely uncompromising in his sadness. There is none of the beauty which that persona also senses in poems such as "Home is So Sad",

"Dublinesque", and a whole series of poems which we could also shuffle out of the chronicle. The speaker introduces an ironic-playful tone in an apparent attempt to joke his way through to the dawn. But his humour is a black humour, and he describes death as "The anaesthetic from which none come round." and in devastating punniness, "a standing chill". Finally, no amount of analytical struggling would seem to change the dreary and defeated sense of life, or death-in-life, which is projected in the image which concludes the poem, where "the sky is white as clay, with no sun" and "Postmen like doctors go from house to house."⁷⁶

On the basis of each poem we can hypothetically draw a conclusion about Larkin's ultimate view. In one instance, supported by other examples, we could venture that he is a bleak poet, a dogmatic pessimist. On the basis of the other, supported by additional examples, we could call him a poet who is reconciled, one who has grown up to the expectations of his "romantic reviewers". But we begin to realize that the truth of the matter is more complex and demanding than this. Neither poem singly embodies Larkin's ultimate view, and at the same time each is a contemplation, a momentary epiphany of the possible truth, one dark, the other light. Most importantly, the evidence of the two poems shows that Larkin is a poet who, figuratively speaking, knows a lot about heaven and a lot about hell. For all of that, there is no myth which he has contrived to contain both of the experiences. Quite typically, he distances himself from the

vision in "The Explosion" by centering it in the consciousness of the wives themselves, just as he centered the wonder in "Wedding Wind" in the whole being of the young bride. And Larkin owns these views no more than Shakespeare owns MacBeth's or Falstaff's or Mercutio's. Which is to say that he does own them in a profoundly impersonal way. Larkin's personae are not Philip Larkin in any categorical sense. And analogously, Larkin's epiphanies are so complex and varied that they defeat any attempt to dismantle them in a search after the controlling myth which, the poet has warned us, does not exist. And who is to say which of the epiphanies, the dark or the light, are the most profound since we certainly can't add them up into a total.⁷⁷

The truth of the matter, we begin to realize, is that Larkin shares with the most frankly realistic writers, Shakespeare included, a negative capability which is the genius of his mastery over a wide range of perspectives on life. Larkin writes poems which, like the face of the world itself, are dark, and poems which, like the face of the world itself, are light. There is a balance to that vision which is as natural as the movement of night into day. Without a firm commitment to a mythic superstructure, the open-minded poet is destined to turn up flashes of light, and flashes of dark. It is foolhardy for the critic to insist, against the evidence, that his moments are only sunny, or more conventionally, only dark, just as it is absurd to indulge in guessing games about what he might do next. Once the moments

of epiphany are conveyed -- and it is sheer genius that Larkin so continually renders them fresh -- they are freed from the poet in a profound way, and take their place with other works of art. They either move us intelligently or not. If they do not, it is pointless to send them back to Larkin in Hull. He doesn't own them. More absurdly, one begins to realize, it is a waste of energy to moralize about their impropriety, unless one is honestly declaring oneself as a custodian of morality and/or religion. Larkin is a poet more thoroughly open in sensibility than any critic who has written on his work. He is a poet par excellence, of negative capability. And one doesn't say that as a wild gesture of defence. It is verifiable on the grounds of the integrity of his poetry as we can find it related in yet another way to the poetic of the Imagists. Importantly, Hulme's view of the work of art as religiously inconclusive can be seen as centrally appropriate to Larkin's resistance to final abstraction.

In his famous definition of the "classical in verse", Hulme made a statement which is suggestively appropriate to Larkin's poetry. In the context of attempting to define the difficulty -- and the maturity -- of Shakespeare's work, its unusual resilience, Hulme described it as expressive of "the classic of motion". As he proceeded to define the "classical in verse", he made a statement which can both sanction and focus Larkin's work in a way which all of the impressionistic

guesswork of volumes of Larkin criticism has understandably failed to do. He said:

What I mean by classical in verse, then, is this. That even in the most imaginative flights there is always a holding back, a reservation. The classical poet never forgets his finiteness, his limit of man. He remembers always that he is mixed up with earth. He may jump, but he always returns back; he never flies away into the circum-ambient gas.

You might say if you wished that the whole of the romantic attitude seems to crystallise in verse round metaphors of flight. Hugo is always flying, flying over abysses, flying up into the eternal gases. The word infinite in every other line.

In the classical attitude you never seem to swing right along to the infinite nothing. If you say an extravagant thing which does exceed the limits inside which you know man to be fastened, yet there is always conveyed in some way at the end an impression of yourself standing outside it, and not quite believing it, or consciously putting it forward as a flourish. You never go blindly into an atmosphere more than the truth, an atmosphere too rarefied for man to breathe for long. You are always faithful to the conception of a limit.⁷⁸

(my emphasis)

Hulme's definition provides us with a strikingly accurate description of Larkin's most central moments of epiphany.

Larkin both records them, and steps back from nailing them down. The speaker at the end of "Church Going" could be said to remember that he is "mixed up with earth". His classical attitude holds him back from the "swing right along to the infinite nothing" of which Hulme speaks:

For, though I've no idea
 What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth,
 It pleases me to stand in silence here;

A serious house on serious earth it is,
 In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
 Are recognized, and robed as destinies.
 And that much can never 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.⁷⁹

We have moved successfully into a rarefied "atmosphere", but are returned to "the conception of a limit". Significantly, the ironic turning back leaves us seriously facing the graveyard, a perspective which underlines the need to be "serious" just as it also prevents us from "flying away into circumambient gas". The flight is romantic, but romantic in the order of the difficult realism which Hulme is speaking of.

In the concluding epiphany of "High Windows", there is the same reining in of the flight, the same recognition of the power of the "atmosphere", and the same corresponding recognition that it is "too rarefied for man to breathe for long".

Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:
 The sun-comprehending glass,
 Any beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows
 Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.⁸⁰

As we recall from Chapter One, the speaker is both given to the flight into an epiphany of wonder, and an epiphany of void. The precarious poise of the moment is as delicate as

anything which is conceivable in art. The image is designed, crafted carefully, to embody a gracefulness of vorticistic motion. There is the suggestiveness of Pound's "VORTEX" at work in the dramatic quality of the moment, and there is also the recognition of limit which Hulme has so clearly defined as the hallmark of "the classic of motion". If we look at Hulme's definition again, we notice the way in which it is also stated by him as being the art of temporary and passing wonder, an art, the description of which is remarkably appropriate to Larkin's work as a whole, and to the individual accomplishment of the poems we are presently in local contact with. In describing the depth and the elusive quality of this art, Hulme was to say that:

The intellect always analyses -- when there is a synthesis it is baffled. That is why the artist's work seems mysterious. The intellect can't represent it. This is a necessary consequence of the particular nature of the intellect and the purposes for which it was formed. It doesn't mean that your synthesis is ineffable, simply that it can't be definitely stated. Now this is all worked out in Bergson, the central feature of his whole philosophy. It is all based on the clear conception of of these vital complexities which he calls "intensive" as opposed to the other kind which he calls "extensive", and the recognition of the fact that the intellect can only deal with the extensive multiplicity. To deal with the intensive you must use intuition.⁸¹

(my emphasis)

While this is a difficult notion, it is not impossible to comprehend. By the time it is sifted through Imagist theory

of craft, it arrives at a notion of the individual poem as the confirmation of a mysterious intuition. Pound described its transcending effect in his definition of the "Image". And Pound's recognition of the newly-intellectual power of artistic intuition is also underscored in his description of the vorticistic design of the image. Its wisdom is "intensive", and is therefore the more difficult to create, just as, because of its delicacy, it is easy for the critic to destroy.

Hulme said that romanticism was like "spilt religion"⁸² because having lost faith in the infinite, it put the infinite in the finite and conceived of the notion of man as presently perfect, chained down from perfection by the strictures of civilized society. It was based, that is, on a myth. One which became stale. "A romantic movement must have an end of the very nature of the thing. It may be deplored, but it can't be helped -- wonder must cease to be wonder."⁸³ It must cease to be the strained and self-conscious motion off into empty "circumambient gas". It was once underpinned by myths which are dead, very like the "vast moth-eaten musical brocade" which Larkin names religion in "Aubade". In the new classical verse, the edifying can only be found in the real physical world and be the recognition of the wondrous in the face of the world, a face which changes daily. Hulme once said: "the world exists to develop the lines on its face",⁸⁴ a comment which was made in consonance with Bergson's view of life as becoming, fluid, unfixed, and potential. Hence, for

Hulme, "Wonder can only be an attitude of a man passing from one stage to another, it can never be a permanently fixed thing."⁸⁵ It is a view of the poet which is highly suggestive of Larkin's agnostic achievement. Hulme is suggesting that there can be a poetry which exists without myth and is yet a poetry of wonder. In the case of Larkin we can see that the poet can take on the role of registering that wonder, while continually holding back from reconciliation into religion. For Larkin, that wonder is the product of his engagement with the daily newness of the physical world. His moments of wonder, because so grounded in the experiential world, are varied. Hence, while some of the epiphanies are suggestive of light, others are darkly terrifying; much as in Shakespeare, all intense moments of perception are not the same in their quality, indeed are often so different that they seem mutually to exclude one another. It is for this reason that Shakespeare seems inexhaustible in terms of the ideas which can be led to his work for confirmation. Since both Larkin and Shakespeare are constantly writing out the circumstantial, the changing face of the physical world, the residual experience of their work is one of mystery, rather than one of heavy philosophical conviction. Attentive to the constant changes in the visage of the physical world, neither writer is given to the statement of a dogmatic pessimism or a vatic optimism. Both dispositions are irrelevant to their more exploratory art. As empirically oriented writers, they are gifted with a negative capability which always waits for further evidence.

Thinking of other modern writers in this context, we can offer that when the gods were seen to have died again, the fixity at the center of traditional myth crumbled for many of them. This is why Eliot's Wasteland⁸⁶ will always be a focusing work in modern literature. It is a funeral oration in which all of the symbols of the myth are numbered and buried one by one. But it is a poem which is limited by a nostalgia for the myth which it buries, a nostalgia which prevents it from turning to the physical world in an attempt to contact a fresh sense of mystery. From one point of view, we can say that Larkin's rejection of Modernism is made on precisely this ground. In a sense, the Modernist rejection of the physical world is the expression of a terminal boredom with life, an inability to survive the funeral with a new curiosity.

In the Imagist impulse, as we have seen Hulme prescribe it as a classical disposition, the option was opened for a retrieval of the world as wondrous, still suggestive of meaning. The fact of the matter, of course, is that the physical world did not die at all. Writers who recognized the death of the myth without throwing the physical world away with it refused to give in to the Modernist-Symbolist funeral. They became, and become, writers who, in Hulme's directive, are "passing from one stage to another".⁸⁷ They move through moments of wonder-epiphanies which grow from their contact with the physical world -- and the chronicle of their moments provides us with the moving record of their journey through time.

Wallace Stevens and D. H. Lawrence are two such writers. They write their chronicles as the earned product of their experience of the physical world, and are both poets pre-eminently suitable to Hulme's perception of the "classic of motion" as a poetry of wonder without religion. It is not accidental that we find so many of Stevens' comments on art not only consonant with Larkin's achievement, but in echo of many of the more complex notions of the Imagist theorists. Neither Larkin nor Stevens is willing to construct a religion out of his own ego. Neither, that is, is interested in the interior movement into idiosyncratic mythic structure which poems such as The Four Quartets⁸⁸ entail. By contrast, they are poets who venture into the newness of the physical world, leaving the dead myth behind. In this context one recollects Larkin's "Water", a poem which suggests a good deal about the writer's attitude to the physical world, and what he might wish to discover there as a substitute for the myth which is dead:

If I were called in
To construct a religion
I should make use of water.

Going to church
Would entail a fording
To dry, different clothes;

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

And I should raise to the east
A glass of water
Where any-angled light
Would congregate endlessly.⁸⁹

Larkin turns up many dark epiphanies in his work. The record of the criticism of his work shows that this is what he is famous for. And it could be argued that the absence of a myth in his work is what accounts for this habit of registering epiphanies of dark shock. But on the suggestive basis of the poem above, we can see that he is also concerned with epiphanies of light, and it is more than interesting that the image at the end of the poem reads like his own description of epiphanies of light, moments of beauty which sparkle imaginatively out of the fact of the world. Their opposite is the dark perception, and nobody can deny that Larkin's work is not populated with such moments, though why so many insist on their dominance becomes finally an imponderable. But at least this much can be said: to view the poetry as a whole as expressive of only a bleakness, sadness, and despair, is to ignore that side of the work in which "any-angled light" does in fact exist.

In an attempt to right this imbalance of the criticism, it is worth looking at the work from the point of view of its capacity for wonder, its faith in the sparkle of beauty which suggestively rewards the empirically oriented poet of reality, even amidst his impulses to despair. Larkin's retrieval of the physical world brings with it the retrieval of a sense of wonder without religion, a recognition that to live in a manner receptive to the mystery of the physical world is to discover something which can stave off the worry that existence is really no more than a muddle. D. H. Lawrence can help us to

recognize this aspect of Larkin's work. Indeed, it would appear that he is largely responsible for its presence in Larkin's chronicle. We will see in the next chapter that Larkin shares with Lawrence a conviction which Stevens once turned to an axiom in one of his poems: "The greatest poverty is not to live/ In a physical world."⁹⁰ We can add that to live in the physical world, for both Larkin and Lawrence, is to retrieve a sense of wonder which can give a focusing power to one's life, despite the absence of a controlling myth.

NOTES: CHAPTER III.

¹Robert Conquest, New Lines, (1956; rpt. New York: MacMillan, St. Martins' Press, 1967), p. xv. For context, see above, p. 8.

²T. W. W., p. 17.

³H. W., p. 17.

⁴T. W. W., p. 21.

⁵H. W., p. 24.

⁶T. W. W., p. 45.

⁷T. L. D., p. 13.

⁸T. L. D., p. 45.

⁹H. W., p. 33.

¹⁰T. L. D., p. 41.

¹¹H. W., p. 32.

¹²T. L. D., p. 15.

¹³T. W. W., p. 9.

¹⁴Richard Hoggart once made a comment which expresses that "immediacy" of art which is central to the English tradition. It can act as a widely general placing of the difference between Eliot's art and Larkin's. Hoggart said: "Good literature recreates the immediacy of life -- the sense that life was and is all these things, all these different orders of things, all at once. It embodies the sense of human life developing in a historical and moral context. It recreates the pressure of value-laden life so that--to the extent of the writer's gifts and art--we know better what it must have meant to live and make decisions in that time, at that place, to have thought and felt, to have smelt roast beef, been troubled by falling hair and wondered what one was

NOTES CONT'D: CHAPTER III.

making of one's life. See "Literature and Society," Norman MacKenzie, ed., printed in A Guide To The Social Sciences (New York: New American Library, 1966), p. 205. Interestingly, it is a comment which could well describe T. S. Eliot's *Prufrock*, as it could Lawrence's *Tom Brangwen*--as he grows older. The more ordinary and recognizable immediacy of Tom's world is the one which Larkin would likely point to as involving the feel of the substantial world.

¹⁵T. S. Eliot, The Wasteland (1922; rpt. Collected Poems; 1909-1962, London: Faber and Faber, 1974), p. 61-80.

¹⁶Yet I must indelibly underline the help of Anthony Thwaite in this matter, not in any recognition of the Imagist impulse as such, but in his recognition of the importance of realizing Larkin's grounding of his poetic in his own life. Thwaite has said: "What Hardy taught Larkin was that a man's own life, its suddenly surfacing perceptions, its 'moments of vision' its 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." See "The Poetry of Philip Larkin," in The Survival of Poetry, ed. Martin Dodsworth (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 43.

¹⁷Alun R. Jones, "The Poetry of Philip Larkin: A Note on Transatlantic Culture," Phoenix, Nos. 11-12 (Autumn and Winter 1973-74), 140. Jones was responding to M. L. Rosenthal's claim--innocently general in its drift--that "younger British poets...are turning to American post-Imagist models as a means of re-orienting their work." (as quoted by Jones, p. 140). As it turns out, Rosenthal is right in a general way. Larkin's "Show Saturday", for example, is not alien in its method from the poetry of William Carlos Williams. Additionally, on the point about "younger British poets", Rosenthal is not far off the mark: Thom Gunn, for instance, has publicly stated that the Imagist impulse is one from which the contemporary poet can learn a good deal about what he terms "matter and principle." See below, pp. 244-245.

¹⁸Central treatments of Larkin's kinship with the Georgians can be found in two essays: "Larkin, Edward Thomas And The Tradition," by Edna Longley in Phoenix, Nos. 11-12 (Autumn and Winter 1973-74), 63-89, and "Rhetoric

NOTES CONT'D: CHAPTER III.

and the Moderns," by A. T. Tolley in Southern Review, 6 (1970), 380-94.

¹⁹Colin Falck, "Cranking The Engine," rev. of Imagist Poets, ed. by Peter Jones, Poetry Nation, 1 (1973), 129. Falck suggestively notes that: "Another look at what Imagism did and did not do for poetry might renew some poetic hopes on both sides of the Atlantic at the present time (192)."

²⁰At its most basic, the different emphasis of the Symbolist attitude to the object(s) of the world, is underlined in a clear comment which J. P. Stern has made on the matter: "The concentration of meaning we call a symbol involves a loss as well as a gain, obviously it is not attained at that middle distance from which realism portrays the world; indeed, symbolism isn't confined to any stable perspective at all. It is making rather than a matching a 'disfiguring' of things the world contains rather than a retracing of them." See On Realism (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), pp. 156-57.

²¹Philip Larkin, quoted by John Press in A Map of Modern English Verse (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 258. His source: Poets of The 1950's, D. J. Enright ed., (Tokyo: n.p.; 1955), pp. 77-78.

²²_____, in "Four Conversations," interview with Ian Hamilton, London Magazine, 4 (November 1964), 71-72.

²³_____, "Philip Larkin Praises the Poetry of Thomas Hardy," p. 111. For context, see above, p. 5.

²⁴Thomas Hardy, "Preface" to Poems Of The Past And Present, 1901; rpt. in The Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy (London: MacMillan, 1962), p. 75.

²⁵This kind of a comment is even boringly recurrent, often operates on the level of trite quantifying. One takes it that quality can be judged in poetry on the level of "billions and billions have been sold." George Hartley, in Phoenix, 13 (Spring 1975), reviews High Windows with the introductory remark: "We should make the most of celebrating

NOTES CONT'D: CHAPTER III.

Larkin now, for if his pattern of publication continues, his next collection will appear in 1984 (87)."

²⁶Philip Larkin, "Out of The Air, : Not Like Larkin," a comment made on the BBC, transcribed in Listener, 4: August 1977, p. 209.

²⁷_____, All What Jazz: A Record Diary 1961-68 (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 17.

²⁸_____, Introduction to John Betjeman: Collected Poems, compiled by the Earl of Birkenhead (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), p. xxviii.

²⁹_____, "Subsidies and Side Effects:" Times Literary Supplement, 18 February 1977, p. 183.

³⁰_____, "The Poetry of William Barnes," rev. of The Poems of William Barnes, ed. by Bernard Jones, Listener, 16 August 1962, p. 257.

³¹_____, "What's Become of Wystan," rev. of Homage to Clio, Spectator, 15 July 1960, p. 104.

³²_____, Introduction to John Betjeman: Collected Poems, p. xxiii.

³³_____, "Betjeman En Bloc," rev. of John Betjeman: Collected Poems, Listen, 3 (Spring 1959), 15.

³⁴_____, "The Blending of Betjeman," rev. of Summoned By Bells and First and Last Loves, Spectator, 2 December 1960, p. 913.

³⁵_____, "Philip Larkin Praises the Poetry of Thomas Hardy," Listener, 25 July 1968, p. 111.

³⁶Ibid., p. 111.

³⁷T. E. Hulme; "Romanticism and Classicism," 1924; rpt. in Prose Keys to Modern Poetry, ed., Karl Shapiro (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 101.

NOTES CONT'D: CHAPTER III.

³⁸Ibid., p. 102.

³⁹Ibid., p. 101.

⁴⁰Ezra Pound, "Vorticism," Fortnightly Review, 96 (1914), 464.

⁴¹H. W., p. 37.

⁴²Randall Jarrell, "An Introduction to the Selected Poems of William Carlos Williams," 1948; rpt. in Poetry and The Age (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), p. 217.

⁴³Larkin has said that once the poet is motivated by an "emotional concept," it is then up to him to "construct a verbal device that will reproduce this emotional concept in anyone who cares to read it." See "The Pleasure Principle," Listen II (Summer-Autumn, 1957), 28. And Anthony Thwaite quotes Larkin as saying in The Poetry Society Bulletin (n.d.) that "Some years ago I came to the conclusion that to write a poem was to construct a verbal device that would preserve an experience indefinitely by reproducing it in whoever read the poem." See "The Poetry of Philip Larkin," in The Survival of Poetry: A Contemporary Survey, ed. Martin Dodsworth (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 47.

⁴⁴Ezra Pound, "A Few Don'ts," 1913; rpt. in Shapiro, Prose Keys, p. 109.

⁴⁵H. W., p. 24.

⁴⁶"Lines On A Young Lady's Photograph Album," T.L.D., p. 13. In this poem the speaker marvels at his sudden realization of the innocence of youth and the evidence of ageing which the photograph seems to shout from the world of fact. Patricia Ball, in "The Photographic Art," A Review of English Literature, III (April 1962), p. 50-58, refers to this poem and says that "The art is not in the camera work, though the inspiration may be; it is the imagination rejoicing at candor, its kindling at the idea of a camera's record which transfigures accuracy and makes it a means to perception (p. 55)." The essay also deals with the use of fact in short examples from the poetry of Kingsley Amis and John Wain.

NOTES CONT'D: CHAPTER III.

⁴⁷Wallace Stevens, "Imagination as Value," 1949; excerpt rpt. in The Modern Tradition, ed. Richard Ellman and Charles Feidelson Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 223.

⁴⁸Jarrell has said that with the Imagist tradition, "The subject of poetry had changed from the actions of men to the reactions of poets--reactions being defined in a way that left the poet without motor system or cerebral cortex." (Poetry and the Age, p. 217). It is perhaps for this reason that, as William Pratt has also suggested, "Imagist poetry itself is minor poetry,"--The Imagist Poem (New York: Dutton, 1963), p. 38.

⁴⁹Wallace Stevens, "Imagination as Value," The Modern Tradition, p. 222.

⁵⁰Philip Larkin, in Poets of the 1950's, for context, see above p. 98.

⁵¹T. W. W., p. 10.

⁵²Wallace Stevens, "Adagia," in Opus Posthumous, ed. and introd., Samuel French Morse (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 158.

⁵³Ibid., p. 160.

⁵⁴H. W., p. 28.

⁵⁵Wallace Stevens, "Adagia," Morse, p. 162.

⁵⁶William Wordsworth, "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," 1798; rpt. in Russell Noyes, ed., English Romantic Poetry and Prose (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 260.

⁵⁷Wallace Stevens, "Adagia," Morse, p. 162.

⁵⁸Philip Larkin, in Poets of the 1950's, pp. 77-78.

NOTES CONT'D: CHAPTER III.

⁵⁹T. E. Hulme, "Notes On Language and Style," 1925; rpt. in Further Speculations, ed. by Sam Hynes (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955), p. 99.

⁶⁰Ezra Pound, "A Few Don'ts," 1913; rpt. in Shapiro, Prose Keys, p. 105. Analogously, Anthony Thwaite tells us that Larkin once said that in the reading of "The Whitsun Weddings," as the voice comes to the close, it should "lift off the ground." See "The Poetry of Philip Larkin" in The Survival of Poetry, p. 48.

⁶¹Wallace Stevens, "Adagia," Morse, p. 173.

⁶²H. W., p. 19.

⁶³This kind of analysis of Larkin's work is rare, primarily, one guesses, because Larkin's poetry holds it off with continual gestures of apparent anti-intellectualism. Nonetheless, J. R. Watson, in "The Other Larkin," Critical Quarterly, 17 (1975), 347-360, sees Larkin's vision as amenable to Mircea Eliade's version of the "wholly desacralized cosmos" (as quoted by Watson, 350). In Watson's view, Larkin's scorn of myth-kitty and religion is separate from a nostalgia in his work for a further religious meaning. The interesting process of logic in which Watson engages is--in paraphrase--to see Larkin as a poet whose negative vision of modern life is so strong that it in some way implies its own opposite. He says that "Larkin's poetry abounds with figures who belong involuntarily to the modern desacralized cosmos (351)." Watson's view is that Larkin is a poet who recognizes the world as in need of religion and as devoid of meaning without it. It is for this reason that he sees Larkin as attentive to the ritualistic quality of life as he perceives it in, for example, "The Whitsun Weddings." Watson is encouraged by Larkin's vision in "The Explosion," and says that on the evidence of his growing concern with ritual life, we can see that "one of Larkin's greatest strengths as a poet is his position as "'homo religious' with an intuitive awareness of the tenuous sacred in the midst of the profane (360)." Like many analyses which see a given writer as embodying the ideas of philosophical and/or religious thinking, the terminology is usually more helpful to the critic than it is conscious to the poet. In the final analysis, what is helpful about Watson's approach is that in spite of his terminology he manages to point to a real concern in

NOTES CONT'D: CHAPTER III.

Larkin's work for "ritual." (See my comments on ritual, below p. 194.)

Additionally, in terms of Larkin's "ideas," the European tradition of existentialism would be the most likely tradition for a terminology which suits the case, though one wonders how far it would go toward an appreciation of the art itself. Nonetheless, existentialist notions such as Sartre's basic statement about existence preceding essence, would seem to aptly describe the agnostic base of Larkin's work. And more importantly, both Sartre and Camus' claim that identity is achieved through lived discovery of oneself in the journey of life unguided by a God, would seem to also be appropriate. The more one reads Larkinian criticism, the more apparent it becomes that the vast majority of his readers expect that he have a pat answer to issues and questions which, for the existentialist/agnostic can only be seen as intellectually imponderable, though at the same time, emotionally pressing. When, for example, the speaker in "Ignorance" (T. W. W., 39), considers the fact of death, his "idea" is both existentialist in its blankness, and existentialist in its registration of a kind of emotional incredulity.

And yet spend all our life on imprecisions,
That when we start to die
Have no idea why.

The sense of the "absurd" is definitely involved in Larkin's work.

Finally, as the reader will shortly see, I think that Larkin's ability with abstractions lies precisely in his ability to exceed their limitations.

⁶⁴ Ezra Pound, "Vorticism," 469.

⁶⁵ One thinks here of Alvarez's claims in The New Poetry. See above, pp. 30-32.

⁶⁶ Wallace Stevens, The Necessary Angel 1951; except rpt. in The Modern Tradition, p. 225.

⁶⁷ T. W. W., p. 33.

⁶⁸ "An Arundel Tomb," T. W. W., p. 45.

NOTES CONT'D: CHAPTER III.

⁶⁹Lolette Kuby, An Uncommon Poet for the Uncommon Man, (The Hague: Mouton, 1974), p. 55. Kuby says that, "yet, 'Absences' is surely the visualization of a mystical experience, a negative mystical experience, into the ineffable Nothing."

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 55.

⁷¹Kenneth Moon, "Cosmic Perspective: A Use of Imagery in the Poetry of Philip Larkin." Poetry Australia, No. 68 (October 1978); 59. Moon also analyzes this notion as he finds it registered in "Talking in Bed," "Essential Beauty," "Days," "Next, Please," and "An Arundel Tomb."

⁷²Philip Gardner, "Bearing the Unbearable," rev. of High Windows, in Phoenix, 13 (Spring 1975), 100.

⁷³H. W., p. 42.

⁷⁴Philip Larkin, in Times Literary Supplement, 23 December 1977, p. 1491.

⁷⁵_____, "Four Conversations," For context, see above, p. 19.

⁷⁶Nonetheless, apart from the exercise of forcing the issue above, I have no difficulty with the poem myself, find its comedy strong in the center, and wonder if Larkin is even having his critics on in the concluding lines. That sky is right out of Hardy's "Neutral Tones." There has been a lot of easy association of Larkin with Hardy's neutral tone of sensibility and expression. Additionally, the "Postmen like doctors," who appear as messengers of mortality, collide humorously with Larkin's priest and doctor in "Days" (T. W. W., p. 27), a poem which jokes at the absurdity of human posturing around death. In that poem the speaker asks, "Where can we live but in days?" The concluding stanza states:

Ah, solving that question
Brings the priest and the doctor
In their long coats
Running over the fields.

NOTES CONT'D: CHAPTER III.

⁷⁷When Larkin himself was asked a similar question about the comparative judgement of works of art according to their theme, or basic insight (in this case, a work's socio-political theme), he replied: "good social and political literature can exist only if it originates in the imagination, and it will do that only if the imagination finds the subject exciting, and not because the intellect thinks it important; and it will succeed only in so far as the imagination's original concept has been realized. To say more than this seems possible only if you are prepared to postulate and compare two equal concepts equally realized, and to argue that the one about factories is better than the one about fairyland, and I don't think you can do this as long as you are talking about literature and not about something else." See "The Writer in His Age", answer to question posed by London Magazine in same, 4 (May 1957), 47.

⁷⁸T. E. Hulme, "Romanticism and Classicism," Shapiro, Prose Keys, pp. 94-95. Larkin has himself made a comment which somewhat parallels Hulme's statement of the precarious classical moment. In the context of introducing two of his poems ("MCMXIV" and "Send No Money"), he said that each poem represented what he thought to be: "the two kinds of poem I write: the beautiful and the true. I have always believed that beauty is beauty, truth truth, that is not all ye know on earth nor all ye need to know, and I think a poem usually starts off from the feeling How beautiful that is or from the feeling How true that is. One of the jobs of the poem is to make the beautiful seem true and the true beautiful, but in fact the disguise can usually be penetrated." See Let The Poet Choose, ed. James Gibson (London: Harrap, 1973), p. 102. In the instance of the two poems of which he speaks, one of the impulses is enacted in each of the poems. It could be said that in "Church Going," "Whitsun Weddings," and "High Windows," the momentousness of the poems lies in their interweaving of the two impulses.

⁷⁹T. L. D., p. 28.

⁸⁰H. W., p. 17.

⁸¹T. E. Hulme, "Romanticism & Classicism," Shapiro, Prose Keys, p. 103.

⁸²Ibid., p. 94.

NOTES CONT'D: CHAPTER III.

⁸³Ibid., p. 103-104.

⁸⁴T. E. Hulme, As quoted by Glenn Hughes in Imagism and the Imagists (New York: Biblo and Tanner, 1972), p. 19.

⁸⁵T. E. Hulme, "Romanticism & Classicism," Shapiro, Prose Keys, p. 104.

⁸⁶T. S. Eliot, "The Waste Land," 1922; rpt. in Collected Poems: 1909-1962 (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), pp. 61-86.

⁸⁷T. E. Hulme, "Romanticism and Classicism," Shapiro, Prose Keys, p. 101.

⁸⁸T. S. Eliot, Four Quartets 1935-1942; rpt. in Collected Poems: 1909-1962 (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), pp. 187-223.

⁸⁹T. W. W., p. 20.

⁹⁰Wallace Stevens, "Esthetique Du Mal," in The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), p. 325.

CHAPTER IV: THE PHYSICAL WORLD: AGNOSTIC WONDER



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Larkin's retrieval of the physical world as a vitalizing stimulus to poetry lies at the creative center of his work. The complexity of his experience of the world is borne out in the sophistication of his art, one which is crafted to include a registration of subtle moments of epiphany, and one which is in keeping with his essentially agnostic temperament. There is a quality of negative capability in his work which defies all analysis of it as simply dreary, bored, sad, or withdrawn. At this point one feels secure in stating that he is an exceptionally exploratory writer, and steps energetically past the emotional complacency of dreariness and the intellectual stasis of terminal pessimism. That he is an intensely sceptical writer is undeniable. But as we have seen in the previous two chapters, his scepticism is nothing if not tough-minded, the expression of an honesty to the seriousness of the world.

All of that having been said, what remains to be explored is that side of his work which is the most neglected: its concern with the wondrous visage of the physical world, and its instinct for praise. A fuller realization of this dimension of his work enables us to complete our view of him as a more balanced writer than has yet been claimed in the conventional world of Larkin criticism. This chapter, in other words, attempts to right a balance, to seek a more just

perspective on his work as a whole. While certainly not denying that Larkin is a strongly pessimistic writer -- as was Shakespeare -- we can here demonstrate that his view of the world includes as much a glance at the mystery of life as it does at its squalor. Our guide in this demonstration is D. H. Lawrence, a writer who can be seen as more closely connected with Larkin's world than has so far been claimed to be the case. Larkin shares with Lawrence a similar emphasis on the need for a living consciousness of the physical world, and, significantly, it is a consciousness which leads both writers to a primarily agnostic wonder, one which could be said to constitute their most profound weapon against despair.

Few will be surprised to find Lawrence's name mentioned to the side of a study of Larkin's poetry, but most would consider the connection between the two writers, to be evidenced in the fact of only two poems. Larkin has written one poem, "Wedding Wind",¹ with a Lawrentian concern with the power of love, and another, "The Explosion",² with a Lawrentian feeling for the unifying mystery of death. Seamus Heaney has mentioned the Lawrentian temperament of the former poem and regretted that Larkin did not develop the influence past the single instance.³ And Walford Davies has said of "The Explosion" that it has the "period feel of early Lawrence about it".⁴ So, at least in terms of these two poems, there is a recognition of the connection. But the matter is usually left at that and no central kinship of sensibility

in the work as a whole is considered to be operative. In the context of speaking of "I Remember, I Remember", A. Kingsley Weatherhead has said that the things which did not happen in the speaker's childhood, are "curiously similar to some of those in Sons and Lovers".⁵ David Timms, in his book on Larkin, replied that "This is true, but not curious surely,"⁶ and implies that we should leave well enough alone. But in spite of his confidence on the matter, what remains yet more curious, and ultimately very suggestive, is at least Larkin's owning of an early influence of Lawrence on his attitude to craft. In his 1970 tribute to Vernon Watkins, Larkin indicates his early regard for Lawrence, just as he tells us of the process of his conversion -- by Watkins -- to the work of Yeats:

We talked a good deal about poetry, or rather Vernon talked, in the main, and I listened: it was difficult to avoid the subject in his company. He did listen patiently to my enthusiasm for D. H. Lawrence, remarking simply, 'The shape of the poem by Lawrence is the shape of the words on the page; the shape of a poem by Yeats is the shape of the instrument on which the poem is played. I saw instantly what he meant, and asked him if he thought form so important'⁷

We also know of his clarification of the record on how much he was incapable of absorbing Yeats' influence without losing his wits.⁸ And just as it could be argued that he has absorbed some of the influence of Yeats' work in spite of the later rejection, it is worth pursuing the connection with Lawrence a bit further. One is encouraged in that venture,

not only by the poet's own recognition of an early enthusiasm, but by the knowledge that Larkin's connection with the Imagists' views on craft is one that places Lawrence's poetry in an interesting position of formal similarity. Most importantly, however, one is directed by a feeling that both writers share a sense of the dramatic presence of the physical world, and are similarly wonder-struck in their imaginative contact with it. After some knowledge of Larkin's capacity for wonder, one we are now aware of as having a craft connection with the empirical bias of the Imagists, we are less surprised at the existence of "Wedding Wind" and "The Explosion" in his chronicle. Indeed they seem precisely in keeping with his capacity for registering moments of transcending meaning which rise from the immediacy of the physical world.

Interestingly, if we reread Lawrence's poetry with Larkin in mind, we are struck by the way in which Lawrence embodies many of the attitudes to poetry which Larkin has claimed to admire singularly in other writers. There is always, for instance, that feeling in Lawrence's poetry that the expression is more important to him than the craft of the work. Additionally, there is the same capacity for unscreened emotional statement which Larkin so much admires in the work of Betjeman, just as one also finds Lawrence to be often given to humour in his poetry, and given to tossing off frank recognitions of the human body and the vitality and health of the language of slang which goes with it. And in

terms of an expression of bitterness and impatience with all that reduces the human being to pettiness, Lawrence might be said to provide bigger game for Larkin's poet-as-cynic critics than Larkin could ever hope to become. To reread Lawrence is to recognize the relative timidity of Larkin's occasional outbursts of strutting sardonicism. Indeed, there are more useful analogies which can be drawn between the two writers than this study could ever find space for. But in terms of our centralizing focus on Larkin's retrieval of the physical world, the connection could be said to be a very rich one, and one which helps to focus Larkin's quality as a poet of wonder.

Larkin and Lawrence share a conviction regarding the need for the artist to invoke the living presence of the physical world as both palpably and mysteriously present. Both writers also see the work of art as being the representation of unusually poignant moments of perceived and deeply felt connection with that world. If, before turning to the poetry itself, we briefly refresh our memory of some of Lawrence's statements on the value and the function of art, a familiar sense of its epiphanic power begins to emerge, one that is consonant with Larkin's views on art as we have come to know them.

In "Morality And The Novel"⁹ Lawrence makes one of his many statements on the relationship between the artist and the physical world, one which insists on the central importance to art of the act of invoking the world in a

relationship of mysterious connection. In the following passage we can see that his recognition of the epiphanic dimension of art recalls many of our concerns in the previous chapter:

The business of art is to reveal the relation between man and his circumambient universe, at the living moment. As mankind is always struggling in the toils of old relationships, art is always ahead of the "times", which themselves are always far in the rear of the living moment....If we think about it, we find that our life consists in this achieving of a pure relationship between ourselves and the living universe about us. This is how I "save my soul" by accomplishing a pure relationship between me and another person, me and other people, me and a nation, me and a race of men, me and the animals, me and the trees or flowers, me and the earth, me and the skies and sun and stars, me and the moon: an infinity of pure relations, big and little, like the stars of the sky: that makes our eternity for each one of us, me and the timber I am sawing, the lines of force I follow; me and the dough I knead for bread, me and the very motion with which I write, me and the bit of gold I have got. This, if we knew it, is our life and our eternity: the subtle, perfect relation between me and my whole circumambient universe.¹⁰

Lawrence of course, is speaking of the novel, but the drift of his essay is inclusive of all art. Hence he sees Van Gogh's sunflower as the expression of, and the preservation of, a "momentaneous" realization of "perfected relation".¹¹ He additionally claims that the mysterious quality of art lies in the fact that it is recorder of that relation which gives us the "feeling" of "that which exists in the non-dimensional space", and as seeming to be "deathless, lifeless, and eternal".¹² Art which manages to triumph over

time in its registration of this kind of intimate relatedness between the artist and the otherness of the world, he offers, can lead us to a sense of momentary harmony which approximates the religious dimension. At the same time, it is also superior to religion in its resistance to any "nailing down" of the moment into "a stable equilibrium".¹³ Lawrence also says, "And there is something inside us which must also be beyond life and beyond death, since that 'feeling' which we get from an Assyrian lion or an Egyptian hawk's head is so infinitely precious to us."¹⁴ Lawrence is here moving the Imagist recognition of a transcending quality in moments of epiphany to a religious dimension which they might have felt uncomfortable with, just as one suspects Larkin might recoil from it though not to a far distance. Importantly, for all of Lawrence's eagerness on the matter, he refuses to name a religious myth, or, in his own lingo, be involved in "nailing down" the "feeling". He is for the most part as agnostic about that point as we find Larkin to be. Larkin once said that he thought the most successful poems were those which ultimately "float free from the preoccupations that chose them" and are "reassembled -- one hopes -- in the eternity of the imagination",¹⁵ which is about as far as one can go without, in Lawrence's terms, "nailing down" the issue.

In both the instance of Lawrence's gesturing at the power of these moments of "pure relations", and Larkin's concern with "things I have seen/thought/felt",¹⁶ there is

the recognition of a barely articulable significance to the moment itself which both writers wish to leave ultimately undefined, leave on an agnostic basis of wonder without religion. Again, looking at Lawrence's passage, we notice his claim that there is an "infinity of pure relations", or, we might say, epiphanies. Further, the suggestion of the rich beauty and significance of these moments of unusual connection of the mind with the physical world, recalls Larkin's natural symbol in "Water"¹⁷ which equally powerfully notes the "any-angled light" which "congregate(s) endlessly" as the sun glitters, one suspects prismatically, on the glass of water. And if both writers' comments seem to echo the recognition of beauty at the end of Lawrence's The Rainbow, it is probably not an accident of association. The novel ends with a gesture of hope in the sufficiency of a realization of momentaneous beauty which is durable enough to move Ursula through the despair which threatens to destroy her:

Steadily the colour gathered, mysteriously, from nowhere, it took presence upon itself, there was a faint, vast rainbow. The arc bended and strengthened itself till it arched indomitable, making great architecture of light and colour and the space of heaven.¹⁸

As physical fact, the natural symbol is the more convincing in the novel as metaphor for the hope which she at least wishes to feel. This single epiphany of "pure relationship" is enough to encourage her in spite of her almost counter-

vailing awareness of "the old, brittle corruption of houses and factories".¹⁹ This other reality constantly threatened to lead Lawrence, and we can include Larkin, to a perception of life as "slow dying".²⁰ In "Nothing To Be Said", Larkin placed that kind of awareness of bleakness on an even larger scale. What we notice in the middle of the images which he uses in that poem, is something like the "old, brittle corruption of houses and factories" about which Lawrence knew:

For nations vague as weed,
 For nomads among stones,
 Small-statured cross-faced tribes
 And cobble-close families
 In mill-towns on dark mornings
 Life is slow dying.²¹

Larkin's sympathy for the "cobble-close families/ In mill-towns on dark mornings" is reminiscent of the pain which Lawrence intimately knew as part of that way of life. And with this knowledge, it was the more difficult for Lawrence to praise life, to find it wonderful. Yet the resilience of his imagination, it would seem, has inspired Larkin to the moments of praise and wonder which, one begins to realize as an accumulating fact, is a central aspect of his work.

Larkin and Lawrence are veterans of the darkness. This is why, perhaps, one never feels duped by their moments of light. In "The Earth" section of his poem "Transformations", Lawrence addresses the earth with; "on me lies the duty/ To see you all, sordid or radiant-tissued",²² a statement which

is as candid as his claim in "Song Of Death" that "without the song of death, the song of life/ becomes pointless and silly."²³

But Larkin's relation to Lawrence is yet more specifically visible than in this general kinship of a quality of honest realism. The work of both writers also incorporates a rich and enriching connection of sensibility to the wondrous presence of the physical universe. This is the central point. And both have an ability to move that wonder felt in its presence, outward again toward a respect for and recognition of, the mystery of the human world. To notice a similarity of logic in this motion of wonder in both writers, is to concede a depth in Larkin's work which has been overlooked in the critical evaluation of his work which claims it is wanting because dreary. In short, as in much of Lawrence's work, there is in Larkin's an agnostic wonder at the beauty of the physical universe which is the stimulus to a corresponding respect for the human world.

So that we can notice this connection requires that we now distinguish between the human world and the physical universe, rather than hold to what could become a limitation in the use of the term "the physical world", a term which tends to be associated in the imagination -- if not in the mind -- with the world of landscape and the fact of the human being. Lawrence and Larkin both, we will see, are unusually attentive to the physical universe as an entirely rising reality, one which includes the physical fact of the

heavens, just as they are also sharply attentive to the smallest details of landscape nature. With that easily held distinction in view, between the physical universe, and the human world, we can move to their poetry in an attempt to see the importance of the difference, and finally to see their fusion, one which we can say importantly underlines their shared sense of a meaning to existence as almost assured by its pervasive quality of mystery.

As an initial motion toward the poetry it is worthwhile, as a way of refreshing our memory of Lawrence's markedly physical poetry, and also as a way of connecting Larkin's poetry to that fact immediately, to juxtapose a few lines from each writer in an attempt to make the connection as quickly as possible at the outset. Hence, to list but a very few of what could be termed instances of wonder at the expansive fact of the physical universe, and respect for the mystery of the human, we can come up with the following kind of collocation. One adds that there is no intention here to cite the lines from Lawrence as sources of specific inspiration in Larkin's poetry. If Larkin can at all be said to be inspired by Lawrence, it is an inspiration which his original genius fully transforms into his own art.

And all the manifold blue, amazing eyes,
The rainbow arching over in the skies,
New sparks of wonder opening in surprise:

(Lawrence: "Blueness")²⁴

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

(Larkin: "High Windows")²⁵

Space, of course, is alive
 that's why it moves about;
 and that's what makes it eternally spacious and unstuffy.

And somewhere it has a wild heart
 and sends pulses even through me;
 and I call it the sun;
 and I feel aristocratic, noble, when I feel a pulse go
 through me
 from the wild heart of space, that I call the sun of suns.

(Lawrence: "Space")²⁶

Here is unfenced existence:
 Facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach.
 (Larkin: "Here")²⁷

And I should raise in the east
 A glass of water
 Where any-angled light
 Would congregate endlessly.

(Larkin: "Water")²⁸

To be an aristocrat of the sun
 you don't need one single social inferior to exalt you;
 you draw your nobility direct from the sun
 let other people be what they may.

I am that. I am
 from the sun,
 and people are not my measure.

Perhaps, if we started right, all the children could
 grow up sunny
 and sun-aristocrats.
 We need have no dead people, money slaves, and social
 worms.

(Lawrence: "Aristocracy of The Sun")²⁹

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

(Larkin: "Solar")³⁰

and for a second
 Wives saw men of the explosion

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

One showing the eggs unbroken.

(Larkin: "The Explosion")³¹

The world of Lawrence's poetry is the world of the self as placed in connection with a living physical universe, one which constantly charges the personae with a sense of wonder. The most casual sorting of his lines shows this. While Larkin is reputedly a dreary poet, one who is supposedly withdrawn pessimistically from the world, it can be argued that he shares with Lawrence a similar sensibility to the physical universe. Once that is established, the view of him as only a bleak poet begins to melt into irrelevance. If there is a persona which is the most overlooked one in Larkin's work, it is the one who stands at the end of "Here" in The Whitsun Weddings. The speaker in that poem moves on a train through an industrialized landscape, past the countryside toward "Isolate villages, where removed lives/ Loneliness clarifies," and still further journeys to a place where he stands on a lonely shore. He both respects the tumble of life which he has observed on his journey, and chooses to base his own

psychological health on the freedom which is suggested to him in the expansive fact of the physical universe. The universe elicits from him a sense of wonder and gives him a sense of self-possession. "Here" ends with a flight into freedom from the time and space limits of ordinary awareness which we have begun to recognize as one of the most profound of Larkin's poetic effects:

Here silence stands
Like heat. Here leaves unnoticed thicken,
Hidden weeds flower, neglected waters quicken,
Luminously-peopled air ascends;
And past the poppies bluish neutral distance
Ends the land suddenly beyond a beach
Of shapes and shingle. Here is unfenced existence:
Facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach.³²

The disposition of the speaker at the end of the poem is a disposition of Lawrentian wonder. The concluding lines register the sense of psychological liberation which is consequent on a realization of the magnitude of the physical universe, one which is infinitely suggestive of freedom, just as it is also guarantor of the mystery of being. Looked at in some detail in Larkin's work, we can notice that there is a distinctly Lawrentian logic at work in the power of that mystery. It is precisely the realization of a liberating "pure relationship" to the physical universe in Larkin's work which is reached for by many of his personae as guarantee of the self as inviolable, and as mysteriously and elusively meaningful past the limitations of all other forms of relationship.

Somewhat paradoxically, the seminal experience of a cosmic wonder plays an important part in the working out of a fundamental respect for the world of the human. In the work of both Larkin and Lawrence, there is a continual motion imaginatively outward to the physical universe as source of personal psychological freedom and wonder, and back again to the mystery of the human world. A good deal of impatience which Lawrence registered about people -- entire classes of them -- lay in a desire to base all of social mythology on the power of mystery. Anger, in the work of Lawrence and in Larkin, is often anger at the wastage of human spirit, its suffocation under a darkening cover of social ambition and greed. Both writers are alert to the sordid and unimaginative reality of society and both find a staying power in their capacity for wonder at the fact of the universe.

We have argued in Chapter One that solitude in Larkin's poetry is not expressed as a gesture of Prufrockian withdrawal and in this context we see that the solitary aspect of many of his speakers is the solitude of wonder. It is also a solitude which he himself questions with his own gestures of self-deprecation, seemingly worried that the high claim or quasi-religious dimension which he places on it renders it absurd, postured, and only another form of flying off into "circumambient gas".³³ It is because of this relative caution about the wonder that we find Larkin to be less exclamatory on the point than Lawrence, less given to what many see as a narrative noisiness in the work of Lawrence. Larkin avoids

that pitfall entirely, just as Lawrence fell into it less often than is sometimes commonly assumed. Having made that called-for point, we can now turn to a more specific recognition of the form which it takes.

The same poet who places his speaker in "Here" in a climactic and final position of "facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach", has the speaker in "Dockery and Son" recoil from the confinement of Dockery's neatly settled life of marriage, social position, and ostensible success. After leaving Dockery in Oxford, he rides the train -- a highly suggestive natural symbol for his own way of life -- and falls asleep between Oxford and Sheffield. When he awakens, there is an interesting connection quite casually made between himself and the "Unhindered moon".

I fell asleep, waking at the fumes
And furnace-glares of Sheffield, where I changed,
And ate an awful pie, and walked along
The platform to its end to see the ranged
Joining and parting lines reflect a strong

Unhindered moon.³⁴

In this albeit minor example of the connection, we recognize the speaker's rationalization of -- or discovery of a sanction for -- the freer life which at this point he thinks he has chosen. And while the poem ends with the dreary lines "Life is first boredom, then fear," etc., lines which seem to refer to both Dockery and himself, the fact of that moon as "strong" and as reflecting a travelling visage on

the rails, seems to stand above the poem's other considerations as attractively compelling. It is perhaps for this reason that in a much later poem, "Vers de Société", we find a speaker who dreads the prospect of a dinner party, and wishes to be home alone in the presence of the physical universe, recharging his spirit with something more than prattle. Interestingly, he decides ultimately to go to the party, but not until he makes his point:

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

Funny how hard it is to be alone.
 I could spent half my evenings, if I wanted,
 Holding a glass of washing sherry, canted
 Over to catch the drivel of some bitch
 Who's read nothing but Which;
 Just think of all the spare time that has flown

Straight into nothingness by being filled
 With forks and faces, rather than repaid
 Under a lamp, hearing the noise of wind,
 And looking out to see the moon thinned
 To an air-sharpened blade.
 A life, and yet how sternly it's instilled

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

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

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

Apart from suspecting that Larkin is having a swat at his critics here in his discussion of the false dictum "All solitude is selfish", we notice that the physical universe is evoked with all of the power of Lawrencian living presence and mystery. In a cameo of Imagist pictorial visibility in the sharp evocation of the moon, the speaker underlines the value of what is:

repaid
 Under a lamp, hearing the noise of the wind,
 And looking out to see the moon thinned
 To an air sharpened blade.

This living consciousness of the physical universe is reminiscent of Lawrence's similar penchant for conversation with the heavens. Similarly, the recognition of the value of the wonder is a recognition both of its limitations and a recognition of its worth to the self as a guarantor of self-possession. Additionally, and this is a point which becomes more important later, the wonder of loneliness with the universe is valued as necessary to any real communing with people. In this instance Larkin makes that point in a purely negative way in the satire of the kind of inhibited non-communing which the prospect of the dinner party brings to the speaker's mind.

The connection with Lawrence on this point about solitude is not only a theoretical one. In one of the many instances in which Lawrence dealt with the power of lonely wonder, his poem "Delight Of Being Alone", he also invoked the sustaining example of the moon:

I know no greater delight than the sheer delight
of being alone.
It makes me realise the delicious pleasure of the moon
that she has in travelling by herself: throughout
time,
or the splendid growing of the ash-tree
alone, or a hill-side in the north, humming in the
wind.³⁶

And in a more prosaic version of the same point, Lawrence wrote:

To be alone is one of life's greatest delights, thinking
one's own thoughts,
doing one's own little jobs, seeing the world beyond
and feeling oneself, uninterrupted in the rooted
connection
with the centre of all things.³⁷

In both writers there is a recurrently crisp registration of the wonder sensed in a barely articulable connection of the self with the vibrant dignity of the physical universe. The "pure relationship" which is felt and prized could be said to be borne out in the fresh representation of the imagery. A "freshness convinces you", said Hulme, you "feel that for a minute".³⁸

In both Larkin's work and in Lawrence's, the capacity for a cosmic wonder, a realization of an elusive "centre of all things" which is both suggested by the physical universe

and yet resists completing abstraction, is the basic disposition of sensibility which correspondingly leads to a recognition of the mystery of the human world and a praise for its struggle. It can, of course, also lead to an impatience with all forms of human smallness of mind. And this sense of mystery, one takes it, is a much deeper form of connection with the human world than the "Playing at goodness, like going to church", which the speaker in "Vers de Société" refers to.

These kinds of considerations can be brought to more specific expression if we turn to High Windows and see it from this total point of view. The vocabulary we are using here is in large part also appropriate to The Less Deceived and The Whitsun Weddings, but by focusing on High Windows we are given a measure of control over the work, and can also enjoy the bonus of regarding and celebrating the further sophistication of Larkin's art in its more recent manifestations. It is a sophistication which, we will see, shows Larkin to be still developing as "better at what I am", as we recall him once wishing for his line of development.³⁹

The personae which we are familiar with in Larkin's other works are alive and well in this volume. The sad, the ironic, and the serious personae, with their modulation and interplay of humourous, sad, and more seriously reverent tones are all present. And if there is a distinction to be made on the identity of the speakers, it is that they appear to be older than the speakers in many of the earlier poems.

To say which, is to also recognize that this is a volume more preoccupied with old age, and more ostensibly intent on attempting to cope with age, than the other volumes. Again, though we recall that the fact of human transience has always been a central consideration of Larkin's. Additionally, the volume as a whole bears out by further example our earlier conviction that Larkin is both an intensely ironical writer, and also a romantic one -- if by romantic we bear in mind the kinds of consideration of his stature as a poet of the "classic of motion" which we delineated in the previous chapter. It is a volume which also helps us to sustain our notion that Larkin is a poet whose classical control of romantic gestures enriches his instinct for praise, saving it from toppling into the maudlin.

We can first sample the poems in the volume which are related to the contemplation of the physical universe as realized in the Lawrentian moments of "pure relationship", or alternately phrased, as Imagist moments of epiphany. What characterizes all of these works in terms of their art is the characteristic freshness of the evocations, and the complexity of the moments attendant on them. In this context, one thinks of "Sad Steps",⁴⁰ "Cut Grass",⁴¹ "The Trees",⁴² "Solar" and "Livings".⁴³ They are all worth looking at in terms of Larkin's agnostic and Lawrencian wonder.

"Sad Steps" resuscitates Sir Philip Sydney's sonnet and turns it into something more starkly empirical, more crisply evocative of the physical universe, and expressive of

a personal attempt to confront age with dignity.

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

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

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

High and preposterous and separate--
Lozenge of love! Medallion of art!
O wolves of memory! Immensements! No,

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

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

We are almost tempted to say that the poem is expressive of Larkin's entire poetic personality, given that it plays gracefully amidst tones of humour, reverence, and sadness. The ostensible insensitivity of the speaker at the outset of the poem is familiar in its strategy of holding back the instinct for praise from wobbling into the maudlin. A sense of wonder is freshly captured in the physical clarity of the moon as made present in "The rapid clouds, the moon's cleanliness", and in the "hardness and brightness and the plain/ Far-reaching singleness of that wide stare". The epiphanic power of the moment is quite openly stated in the speaker's claim to be "startled by" the visage. He also underlines the wondrous levity of the epiphany with the

shudder of recognition which is lyrically admitted in the line, "One shivers slightly, looking up there." The moment of "pure relationship" which is "seen/thought/felt" as a complex moment of connection with the physical universe, is owned by the speaker as a profound moment of wonder without religion. Its passing quality is underlined by the speaker's recognition that the conversation is a personal one, and that the moon is also losing symbolic meaning for him. Nonetheless, we can add that it is in the peeling away of symbolic epithets -- "Lozenge of love! Medallion of art! / O wolves of memory! Immensements! No" -- that its significance is freshly found. The moment of beauty is not any less significant because of the speaker's familiar holding back with humour and self-mockery. "There's something laughable about this", he says, in an apparent attempt to resist "flying away into circumambient gas". The gesture embodies Hulme's words on the temporary wonder of the "classic of motion". The humour enriches the moment of beauty, and is expressive of the speaker's steady awareness of the fact that he is "mixed up with earth".⁴⁴

The aged identity of the speaker is also a gracious one. His recognition of his own failing composure is not jealous of other significances to the moon, especially as "Lozenge of love", so he can bow from the scene with a dignity. That dignity, one concludes, grows from the moment of wonder which he has experienced, one which gives him stay against despair, and a self-possession which moves maturely outward

in a gesture of goodwill toward the young. As in "High Windows", in spite of having grounds for a cynicism and despair, the movement of the speaker is ultimately one toward praise. The connection between a wondrous relationship to the physical universe and the capacity for praise is a creative one, and one which we shall later become yet more specific about.

To continue with our consideration of the poems in the volume which deal most centrally with the contemplation of the physical universe, the rendition of what Lawrence termed "momentaneous" realizations of the artist in "pure relationship" with the "living universe about us", it is worth briefly looking at "Forget What Did", because it can focus our attention on the other poems on this theme. In that poem the speaker thinks back over his "opaque childhood" in gestures of regret, but absorption in regret is resisted in a statement of purpose. He decides that if he continues to make entries in his "diary" the future entries will take on a particular focus. He resolves:

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

Celestial recurrences,
The day the flowers come,
And when the birds go. 45

Lawrence has said that "our life consists in this achieving of a pure relationship between ourselves and the living universe about us". We recall also that Lawrence included

in the list of relationships "me and the trees or flowers, me and the earth, me and the skies and sun and stars, me and the moon: an infinity of pure relations". Significantly, the phrase, an "infinity of pure relations" resonates with Larkin's "any-angled light" which "congregate(s) endlessly", and both would seem to invoke Lawrence's rainbow image as a symbol of hope, one which saved Ursula from despair and which Lawrence used in another context as a natural symbol of hope in the midst of life in a dark modern age.⁴⁶

Gathered together, the "observed Celestial recurrences" would seem to suggest a somewhat similar rainbow of relationships -- here, with the physical universe -- which can provide the poet with his only, yet majestic, ray of hope amidst his dark journey through life. The extensive suggestiveness of the connections between Larkin and Lawrence in this regard are almost as endless as the light on Larkin's glass of water, but one resists confidence in the analogies, because it is a worrisomely neat way of bringing so much of the poetry into sudden focus. For all of that worry though, one must insist that it is something like these moments of "pure relationship" which Larkin has spread rainbow-like over the sky of his work, in seeming counterpoise with the Bleaney-like reality below, and the dark reality of death ahead.

But we can leave that speculation for the moment and hold for awhile to a steady recognition of at least the power of the "observed Celestial recurrences", a phrase which

so well describes many of the poems in High Windows.

"Cut Grass" is a poem in which this central concept is enacted.

Cut grass lies frail:
Brief is the breath
Mown stalks exhale.
Long, long the death

It dies in the white hours
Of young-leaved June
With chestnut flowers,
With hedges snowlike strewn,

White lilac bowed,
Lost lanes of Queen Anne's lace,
And that high-built cloud
Moving at summer's pace.

The familiar persona of sadness expresses a particular moment of "pure relationship" which is at once beautiful and inseparable from the violent fact of death. One recalls indirectly, Lawrence's claim that "without the song of death, the song of life is pointless and silly" in the context of this poem, because its appreciation of beauty is inseparable from an appreciation of mortality. Again, Larkin's ability to personalize the scene without ever losing sight of it recalls his empirical skill of intelligence, just as it also accounts for the Imagist power of the epiphany. The building up of delicately rich images from the visually pictorial scene reaches to the height of the "high-built cloud", which is analogously resonant with the "chestnut flowers", and the "Lost lanes of Queen Anne's Lace". This strikingly Hopkinsesque rhyming of image aids the accomplishment of a

quiet moment of praise, and a close relatedness between the observer and the observed. The epiphanic dimension of that relationship is a splendid enactment of a Lawrencian communion between the observer and what grows to become the "whole circumambient universe".

In "The Trees" we find yet another moment of "pure relationship" struck, one which is also amenable to Lawrence's vocabulary.

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

Is it that they are born again
And we grow old? No, they die too.
Their yearly trick of looking new
Is written down in rings of grain.

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

The lyric base is one of praise in spite of the threat of a countervailing sadness of tone. The sadness and the humour unite in the creation of a low-keyed registration of wonder. Again, as in "Cut Grass", the contemplation is one in which the observer and the observed merge in the momentaneous recognition of a living relationship. The almost cosmic sense of pain which is suggested in the devastating comment that "Their greenness is a kind of grief" is alleviated by the humour which urbanely refers to the ritual as a "yearly trick of looking new". Any ironic impulse to destroy the moment with quibble is overcome in the earnest note of

praise and connection which closes the poem. The last stanza well states the "fullgrown thickness" of the trees, and the speaker participates in the mysterious cycle of renewal in his concluding and almost prayerful repetition of "Begin afresh, afresh, afresh". Central to Lawrence's recognition of the value of just such moments of epiphany was a conviction that in these moments there is the experience of a healing effect, an energizing of spiritual relationship which can become the accumulating base of an enriched sense of existence. Larkin is most likely aware of Lawrence's evaluation of the moments of relatedness as being just such moments of healing wonder. With this in mind, it is worth looking at that corollary of Lawrence's again before turning to what is perhaps Larkin's most distinctly Lawrencian effort, "Solar".

In Apocalypse⁴⁷ Lawrence discussed the need for a reorientation of the self with the living fact of the physical universe in a more thorough manner than we find in his "Morality And The Novel". In Apocalypse, and in central essays such as "Aristocracy"⁴⁸ and "Hymns In A Man's Life",⁴⁹ he was to emphasize the need for, and the possibility of, realizing in an imaginatively immediate way the sense of harmony which is possible in the personal perception of the interrelated nature of all living life. "Everything in the world is relative to everything else. And every living thing is related to every other living thing,"⁵⁰ he had said at the outset of "Aristocracy". And

central to our concerns with Larkin's epiphanies of light, there is Lawrence's comment in Apocalypse regarding the need for cultivating, without too fully abstracting, what he referred to as "living organic connections". It is quite possible -- though in this kind of a deliberation one is always guessing -- that Lawrence's words on the matter can provide us with an awareness of something like a similar prescription as central to much of Larkin's poetry of praise and wonder. Lawrence's conclusion to Apocalypse emphasized the efficacy of these connections, their healing power. With the sense of healing wonder of "The Trees" still in mind, and as a stepping stone to "Solar", the following statement from the conclusion of Lawrence's Apocalypse might be said to have a central focusing significance for Larkin's work:

...I am part of the sun as my eye is part of me. That I am part of the earth my feet know perfectly, and my blood is part of the sea. My soul knows that I am part of the human race, my soul is an organic part of the great human soul, as my spirit is part of my nation. In my own very self, I am part of my family. There is nothing of me that is alone and absolute except my mind, and we shall find that the mind has no existence by itself, ~~it~~ is only the glitter of the sun on the surface of the waters.

So that my individualism is really an illusion. I am a part of the great whole, and I can never escape. But I can deny my connections, break them and become a fragment. Then I am wretched.

What we want is to destroy our false, inorganic connections, especially those related to money, and re-establish the living organic connections, with the cosmos, the sun and earth, with mankind and nation

and family. Start with the sun, and the
rest will slowly, slowly happen.⁵¹

The passage can be seen as more than coincidental to Larkin. Indeed, it provides us with a focusing vocabulary which can ultimately help us to appreciate the full spiritual depth of his retrieval of the physical world. It is a depth which takes it far past simple empirical alertness and far past, as we are convinced anyway, a simply bleak view of life. We already know Larkin's work as expressive of an essentially outward looking, outwardly engaged achievement. And his critics already agree that he is a poet of common humanity, we might say in Lawrence's terms, a poet of "nation and family". And in our more local concerns in this chapter, we have considered "Forget What Did" as a poem expressive of an intention; to fill the pages of the diary (the artist's chronicle) with "Celestial recurrences/ The day the flowers come,/ And when the birds go". Additionally, in "Cut Grass" and "The Trees" he partly fulfills just such an intention. So we might turn to Larkin's "Solar" with Lawrence's words and their expression of the need for a healing relationship in mind:

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

The eye sees you
 Simplified by distance
 Into an origin,
 Your petalled head of flames
 Continuously exploding.
 Heat is the echo of your
 Gold.

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

"Start with the sun, and the rest will slowly, slowly happen." With that comment in mind and with the above poem present, we recall the constant motion of the sun as wondrous in Larkin's work, giving to it a brightness above the bleakness which his critics are so centrally attentive to. The sun in "Water" glitters in "any-angled" light, just as at the end of "High Windows" the windows are described as having a "sun-comprehending glass", and in "The Explosion" a recognized Lawrencian poem, the colliers are seen by the wives as "Gold as on a coin, walking/ Somehow from the sun towards them". The natural symbol of the sun, we can now assert, grows to a central significance in Larkin's work. It grows to the status of a living physical reality which is a natural symbol of wonder, healing, and communion. And to the extent that we can say it carries that kind of a Lawrencian significance, it can also be seen as Larkin's most powerfully religious symbol, and yet religious only to the extent of its sustenance on the level of his own very

agnostic wonder.

"Solar" is Lawrentian in its recognition of the healing power of wonder at the physical universe. At the same time it is distinctly Larkinian in its reserve in the midst of that wonder. The craft of the poem is familiarly Imagist. The sun is seen as "lion face", and "stalkless flower, Gold" and as "Unclosing like a hand", all images which rush in and out of one another. Every formal detail of the poem aids the thematic expression of the sun's essence as the most natural symbol of perfection in the universe, the center of all things. Even the phonetic level of the form, in its layering upon layering of "o" sounds, mimes the circularity and perfection which the images suggest. And yet, with all of these considerations accumulated, we notice that the speaker nonetheless resists the permanent flight, resists the flight to mythic conviction with the cautionary inclusion of the phrase, "The eye sees you/ Simplified by distance/ Into an origin". The wonder is checked by the agnostic disposition of the speaker, and yet it is not diminished. The note of praise which characterizes the tone of the poem is sustained. The poet does not find the face of God, yet he is rewarded in his contemplation of the sun, and as we have seen in the other poems on nature, rewarded with the epiphany of a mysterious presence which can be said to approximate religious experience, without the naming of a God.

In Lawrence's scale of being, which we could also term a scale of wonder, he emphasized the need for relations with all of life, both human and purely physical. But he was to constantly emphasize the wondrous power of the sky, and the centrality of the grandeur of the sun. In his essay, "Aristocracy", he expressed the scale as follows:

His (man's) life consists in a relation with all things: stone, earth, trees, flowers, water, insects, fishes, birds, creatures, sun, rainbow, children, women, other men. But his greatest and final relation is with the sun, the sun of suns: and with the night, which is moon and dark and stars. In the last great connections, he lifts his body speechless to the sun, and, the same body, but so different, to the moon and the stars, and the open spaces between the stars.

Sun! Yes, the actual sun! That which blazes in the day! Which scientists call a sphere of blazing gas--what a lot of human Greeks call Helios.⁵²

In a less ecstatic way Larkin seems to have absorbed something like the logic of this scale from Lawrence's work. We have seen the "relation" to the sky, the "sun, the sun of suns: and with the night, which is moon and dark and stars" in the poems which we have just left. Significantly, Larkin emphasizes the power of that similarly wondrous sky, unalloyed by inherited symbolism ("Yes, the actual sun!" said Lawrence) in his longest poem to date: "Livings". And if we examine that poem from the point of view of its recognition of the wonder at the reality of the living presence of the physical universe, especially as located in siderial nature, it is possible to claim that Larkin sees the poet

as necessarily solitary, because his function has to do with the sustenance of a sense of mystery in all of creation, and a relating of that sense to the fact of the human world. To examine "Livings" in this light invokes the logic of Lawrence's wonder, Lawrence's claim that, unless we can be alone with the universe, we cannot be said to have anything like a religious dimension to our being. As we shall later see, unless we can respond to the wonder of the physical universe, we are limited in our response to the mystery of the human world.

"Livings" is a long poem, arranged in the form of a triptych. Each section contains an expression of a way of life. Section II is written in the persona of a lighthouse keeper. As poet-figure his life or "living" embodies an imaginative scope which the more limited figures to either side of him in I and III cannot approximate. The persona adopted in section I is that of a bored salesman in the period of the late 1920's. Section III is the embodiment of the "living" of a university don in what looks like a seventeenth-century Oxford. Both the don and the salesman are seen as limited in imagination. The salesman's life is limited to hotel rooms and money. The don's life is limited to study rooms and books. Hence, both lives are circumscribed by comparison to that of the lightkeeper, who could be said to live in the universe. He is a solitary figure and this is a limitation. But it is a paradoxically liberating one. He sees more, thinks more, and feels more than the other two.

The limitation of perspective which is entailed in the salesman's life devoted to commerce, is given in the confidence he expresses at the end of the section:

I drowse
Between ex-Army sheets, wondering why
I think it's worth coming. Father's dead:
He used to, but the business now is mine.
It's time for change, in nineteen twenty-nine.

Time, of course, will undercut the security of his profession and the security of his life. He is on the way to the depression with an unimaginative "living".

The life of the don, while seen as more aware than the salesman's, is nonetheless limited by its absorption in books and dining-hall ease. While the salesman's life could be said to be a conversation with the world of money, the don's life is a conversation with the world of books. Thus, as the section closes, there is a narrative shift from within the don's consciousness, outward to a more authorial point of view. In this concluding stanza, we are brought to recognize the limitation of the don's imagination. It is placed in the context of the living physical universe and found wanting, though certainly not contemptible.

The fields around are cold and muddy,
The cobbled streets close by are still,
A sizar shivers at his study,
The kitchen cat has made a kill;
The bells discuss the hour's gradations,
Dusty shelves hold prayers and proofs:
Above, Chaldean constellations
Sparkle over crowded roofs.

The sudden liberation of the epiphany in the final two lines places the don in his rooms as limited to the awareness of the "Dusty shelves" which hold "prayers and proofs". He lives a relatively confined life under the "crowded roofs", above which the constellations "Sparkle" with a beckoning majesty and mystery.⁵³ Neither the don nor the salesman has any connection with that reality, and their lives are the more limited because of the fact.

The middle section of the poem provides us with a "living" which is poised in the midst of the elemental fact of the universe. Hence the choice of the lightkeeper as metaphoric brother to the poet of reality is sharply appropriate. He is above the limitations of the life which is governed and limited by money, and above the life which is governed and limited by books. Consequently he experiences more of the wonder of the physical universe than the other two figures. In fact, it could be said that he is the one who notices the constellations which "Sparkle over crowded roofs" in section III, and who sees the limits of the salesman's life in section I. In what must be the liveliest poem which Larkin has yet placed in public view, the lightkeeper's life is conveyed as richly animated by the energetic presence of the living fact of the universe. His is a life of wonder amidst the elements, one of Lawrentian "living organic connections" with the physical plane of existence. This section of the poem is appositely shaped in an external form which mimes the height of the lighthouse itself.

Additionally, it is the only section in "Livings" which is written in unrhymed verse. In all likelihood it is a formal device used to convey the freer range of the poet-lightkeeper's imagination:

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

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

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

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

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

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

Central to the enlivened spirit of the lightkeeper's life is the fact that he lives in a physical universe, not under the "crowded roofs" of society. He is therefore not limited to the perspective of the salesman's hotel rooms, or to the confines of the don's study rooms. Somewhat fancifully, we

can say that if the "sizar shivers at his study" in section III, the poet-as-lightkeeper "shivers" in the imaginative presence of the elements. And as such, he is kin with the speaker in "Sad Steps" who said amidst his realization of the sky, that "One shivers slightly, looking up there." We also recollect that in "Sad Steps" the sky was seen as spreading a "Stone-coloured light sharpening the roofs below", an image which sharply focuses the two planes of reality which are lifted into juxtaposition both at the end of section III in "Livings" and in the scales of awareness which "Livings" as a whole discusses.

Risking high nonsense, we can say that the "high windows" of the lighthouse -- where the speaker says he is "Guarded by brilliance" -- are the focal point of consciousness in many of Larkin's poems. They are a focal point inasmuch as we have seen centrally in "High Windows", "Sad Steps", "Solar", and in a quieter manner in "Cut Grass" and "The Trees", that Larkin's perspective of wonder is the perspective of a Lawrentian solitary wonder in the midst of a living physical universe. And it is a universe which is realized as an essentially mysterious one.

It is also one which, taken at face value, is the source of a sense of self-possession and the stimulus to an enriched connection with the human world. Paradoxically, while the contemplation of the physical universe is a solitary matter at its center, it is the center of a consciousness which is strengthened to carry a sense of mystery

outward to the living presence of the human world. And this, ~~one~~ takes it, is why Lawrence could make such exclamatory noise about the need for the lonely connection with "the sun, the sun of suns: and with the night, which is moon and dark and stars", while at the same time doing so with the conviction that it was inseparable from an outgoing and mature connection with the human world. Again, in the context of this kind of logic, the "Playing at goodness, like going to church" which Larkin satirizes in "Vers de Société", is no more solid than the piecrust at the dinner-party which the speaker does not want to attend.

To return to Larkin's more socially oriented poems with the Lawrentian logic of his wonder in mind is to see them more fully for what they are: poems of praise, and poems which seek an imaginative "living organic connection" with "an organic part of the great human soul". As mentioned in Chapter One, Larkin's status as a significant contemporary poet has been supported to a large extent by a body of criticism which sees him as a laureate of the ordinary man.⁵⁴ It is on that ground that his work has found the securest critical support. Recently critics have begun to speak of his ability for dramatizing a ritual aspect to ordinary life, a penchant for witness to human festival which we see in central poems such as "The Whitsun Weddings",⁵⁵ "Show Saturday",⁵⁶ and "To The Sea".⁵⁷ J. R. Watson has said that this attention of Larkin's is essentially a religious concern, and that it is part of an Eliadean frame of perception.

He says that one of Larkin's greatest strengths as a poet is his position as 'homo religiosus' with an intuitive awareness of the tenuous sacred in the midst of the profane."⁵⁸ He sees this concern of Larkin's as the concern of a poet who expresses overall, a chagrin at the fact that he lives in a modern "wholly desacralized cosmos".⁵⁹ More recently, Roger Bowen has responded to Watson's view by saying that on the evidence of the deep chagrin of many of the poems on death and failure, the version of Larkin as poet of "homo religiosus" is a tenuous one.. Bowen says that it "appears to have some legitimacy but it remains to be confirmed in Larkin's future work".⁶⁰ In the light of the connection which we have ~~seen~~ between Lawrence's work and Larkin's, we can see that the debate is based on an assumption that Larkin is either a religious poet and doesn't know it, and/or his status as a religious poet has yet to be confirmed by what one can only guess would be a sort of Auto da fé which he might make in his poetry sometime in the future. This kind of religious vocabulary is beside the point in the first place, and Larkin's identity as a poet of wonder is solid enough that we might call him a deeply religious writer without expecting of him that he couch his sense of mystery in mythic terms, expecting that he perform a "nailing down". Larkin's religious impulse seems to have taken the form of a Lawrentian wonder, one which is agnostic to the extent that it refuses to name a God, and refuses to claim that the power of the wonder is so extensive that it can sum up

all of creation and account for the brutal fact of human failure and death. For all of that, the surety of his grasp of the mystery of the physical universe, and the surety of his grasp of the mystery of human being, gives to his work a dimension which, while resisting "myth-kitty", precariously manages to stave off an impulse toward existential despair.

We can become more convinced of this quite other basis for Larkin's concern with ritual if we recognize its kinship with Lawrence's similar grounding of his sense of the mystery of the human world in the mystery of ritual event. Both writers express their respect for the mystery of the human being in an exceptional capacity for recording a profound feeling for community life. Since "The Whitsun Weddings" is the poem which most centrally gives Larkin his reputation as a ritualistic writer, it is worth making a connection between that poem and one of Lawrence's. Lawrence's "Tommies On The Train", though set differently in a wartime context, has some interesting similarities to Larkin's "The Whitsun Weddings", not the least of which is a strong empirical base, and an Imagist capacity for expressing a profound sense of mystery. Significantly, the mystery registered is the mystery of the "living organic connection" which dramatizes a unique connection with what Lawrence termed "the great human soul". "Tommies On The Train" is here quoted in full:

The sun shines,
The coltsfoot flowers along the railway banks
Shine like flat coin which Jove in thanks
Strews each side the lines.

A steeple
In purple elms, daffodils
Sparkle beneath; luminous hills
Beyond--and no people.

England, O Danae
To this spring of cosmic gold
That falls on your lap of mould!--
What then are we?

What are we
Clay-coloured, who roll in fatigue
As the train falls league after league
From our destiny?

A hand is over my face,
A cold hand.--I peep between the fingers
To watch the world that lingers
Behind, yet keeps pace.

Always there, as I peep
Between the fingers that cover my face!
Which then is it that falls from its place
And rolls down the steep?

Is it the train that falls like a meteorite
Backward into space, to alight
Never again?

Or is it the illusory world
That falls from reality
As we look? Or are we
Like a thunderbolt hurled?

One or another
Is lost, since we fall apart
Endlessly, in one motion depart
From each other.⁶¹

In Lawrence's poem there is a registration of the observer's
epiphanic connection with the family of his nation, a render-
ing which is cast as a moment of pathos and beauty at once.
There is a recognition of a quality of innocence in the

family, one which is prized the more for the feeling that it is threatened by the experience which will follow the train trip. The conclusion to Larkin's "The Whitsun Weddings", appears to have been crafted out of the exemplary subtlety of Lawrence's poem:⁶²

There we were aimed. And as we raced across
 Bright knots of rail
 Past standing Pullmans, walls of blackened moss
 Came close, and it was nearly done, this frail
 Travelling coincidence; and what it held
 Stood ready to be loosed with all the power
 That being changed can give. We slowed again,
 And as the tightened brakes took hold, there swelled
 A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower
 Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.

In both poems there is a recognition of a connection with "the great human soul". Larkin's is the more understandably celebratory poem because of its context of the weddings. Consequently, the "meteorite" of Lawrence's poem is lifted upward to become an "arrow-shower" in Larkin's, one which is "somewhere becoming rain", and therefore a more hopeful and fertile metaphor. Both poems are expressive of a love for the human being which is at the far other end of "Playing at goodness, like going to church". Their distance from that posture is demonstrated in the ways in which they each praise the fact of the human world with the respect that comes from not wishing to completely formulate for it, an abstract meaning. The element of human mystery is evoked, yet not paraphrased into idea. Both writers manage to maintain a poise of negative capability which refuses a "nailing down" of the moment of pure relationship into "shells of

thought".⁶³ There is no fixed sociological or theological idea in either of the poems. The complex respect for the mystery of the human world leads both writers to express their "momentaneous" epiphany with a vorticistic design of image. Each poem, as the expression of a moment of connection with "the great human soul", contains its idea as a part of its complexly suggestive Imagist form.

Lawrence's exemplary stimulus might well be involved in Larkin's poem on yet another level. It goes without saying that Lawrence is a writer who is a master at capturing the ritual aspects of life, the sense of community meaning as unconsciously and deeply meaningful. In The Rainbow he was to underline the values of community life, and the threat to their deep meaning by the specter of industrial-mechanical civilization. In "The Wedding At The Marsh" chapter of that novel the narration celebrates the rich gaiety of Anna's wedding in a manner which looks forward to Larkin's witness of the Whitsun weddings in his poem. What characterizes both the chapter and the poem is a praising sense of renewal in the young, a perception of the continuity of life in spite of the dark prospect of a future which seems damned to insignificance by the brutal god of industrialism. In both cases, a narrative chagrin is overcome in a final negative capability, one which praises the mystery of human innocence and human ritual as a sufficing momentary answer to the qualms about diminished spiritual meaning in the context of modern life.⁶⁴ In the work of

both Larkin and Lawrence we find this capacity to leave off severity of attack on the death-in-life quality of much of modern life, in the creation of moments which bring the disposition of solitary wonder to a recognition of a mystery in the human world. It is one which seems to transcend beautifully and momentarily, all forms of cultural and existential bleakness. Larkin, especially, refuses to turn the moments into building blocks which reach upward to a traditional God, or an absolute mythic conviction. The value of these moments, it would seem, is that, very like the passing wonder registered in his poems about the self in the midst of the physical universe, they are also moments of "any-angled light", parts of the rainbow which arches above the trenchant awareness of personal, social, and existential squalor that characterize so many of Larkin's other poems.

"To The Sea" is an apposite poem on which to conclude this study of Larkin's agnostic wonder, because it is one written with a wide empirical scope. It embodies a glance of wonder which is both given as a recognition of a mystery in the universe, and a ritual beauty to human life. That Larkin placed it at the beginning of his High Windows would seem to sanction a conviction that at least he feels it embodies a compelling epiphany.

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

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

Still going on, all of it, still going on!
 To lie, eat, sleep in hearing of the surf
 (Ears to transistors, that sound tame enough
 Under the sky), or gently up and down
 Lead the uncertain children, frilled in white
 And grasping at enormous air, or wheel
 The rigid old along for them to feel
 A final summer, 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 some seaside quack, first became known.
 Strange to it now, I watch the cloudless scene:
 The same clear water over smoothed pebbles,
 The distant bathers' weak protesting trebles
 Down at its edge, and then the cheap cigars,
 The chocolate-papers, tea-leaves, and, between

The rocks, the rusting soup-tins, till the first
 Few families start the trek back to the cars.
 The white steamer has gone. Like breathed-on glass
 The sunlight has turned milky. If the worst
 Of flawless weather is our falling short,
 It may be that through habit these do best,
 Coming to water clumsily undressed
 Yearly; teaching their children by a sort
 Of clowning; helping the old, too, as they ought.

As in "Show Saturday", there is an "empirical gaiety" which guarantees the affection which the poet feels for the world. Ultimately, the fact of the physical universe in this poem is a fact which includes the human world in a totally unconscious and ritualistic unity. The epiphany is one of wholeness and it includes the beach, sky, the people, their funny junk, and the poet, all of a bundle. The "momentaneous" epiphany could be said to enact the totality of "living

organic connection" which Lawrence listed in Apocalypse:

I am part of the sun as my eye is part of me.
That I am part of the earth my feet know perfectly,
and my blood is part of the sea. My soul knows
that I am part of the human race, my soul is an
organic part of the great human soul, as my spirit
is part of my nation. In my own self, I am part
of my family. There is nothing of me that is
alone and absolute except my mind, and we shall
find that the mind has no existence by itself,
it is only the glitter of the sun on the surface
of the waters.

So that my individualism is really an illusion.
I am a part of the great whole, and I can never
escape. But I can deny my connections, break
them, and become a fragment. Then I am wretched.⁶⁵

The "miniature gaiety" of the scene is recorded in a vision
which collects all small details into a praise of innocence,
just as it frames it with the recognition of a "living
organic connection" which the crowd quite unconsciously has
with the sea. The instinct for praise is uninterrupted by
irony. The humour in the poem is the humor of recognition,
a smiling respect for the small beauty of humanity made
visible to the poet in its moments of off-guardedness. All
sense of the mysterious beauty of the human being is caught
in the images of their gestures, not in abstractions about
them. The children are "frilled in white/ And gasping an
enormous air", or they "wheel/ The rigid old along for them
to feel/ A final summer". Each image of individual humanity
is an image of innocence. In spite of the potentially dis-
piriting natural symbolism of the litter on the beach, the
speaker is more struck by the quality of the event, seen as

"annual pleasure, half rite". The potential stimulus in the scene for a condemnation of social obesity is resisted in a respect for the quality of innocence and mystery which seems to transcend the squalor. The "white steamer stuck in the afternoon", exists in the far distance of the poet's view as a strange embodiment of the small beauty of the scene, the delicate "Pheasant disappearing in the brush", which is both the experience and the poem.

Typically, Larkin is not using his scene to back up a religion, or a myth. He is as tentative about its significance as we have found to be the case in most of his work. As the poem moves to its final note of praise the speaker says, "It may be that through habit these do best." That "may be" should indicate to us that the poet, for all of the confusion and agitation which it causes in his critics, insists on the agnostic basis of all of his art. "I don't know" says the speaker in "Mr. Bleaney", and "We shall find out", concludes the speaker in "The Old Fools". Larkin is a poet who is not only energetically exploratory of the universe in which he lives, but a poet who, at the risk of ending up only perplexed by it, refuses any "nailing down" of its meaning into a fixed idea.

For all of that, his vision of life is more "any-angled" than most of his critics have suggested. Indeed, it could be said that it is his basic agnosticism which accounts for the quality of negative capability which can be said to characterize his work as a whole. Additionally, as we have

seen, agnosticism is not a disposition of passive obscurantism in the world of Larkin's work. He examines life in its most overcast of lights, and in its light of wonder, and turns up epiphanies which are both light and dark. The reader is left with the personal decision as to whether or not there is a balance to that work, and whether or not it is an overall vision of life which is meaningful to him. This study was written with the conviction that some would be cheated of making that kind of a decision in an intelligent way, because the work of the poet has been cast in a critical vocabulary which not only fails to recognize the complex basis of the art in the physical world, but is clouded by the existence of a damaging cliché. The cliché -- that Larkin is a poet of bleakness -- is the one which seems to have most successfully distracted his readers from the rainbow of epiphanies which more brightly arch across the top of the churches, hospitals, and rooms that Larkin also so humanly and imaginatively knows as containing the meanness, greed, ambition, pathos, small courage, and beauty of the human world. As a poet of witness to the living fact of the physical world, he pays it the homage of waking daily to an engaged curiosity about its meaning, not confident that it has all been summed up finally in books.

NOTES: CHAPTER IV.

¹T. L. D., p. 15. For an analysis of this poem, see above, p. 13.

²H. W., p. 42. For an analysis of this poem, see above p. 130.

³Heaney has said: "He never followed the Lawrentian success of his early poem "Wedding Wind" which ends with a kind of Biblical swoon, an image of fulfilled lovers 'kneeling like cattle by all generous waters.'" See "Now and In England," Critical Inquiry 3 (1977), 483.

⁴Walford Davies, "An Ordinary Sorrow of Man's Life," rev. of High Windows, Sewanee Review, 54 (1976), 526.

⁵As quoted by Timms in Philip Larkin, p. 80.

⁶David Timms, Philip Larkin, p. 80.

⁷Philip Larkin, "Vernon Watkins: an Encounter and Re-encounter," in Vernon Watkins: 1906-1967, ed. Leslie Norris (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 30.

⁸See above, p. 4.

⁹D. H. Lawrence, "Morality and the Novel," in Selected Literary Criticism, ed. Anthony Beal (London: Heinemann, 1964), pp. 108-113.

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 108-109.

¹¹Ibid., p. 109.

¹²Ibid., p. 109.

¹³Ibid., p. 110.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 109.

¹⁵Anthony Thwaite, quoted by him, from a BBC Broadcast (unspecified), in "The Poetry of Philip Larkin," Phoenix

NOTES CONT'D: CHAPTER IV.

Nos. 11-12 (Autumn and Winter 1973-74), 55.

¹⁶Philip Larkin, in Poet's of the 1950's, pp. 77-78. For context, see above, p. 118.

¹⁷T. W. W., p. 20.

¹⁸D. H. Lawrence, The Rainbow (1915; rpt. Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1971), p. 495. The Rainbow contains more than one passage which is in striking rhythm with Larkin's work. See also Note #64.

¹⁹The phrase is employed in the final paragraph of Lawrence's The Rainbow: "She (Ursula) saw in the rainbow the earth's new architecture, the old, brittle corruption of houses and factories swept away, the world built up in a living fabric of Truth, fitting to the over-arching heaven. (p. 496)."

²⁰The phrase is from "Nothing To Be Said," T. W. W., p. 11.

²¹T. W. W., p. 11.

²²D. H. Lawrence, "Transformations," in The Complete Poems of D. H. Lawrence, ed. Vivian de Sola Pinto and Warren Roberts (New York: The Viking Press, 1964), p. 73. All future references to Lawrence's poetry can be found in this edition, and it will be listed as DHL-CP.

²³DHL-CP, 965. Lawrence is a poet who seems more atoned to the fact of death than we find Larkin often to be. Lawrence's "Ship of Death" (961), appears to indicate that he is more venturesome than Larkin is in the matter. But for all of that, Larkin's poem "Wants" (T. L. D., p. 22), with its claim that past all our habits, customs, and conventions, the "desire of oblivion runs," is partly in keeping with at least Lawrence's recognition of the centrality of the death-wish to the psychic make-up of the human being. "Drift on, drift on, my soul, towards the most pure/ most dark oblivion," says Lawrence's speaker in "Ship of Death." And while it is true that Lawrence would appear more open to the possibility of death as the most fulfilling of existential occurrences,

NOTES CONT'D: CHAPTER IV.

his shock at its ugliness, as dramatized in the novels, is as rife with fear as anything we see in Larkin. One thinks here, for instance, of the death of Mr. Crich in "Women In Love." Both writers explore all sides of the reality; crash continually up against its horror on the one hand, and its mystery on the other. Even in Larkin's "Next Please" (T. L. D., p. 20), where the regret at the transience of life is given in a curious reversal of Lawrence's "Ship of Death" into the image of a vessel outside of us (and therefore having less to do with us than Lawrence envisaged to be the case in his poem), there is a strange beauty to the mystery of its fact:

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

It is perhaps because Lawrence so firmly and loudly sang his song of life that he has not been made subject to the charges of morbidity which Larkin suffers.

²⁴DHL-CP, p. 136.

²⁵H. W., p. 17.

²⁶DHL-CP, p. 9.

²⁷T. W. W., p. 9.

²⁸T. W. W., p. 20.

²⁹DHL-CP, p. 526.

³⁰H. W., p. 33.

³¹H. W., p. 42. As stated in the text, none of these examples are meant as proof of a direct one-to-one relationship of influence. But the list of poems from Lawrence which appear as comfortable with the imaginative contours of Larkin's poetic world is an endless one. For the reader who might like to read pleasurably on this count, some of the

NOTES CONT'D: CHAPTER IV.

other Lawrence poems which are interesting include: "At The Window" (102), "Flat Suburbs, S.W., in the Morning" (50), "From a College Window" (35), "New Heaven And Earth" (256), "Suburbs on a Hazy Day" (53), "Ultimate Reality" (604), "Man Of The Sea" (705), "Rebuked" (731), "Democracy" (526), "False Democracy And Real" (650), "Furniture" (657), "Things Men Have Made" (448), "On The March" (163), "What Have They Done To You" (630), "At Last" (514), "Escape" (482), "Young Fathers" (521).

³²T. W. W., p. 9.

³³T. E. Hulme, "Romanticism and Classicism," Shapiro, Prose Keys, p. 94. For fuller context see above pp.

³⁴T. W. W., p. 37.

³⁵H. W., p. 35.

³⁶DHL-CP, p. 610.

³⁷"Loneliness," DHL-CP, p. 610. In another example of this connection Lawrence stated the feeling of self-possession as almost medicinal and, in typical unabashed analysis, takes on the mantle of a cosmic psychiatrist:

People who complain of loneliness must have lost something.
lost some living connection with the cosmos, out of
themselves,
lost their life-flow
like a plant whose roots are cut.
And they are crying like plants whose roots are cut.
But the presence of other people will not give them new,
rooted connection
it will only make them forget.
The thing to do is in solitude slowly and painfully put
forth new roots
into the unknown, and take root by oneself.

("The Uprooted," DHL-CP, p. 610)

In this context, one of course remembers Lawrence's admiration for the capacity for loneliness which he so ably characterized in the figure of Mellors in Lady Chatterly's Lover.

NOTES CONT'D: CHAPTER IV.

³⁸T. E. Hulme, "Romanticism & Classicism," Shapiro, Prose Keys, p. 101. For context, see above, p.

³⁹Philip Larkin, "Four Conversations." For context, see above, p. 12.

⁴⁰H. W., p. 32.

⁴¹H. W., p. 41.

⁴²H. W., p. 12.

⁴³H. W., p. 13.

⁴⁴T. E. Hulme, "Romanticism & Classicism," Shapiro, Prose Keys, p. 101. For context, see above, p. 135.

⁴⁵H. W., p. 16.

⁴⁶The use of the symbol in Lawrence is complex and various, goes well past the single instance of The Rainbow. For further discussion of it, see Keith Sagar's The Art of D. H. Lawrence, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), especially pp. 65-68. See also Tom Marshall's The Psychic Mariner: A Reading of the Poems of D. H. Lawrence (New York: The Viking Press, 1970), especially pp. 116-63.

⁴⁷D. H. Lawrence, Apocalypse, 1931; rpt. with intro. by Richard Aldington (London: Heinemann, 1972).

⁴⁸_____, "Aristocracy," 1920; rpt. in Phoenix II: Uncollected, Unpublished and Other Prose Works by D. H. Lawrence, collected and ed. with notes and introd. by Warren Roberts and Harry T. Moore (New York: The Viking Press, 1968), p. 475.

⁴⁹_____, "Hymns in a Man's Life," Phoenix II, pp. 597-601.

⁵⁰_____, "Aristocracy," in Phoenix II, p. 475.

⁵¹_____, Apocalypse, pp. 103-104.

NOTES CONT'D: CHAPTER IV.

52

_____, "Aristocracy," in Phoenix II, pp. 481-82. Lawrence also asserted the central importance of man's relationship to the sun in "Reflections On The Death of a Porcupine" (Phoenix II, pp. 460-74). "No creature is fully itself," he said, "till it is, like the dandelion, opened in the bloom of pure relationship to the sun, the entire living cosmos (p. 469)."

53

At the risk of being oversubtle, one notes that Lawrence was struck by the wondrous glance of the Chaldeans. He felt that post-Chaldean civilizations had dispirited the heavens with abstractions. In "The Dragon Of The Apocalypse," a review of a book by Frederick Carter, he said: "I would like to know the stars again as the Chaldeans knew them, two thousand years before Christ. I would like to be able to put my ego into the sun, and my personality into the moon, and my character into the planets, and live the life of the heavens, as the early Chaldeans did." (Selected Literary Criticism, pp. 160-61). Lawrence also made a comment in this review which contrasts the world of scholarship with the world of the Chaldeans: "It matters so little to us who care more about life than scholarship, what is correct or what is not correct (p. 159)." It can be seen that Lawrence and Larkin share this preference for a kind of profoundly ignorant wonder to the staler world of, in the words of Larkin's poem, "prayers and proofs." In this context, one recalls Ursula's experience of college in The Rainbow. It was a disappointing one: "College was barren, cheap, a temple converted to the most vulgar, petty commerce. Had she not gone to hear the echo of learning pushing back to the source of mystery? The source of mystery! And barrenly, the professors in their gowns offered commercial commodity that could be turned to good account in the examination room; ready made stuff too, and not really worth the money it was intended to fetch; which they all knew (p. 436)." What sustains her in the midst of a threat from that kind of learning is her knowledge of the universe as wondrous: "But she could see the glimmer of dark movement just out of range, she saw the eyes of the wild beast gleaming from the darkness, watching the vanity of the campfire and the sleepers: she felt the strange, foolish vanity of the camp, which said 'Beyond our light and our order there is nothing,' turning their faces always inward towards the sinking fire of illuminating consciousness, which comprised sun and stars, and the Creator, and the System of Righteousness, ignoring always the vast darkness that wheeled round about, with half-revealed shapes lurking on the edge (pp. 437-38)."

NOTES CONT'D: CHAPTER IV.

⁵⁴See above, p. 20.

⁵⁵T. W. W., p. 21.

⁵⁶H. W., p. 37.

⁵⁷H. W., p. 9.

⁵⁸J. R. Watson, "The Other Larkin," 360. See also Note #63, Chapter Three.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 350. The term is Eliade's, as quoted by Watson.

⁶⁰Roger Bowen, "Death, Failure, and Survival in the Poetry of Philip Larkin," Dalhousie Review, 58 (Spring 1978), 93. Bowen agrees with Watson that there is a religious impulse in Larkin's work which "has an undoubted claim on our attention (79)," but on the basis of the poems about death--some of which are quoted from Larkin's unpublished manuscripts--he feels that Larkin's viewpoint is a darkly mortal one.

⁶¹DHL-CP., p. 162.

⁶²Again, as a way of underlining the creativity of Larkin's poem, in spite of any guesses we can make about sources of stimulation, Lawrence's poem "The Train" (DHL-CP, p. 873), might also be involved in the stimulus. Additionally, one recollects John Reibetanz's relating of the poem to Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn." (See Note #22, Chapter Two.) And for a relating of the poem to Virginia Woolf's The Waves, see: Ian Milligan; "Philip Larkin's, 'The Whitsun Weddings' and Virginia Woolf's, The Waves in Notes and Queries 23, No. 1 (1976) 23.

⁶³Ezra Pound, "Vorticism," 469. For context, see above, p. 123.

⁶⁴Interestingly, this process is captured in a miniature, somewhat paradigmatic way, in the "Wedding at the Marsh" chapter of The Rainbow. Tom Brangwen is the interesting centre of consciousness in this regard. He is growing older

NOTES CONT'D: CHAPTER IV.

and is agitated by the incompleteness of being. In a moment of solitary wonder he looks at the windows in the church (during the wedding), and his attention is rewarded with an epiphany. The "blue window at the back of the altar" even brings to mind Larkin's window in "High Windows." The impressiveness of the moment lies in the typical Lawrentian ability to evoke wonder as passing, yet adequate--a claim which we have similarly made for Larkin. Here is the pertinent passage: "Brangwen was staring away at the burning blue window at the back of the altar, and wondering vaguely, with pain, if he ever should get old, if he ever should feel arrived and established. He was here at Anna's wedding. Well, what right had he to feel responsible, like a father? he was still unsure and unfixed as when he had married himself. His wife and he! With a pang of anguish he realized what uncertainties they both were. He was a man of forty-five. Forty-five! in five more years fifty. Then sixty--then seventy--then it was finished. My God--and one was so unestablished.

How did one grow old--how could one become confident? He wished he felt older. Why, what difference was there, as far as he felt matured or completed, between him now and him at his own wedding? He felt himself tiny, a little, upright figure on a plain circled round with the immense, roaring sky...When did one come to an end? In which direction was it finished? There was no end, no finish, only this vast roaring space...That was the clue. He exulted strangely, with torture. He would go on with his wife, he and she like two children camping on the plains. What was sure but the endless sky? But that was so sure, so boundless.

Still the royal blue colour burned and blazed and sported itself in the web of darkness before him, unwearingly rich and splendid...Always it was so unfinished and unformed (pp. 134-35)."

This chapter of *The Rainbow* is interesting otherwise. The narrator's eye for the excitement of the wedding itself, one suspects, might be involved in Larkin's "The Whitsun Weddings". "How funny such dressed-up people look in the winter sunshine! (p. 133)" says Lawrence's narrator. And the relatives are there, half tipsy, part shy, and full of awkward gestures and sometimes lewd comments, just as we find in Larkin's poem.

⁶⁵ D. H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse*, pp. 103-104.

CHAPTER V: PLACING LARKIN

(A) LARKIN: A RECAPITULATION

(B) POETRY & THE PHYSICAL WORLD:
AN EMERGING TRADITION

CHAPTER V: PLACING LARKIN

(A) Larkin: A Recapitulation

Larkin's work as a whole invites the reader to look outward at the lines on the face of the physical world. In its connection with the empirical bias of the Imagists and its Lawrentian alertness to the mystery of the living physical universe, it provides the reader with a value which far transcends its restriction to the poetic personality which accompanies it. The option for meaning which it entails, its difference from the more intellectually inward gazing work of the Modernists, is perhaps its most profound contribution to the possibilities for life which art and culture can sometimes provide for us. While Larkin is a poet with a keen eye for all of the failing aspects of life, his consistent recourse to the physical world as source of meaning gives to his work a buoyancy which resists despair. It was M. L. Rosenthal who said of our more recent poetry that, "If there is, in fact, one distinctively modern quality in literature, it lies in the centrifugal spin toward suicide of the speaking voice."¹ Many commentators on modern culture have noted with chagrin that modern literature is predominantly a literature of disaster.² And the more recent perspective of Confessional poetry is one which all but turns suicide into the last poetic act, the supreme complaint against life. The sense of meaninglessness which

that tradition is mired in is given in Lowell's evocation of contemporary apocalypse and human failure in "Fall 1961", where the motion of the voice is precisely in the "centrifugal spin" of which Rosenthal speaks:

All autumn, the chafe and jar
of nuclear war;
we have talked our extinction to death.
I swim like a minnow
behind my studio window.

Our end drifts nearer,
the moon lifts,
radiant with terror.
The state
is a diver under a glass bell.

A father's no shield
for his child.
We are a lot of wild
spiders crying together,
but without tears.³

It is the crisis mentality of this kind of poem which Alvarez has responded to in his introduction to The New Poetry, a mentality which we recall he chose over the theoretically more limited poetry of Philip Larkin.⁴ We are wise to agree with Larkin that, as he put it himself:

Whether one finds the recent emphasis on
violence and insanity discouraging depends,
I suppose, on what your view of poetry is.
If these are genuinely what a writer finds
poetic, then of course he must deal with
them.⁵

Nonetheless, if we consent to Larkin's claim that "Poetry is an affair of sanity, of seeing things as they are",⁶ consent, that is, to a notion that past all of the disillusionment of

the Wasteland tradition of poetry, and the sunlessness of the Confessionals, there is the possibility of meaning outside of the self, then we are brought inevitably to the doorstep of Larkin's poetry of the physical world. For if Larkin is a poet knowledgeable of the impulse to despair which characterizes Modernist and Confessional poetry alike, he is nevertheless a poet whose quality of negative capability is redemptive of that "centrifugal spin toward suicide" of which Rosenthal speaks. Additionally, if there is an aspect of his work which most centrally aids that retardation of despair, it is its willingness to venture past the "gorgon ego" of which Auden spoke,⁷ and into the physical world.

In the context of this persistence of sanity in an insane time, Lawrence is helpful as a casual focusing point. We noted in the previous chapter his recognition of the healing effect of the connection between the artist and the physical world. And in what can be considered a central poem of his in this context, "The Sane Universe", he gave statement to an option which Larkin, in his idiosyncratic way, can be said to have chosen instead of the Confessional motion inward:

One might talk of the sanity of the atom,
 the sanity of space,
 the sanity of the electron,
 the sanity of water--
 For it is all alive
 and has something comparable to that which
 we call sanity in ourselves.
 The only oneness is the oneness of sanity.⁸

Lawrence's idea that "it" has "something comparable to that which/ we call sanity in ourselves" is by no means a panacea for the poet's recognition of the failing elements of his life, the life of his times, and his ultimate existential qualms. But a motion outward to a curious and beholding realization of the beauty which does exist goes a long way, as we have seen in Larkin's work, toward the discovery of a kind of healing knowledge. It is limited, not mythic, and agitated by a feeling that reality can also readily fail the poet, dupe him as it seems to have done for each age as we look back on it. So the edification which he occasionally feels in his forays into reality is surrounded by doubts which keep his mystical sense on the level of agnosticism. Matthew Arnold once said that the Romantic Poets "did not know enough".⁹ And D. J. Enright once brought that comment to bear on Modernist poets, saying that the same is true of their work in an opposite way:

These poets [Modernists] , too, did not know enough--and their ignorance has proved remarkably infectious. They may have known what the Romantics were ignorant of, but they were ignorant of what the Romantics knew. In this aspect, as in others, Modernism seems to be a violent inversion of Romanticism: each is¹⁰ notably weak where the other is notably strong.

Put in other words, what Enright has said is that if the Romantics were too naive, the Modernists were too cynical. Otherwise, one can add that if the Romantics were too confident of a benevolent visage to the face of the physical world, the Modernist and Confessional poets are largely

incurious about the physical world in the first place.¹¹ And if the price paid is the insanity which is the other side of Lawrence's poem "The Sane Universe", the reward which Larkin finds in his discovery of wonder in the physical world provides us with the possibility of an option for meaning which is exceptionally valuable from almost all points of view.

Thus, when we return to Alvarez's introduction to The New Poetry and take note of his prescriptive connecting of the poetry of the early part of the century to the poetry of today, we begin to realize that he has bypassed something valuable in an avoidance of its true nature. Toward the close of his introduction he has said:

Dr. Leavis has come, apparently, to believe that D. H. Lawrence and T. S. Eliot represent the two warring and unreconcilable poles of modern literature. The best contemporary English verse, however, shows that their influences can be creatively reconciled. In the seriousness of what I have called the new depth poetry, the openness to experience, the psychological insight and integrity of D. H. Lawrence would, ideally, combine with the technical skill and formal intelligence of T. S. Eliot.¹²

Alvarez then concludes his introduction with the comment that "a good deal of poetic talent exists in England at the moment", and adds that it can only develop if "poets can remain immune to the disease so often found in English culture: gentility".¹³ As we recall from Chapter One, Philip Larkin is the poet at whom Alvarez slams the charge of

gentility. It is therefore with a strong sense of an injustice having been done that one notes of Larkin that his work has as its mainspring a technical sophistication which matches Eliot's -- but without gazing at itself. And that it is not only characterized by an "openness to experience" which we can associate with Lawrence's work, but tellingly, it absorbs from Lawrence's example a quite other direction of movement than an inward motion to "psychological depth" -- it takes from Lawrence's example a recognition of the importance of the movement outward to the physical world. In that motion outward to discovery of the mystery of both the physical universe and the human world, there is a corresponding recognition of a "depth" which is both psychological and universal. And therein, one wants to say, lies the full genius of Larkin's work. For if Alvarez feels that the "disease" of English culture is "gentility", a legion of his contemporaries would say that there is a less local, culturally more international one: despair. And if Larkin is a poet who feels that reality deep within the reaches of his imagination, he also writes in a tradition of art which knows that the physical world is not dead yet, and therein lies a paradoxically slim but nonetheless great hope for us all. And while it is true that the perspective of Confessional poetry may well be the one which will break through darkness into a sudden discovery of light, it is the tradition of a poetry of the physical world to which Larkin belongs that has so far achieved the most durable reclamation of meaning

during and after the disillusioning decades of the first half of the century. Given that knowledge we can conclude that "The greatest poverty is not to live/ In a physical world."¹⁴

(B) Poetry of the Physical World: An Emerging Tradition

Three major contemporary British poets, Thom Gunn, Ted Hughes, and R. S. Thomas, although each in their own way radically different from Philip Larkin and from each other, are all similar in their shared conviction that "The greatest poverty is not to live/ In a physical world." We have already seen how conventional it is to consider Larkin and Hughes as opposite in sensibility,¹⁵ and one supposes that the conjunction of an Anglican Vicar with a poet, who writes about motorcyclists and Elvis Presley is a combination which could insult anyone who worries about the neatness of the human mind. But in a shared conviction that the physical world must be attended to anew as a vitalizing stimulus to poetry, these poets belong to a distinct tradition of a poetry of the physical world which is emerging in Britain today. Indeed, theirs is the poetry which stands not only as an option for meaning which the Confessional tradition has failed to embody, but could be said to represent a kind of survival of consciousness past the Modernist tradition which gives to their work one of its most compelling traits.

It is a tradition of poetry which includes, as we have noted in detail in Larkin's work, an empirical alertness of intelligence, and a willingness to resist all ideas and/or myth which is not borne out by, or does not emerge from, the act of witness to the living world. Significantly, all of these poets conspire to reduce form below the level of content, to use craft as a way of directing the reader outward in a curious and/or beholding glance. If there are early twentieth century influences behind their work, they are the influences of the Imagists and of D. H. Lawrence. And while one must take much care to respect the individual achievement of each of these poets -- they are intensely explorative writers in their separate ways -- it is fair to characterize the tradition as one which, in its retrieval of the physical world as stimulus to poetry, is also one which retrieves a sense of wonder in both the physical universe and the human world. Consequently, its most striking aspect of sensibility could be said to be its movement past the sunlessness of The Wasteland tradition.

That courageous and difficult distinction is one which is achieved in spite of immense doubts which, like Larkin, all of these poets live with as sensitive and intelligent artists in an unsettled and unsettling time. The Wasteland heritage of our culture is a heritage they know well. But just as in some ways the Confessionals could be said to be victims of it, these poets attempt to move past it by way of a new trust in meaning, or at least the potential for meaning

in the physical world. This, it can be claimed, is their only complete act of faith thus far. But given the all but terminal pessimism of the Modernist and Confessional alternative, it is as we have said of Larkin's work as whole, a paradoxically slim but nonetheless great hope. In his "Human Condition", Gunn's speaker says, "Particular, I must/ Find out the limitation/ Of mind and universe", and that:

I seek, to break, my span.
I am my one touchstone.
This is a test more hard
Than any ever known.¹⁶

The poets of this emerging tradition all "seek, to break" that "span" -- to transcend meaningless subjectivism -- and discover in the physical world, an intelligibility which is redemptive. They seek to realize moments of epiphany which suffice as a complex answer to the meaninglessness by which their time and their culture is threatened. While they are not reconciled or atoned artists, they are unwilling to submit to easy despair. In short, they share with Larkin an exploratory negative capability, one which is rewarded by the flashes of light which sparkle amidst the surrounding darkness of their time.

Ted Hughes' work is animated by a living consciousness of the physical world. That consciousness is characterized by its curiosity about the instinctual, energetic, and natural aspects of reality. Hughes shares with Lawrence the notion that the realm of thought is stale by comparison to

the deep and quick mystery of the living cosmos. Hughes renders as alive everything his poetry beholds -- from the smallest of creatures to the physical universe conceived as a pulsating whole. He has a lop-sided reputation for being a poet of will in spite of the fact that his own comments on poetry can be seen as embodying a kind of respect for the otherness of the world, is quite intent on subduing the will in the name of pointing to the mystery of which he constantly speaks.

Natural energy animates Ted Hughes' poems to the extent that they often take on an uncanny life of their own. As Anthony Thwaite has said, "There is a profusion of creatures in Hughes' work, almost a modern bestiary",¹⁷ and they are enlivened with the flash of instinct, the quick move of surviving nature. As a result the poems are often considered by critics and reviewers to be violent, and prurient about violence.¹⁸ But if we momentarily trust the teller and not his critics, there is an aspect of his animal poems which Hughes himself can illuminate for us. In his Poetry in the Making, he has said that "Maybe my concern has been to capture not animals particularly and not poems, but simply things which have a vivid life of their own,"¹⁹ a comment which resonates backwards throughout much of what I have been saying of Larkin's poetry of "Agnostic Wonder". In his advice to school children on how to write animal poems, Hughes has said:

The one thing is, imagine what you are writing about. See it and live it. Do not think it up laborously, as if you were working

out mental arithmetic. Just look at it, touch it, smell it, listen to it, turn yourself into it.

He goes on to say that if the poet does this, the craft of the poem almost takes care of itself and; "You will read back through what you have written and you will get a shock. You will have captured a spirit, a creature."²⁰ All of this recalls Larkin's poetic, his notion that every poem should "be its own sole freshly created universe",²¹ and be written from what surrounds one, rather than from a "concept of poetry".²² Larkin and Hughes share the conviction that "art" is secondary to content, and that content should be the content of the world. Different though they may otherwise be as poets, they are conjoined by a poetic which echoes Stevens' notion that, "The real is only the base. But it is the base."²³

The advice which Hughes gives the aspiring poet, the stress he puts on the need to go past the ego to the object in an intimate way, is borne out as accomplished fact in his own poetry:

More than to the visionary his cell:
His stride is wilderness of freedom:
The world rolls under the long thrust of his heel.
Over the cage floor the horizons come.

("The Jaguar")²⁴

Pike, three inches long, perfect
Pike in all parts, green and tigering the gold.
Killers from the egg: the malevolent aged grin.
They dance on the surface among the flies.

Or move, stunned by their own grandeur,
 Over a bed of emerald, silhouette
 Of submarine delicacy and horror,
 A hundred feet long in their world.

("Pike")²⁵

The briefest of quotes give testimony to Hughes' ability to capture "a spirit, a creature". In both examples above, the speaker's perspective is from deep within the dramatic inscape of the creature itself. It is the product of an ability to capture mystery as fact, rather than as concept searching for supporting symbol. "Bull Moses" is one of Hughes' finest examples of this ability at work.

In "Bull Moses" the speaker looks into a barn, into a "Blaze of darkness" toward the bull, which he sees in "a sudden shut-eyed look/ Backward into the head". He registers a quick and sharp moment of epiphany; "Blackness is depth/ Beyond star." In that moment, he welds the deep mystery of the bull's primitive being with that of his own dark recesses of mind, and with the ramifying and dark eternity past the stars. While putting the moment into paraphrase robs it of its dramatic flash, the prodding is worthwhile if it shows to the reader Hughes' remarkable ability to evoke, perhaps one should say allow, a deep and deepening epiphany to rise from the physical world. The poem proceeds in an evocation of the intractable weight and largeness of the creature, and ends with the speaker seeing:

something

Deliberate in his leisure, some beheld future.
 Founding in his quiet.

26

I kept the door wide,
 Closed it after him and pushed the bolt.

The poem moves from a moment of primitive fright, through a sense of mystery, to the partly humorous respect of the close. The dark epiphany, in its potential for both a sense of awe, and a sense of thick void, is reminiscent of Larkin's conclusion to "High Windows", where the emptiness startles the speaker into a recognition of something obscurely profound.

Hughes' moments of wonder rise constantly out of his preoccupation with the primitive aspects of being -- emerge from his sense of the physical, elemental context of life. His more negative critics are distracted from some of the effects of his poetry by the ostensible nihilism of his Crow persona. But Hughes' Crow, rather than being merely a nihilistic projection of Hughes himself, "flying the black flag of himself",²⁷ is ironically a vibrantly creative force. In the universe of the Crow volume, the Crow is energetic, certainly humorous, and above all, an agitator, an agent of perception, pestering the issues of Creation, shocking the reader into confronting the universe in a fresh way. Hence,

Crow saw the herded mountains, steaming in the morning.
 And he saw the sea
 Dark-spined, with the whole earth in its coils.
 He saw the stars, fuming away into the black, mushrooms of
 the nothing forest, clouding their spores, the virus of God.
 And he shivered with the horror of Creation.²⁸

Even lines like these, "horror of Creation" included, are energetic. The dramatic, thunderous grasp of the universe itself, is fresh and startling. Although the registration of the "stars" as "mushrooms of/ the nothing forest" is an unsettling image, the effect of the image is to lift, albeit violently, the "veil of familiarity". And if the "wonder of our being"²⁹ which it gestures at is a somewhat black wonder, it is for all of that an achieved one, and, one might add, preferable to the darkness without wonder which has made up such a large part of our imaginative heritage since The Wasteland. Hughes' Crow flies, perhaps, directly out of the primeval night of Shakespeare's MacBeth ("Light thickens and the crow/ Makes wing to the rooky wood."³⁰), and if we can put him in kind with Shakespeare's creature, we can grant to him an ability to evoke a sense of dread as an imaginative state prefatory to the most edifying of realizations. Hughes once said that the "whole art of writing is to make your reader's imagination go into action"³¹ and the Crow poems definitely manage that effect. The cumulative effect of the volume, viewed from the perspective of a cultural context in which many are still waiting for the end in an anodyne state of dogmatic pessimism, is a comparatively lively one.

And another crucial point is called for in this context. We have seen that the price which Larkin has paid in the critical world for turning up unsettling epiphanies is an unjust one. As an exploratory poet, Hughes is in the danger of being mistaken as a poet of the void in the same way that

Larkin's "romantic reviewers"³² have mistaken him. The error rises, as we know, from isolating the unsettled moments and calling them the representative ones. But to continue the analogy to Larkin further, Hughes can also be seen as a poet of temporary wonder, a writer who never really concludes his work into the "nailing down"³³ process of categorical conviction which Lawrence saw as deadly. To use Larkin's coinage, there is no "myth-kitty"³⁴ in Hughes' work of that order. So that even if Hughes entertains a large and horrifying prospect for meaning in Crow (a moot point in itself), it must be placed in juxtaposition with his more assuredly edifying perceptions or epiphanies. Like Larkin, Hughes is above all a poet of wonder, and is similarly agnostic in his wonder. While there are epiphanies of existential shock in his chronicle of moments, there are also ones of compelling light, ones of intellect-defeating mystery.

That is the usual dimension of the Hughes poem. His grasp of the basic wisdom of Lawrence's sense of the cosmos as a presence, and as a mystery, gives to his work a power which most critical exegesis will always run behind. From that point of view, his "Wind" is a striking example. In the context of this poem, Stevens' notion that "Poetry increases the feeling for reality",³⁵ is borne out as a substantial truth:

This house has been far out at sea all night,
The woods crashing through darkness, the booming hills,
Winds stampeding the fields under the window
Floundering black astride and blinding wet

Till day rose; then under an orange sky
 The hills had new places, and wind wielded
 Blade-like, luminous black and emerald,
 Flexing like the lens of a mad eye.

At noon I scaled along the house-side as far as
 The coal-house door. Once I looked up--
 Through the brunt wind that dented the balls of my eyes
 The tent of the hills drummed and strained its guyrope,

The fields quivering, the skyline a grimace,
 At any second to bang and vanish with a flap:
 The wind flung a magpie away and a black-
 Back gull bent like an iron bar slowly. The house

Rang like some fine green goblet in the note
 That any second would shatter it. Now deep
 In chairs, in front of the great fire, we grip
 Our hearts and cannot entertain book, thought,

Or each other. We watch the fire blazing,
 And feel the roots of the house move, but sit on,
 Seeing the window tremble to come in,
 Hearing the stones cry out under the horizons.³⁶

The strong actuality of the poem, its ability to present the universe in convulsion, gives it a stark physicality which makes the fact of the event inseparable from the idea which it discovers. In Poetry in the Making Hughes has said: "In writing that poem I was mainly concerned with the strength of the blast, the way it seems to shake the world up like a box of toys."³⁷ It is because of this initially mimetic intention, that the poem's theme seems to rise inevitably from its physical setting, is not abstracted, and therefore manages a naturally symbolic effect. The craft of the poem is in its apposite diction, its appropriately strong verbs, for instance, and in its enjambed syntax, a syntax which mimes the action of the wind itself. The ravelled landscape and the threatened buildings stand as symbols of

the fragility of human creations in the midst of elemental forces. The wind's crying "out under the horizon" presents both the whistle of the wind's intensity, and its primitive hold on the less civilized aspects of being. From a very common natural event, Hughes manages to behold a sudden epiphany, one which dramatically presents the reader with a sudden sense of humanity's fragile grip on existence. That precarious tenure is symbolically centred on the figure who scales along the coal-house door, and in the quiet placing of the figures around the fire in a huddle which evokes an image of frightened primitive ancestors hiding in the cave, away from the blast of nature.

Hughes finds something refreshing about this ability to witness nature with open attention again, to behold it in an engaged manner, rather than simply mine it for symbol, as the Modernists tended to do. He has spoken of the value of this kind of witness in a comment he has made regarding "wild" landscapes:

Civilization is comparatively new, it is still a bit of a strain on our nerves--it is not quite a home to mankind yet, we still need occasional holidays back in the old surroundings. It is only there that ancient instincts and feelings in which most of our body lives can feel at home and on their own ground. It is almost as though these places were generators where we can recharge our run-down batteries. And what do we recharge with, what sort of electricity? Those prehistoric feelings, satisfactions we are hardly aware of except as a sensation of pleasure--these are like a blood transfusion to us, and in wild surroundings they rise to the surface and refresh us, renew us. For some people, even to think about such places is a refreshment.³⁸

What for many is only the terrifying, the dreadful without edificatory reward, is for Hughes the very source of the fresh and the wondrous. His driving curiosity about the world, and his fundamental grasp of the creaturehood of the human, while leading him toward a perception of the violence of nature, also leads him to a highly individual sense of primitive wonder. It is not a sense of wonder which leads to quiescence or religious conversion. As in the case of Larkin, it leads to the flash of peculiar beauty which is occasionally the reward of the exceptionally alert poet, the poet who is both aware of the darker aspects of life, and yet awake to the beauty which the world still sparkles forth. Among other things, the greatness of poetry, for Hughes, lies in its power to express what he has termed:

Something of the spirit of the snowflake in the water of the river. Something of the duplicity and relativity and the merely fleeting quality of all this. Something of the almighty importance of it and something of the utter meaninglessness.³⁹

In that comment Hughes indicates the essential negative capability of his mind, and at the same time, his wondrous perspective on existence. There is nothing in the comment, or the poetry itself, which will satisfy the "nailing down" instincts of the critic. Additionally, if there is at all a religious dimension to the view, it is like Larkin's, an agnostic one. For Hughes, there is no sufficiency of evidence which he has collected for the making of a case regarding either the imbecility of Creation, or for its harmonious

beneficence. His view is open, and in the kind of intelligence which it embodies, it recollects Larkin's poised tentativeness at the end of "High Windows". In that moment the blue sky is registered as being "Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless",⁴⁰ a precarious tumble of mysteriously compelling beauty, and an "utter meaninglessness". Starting with a faith in the empirical imagination and a recognition of the possibility of meaning in the physical world, both poets accumulate a sense of existence which is wondrous. In both instances, a retrieval of the physical world as a vital stimulus to poetry correspondingly brings with it a retrieval of a sense of wonder which the Imagists, and more especially in this case, D. H. Lawrence, knew well.

It might initially seem odd to readers of Larkin's poetry that R. S. Thomas would be in any way considered similar to Larkin. Recollecting, for instance, Larkin's scathing comments on "myth-kitty", and realizing that Thomas is one of the most intensely searching religious poets of our time, a poet who is also obsessively interested in biblical myth, would seem to place them, in sensibility, as far apart as it initially appears that Hughes and Larkin are. But again, the connection is in the energetic base of the poetry in the physical world.

Thomas is interested in myth, but there is a difference between his use of myth and that of, say, T. S. Eliot's. It is a difference which is hinted at by John Press in Rule and Energy, where he says that "Thomas' faith is rooted in

the soil of Wales, and also in the earth, which is our element, our planet, our home."⁴¹ That description, in spite of those critics who insist on seeing Larkin as parochial and those who see Hughes as merely violent, unwittingly describes the sense of the physical basis of human existence which is shared by all of the poets in this emerging tradition. For them, the "earth" is "our element, our planet, our home". Like Hughes and Larkin, Thomas writes directly from the physical world, and the cumulative effect of his poetry is one which gives back to the reader, a sense of cosmic wonder. That effect is never achieved in the mere realm of the abstract, is always the result of Thomas' ability to sharply draw the human figure in the midst of the recognizable physical universe. Hence, when John Press, for example, praises the sharpness of Thomas' style, he describes it as intensely realistic. The poetry, he says, is characterized by a "harshness and pungency of concept and phrase", and it is as though Thomas is always "paring away the surplus flesh of epithet and of explanation, stripping the language to the bone".⁴² What Press is here saying is borne out in the poetry itself, and also in Thomas' view of poetry as we find him express it in the title poem of Poetry For Supper (1967)⁴³ written four years after Press had made these comments. In that poem, Thomas presents in dialogue form the tension he sees as needed between the fact of the physical world and the poet's imagination:

'Listen, now, verse should be as natural
 As the small tuber that feeds on muck
 And grows slowly from obtuse soil
 To the white flower of immortal beauty.'

'Natural, hell! What was it Chaucer
 Said once about the long toil
 That goes like blood to the poem's making?
 Leave it to nature and the verse sprawls,
 Limp as bindweed, if it break at all
 Life's iron crust. Man, you must sweat
 And rhyme your guts taut, if you'd build
 Your verse a ladder.'

'You speak as though
 No sunlight ever surprised the mind
 Groping on its cloudy path.'

'Sunlight's a thing that needs a window
 Before it enter a dark room.
 Windows don't happen.'

So two old poets,
 Hunched at their beer in the low haze
 Of an inn parlour, while the talk ran
 Noisily by them, glib with prose.

Where Thomas stands in this argument is in the precarious middle. Constantly, in his work, he manages to capture the "sunlight" which seems to surprise "the mind/ Groping on its cloudy path", even though we know (because of the scrupulous craft of his poems), that it is an effect which is managed because each of the individual poems is also a "window". Often, the window provided is an Imagist one, not only in its recreation of a pictorially visible world, but in its moments of sudden epiphany. Hence, "A Peasant" is a somewhat typical poem in that its strategy of discovery is outward to the physical world, and its motion is rewarded with epiphany. A perception of the horrifying vacancy which is latent in Welsh rural life leads the speaker toward a feeling

of emptiness and fright, but that initial observation is amended in the concluding image of the poem. It is an image which has a sharp placing effect, and comes with the flash of surprise which "Poetry For Supper" spoke of:

There is something frightening in the vacancy of his
mind.

His clothes, sour with years of sweat
And animal contact, shock the refined,
But affected, sense their stark naturalness.
Yet this is your prototype, who, season by season
Against seige of rain and the wind's attrition,
Preserves his stock, an impregnable fortress
Not to be stormed even in death's confusion.
Remember him then, for he, too, is a winner of wars,
Enduring like a tree under the curious stars.⁴⁴

In both Larkin's poetry and Thomas' there is an openness to experience which is rewarded by a perception of mystery in the fact of the human world, one which firmly transcends the limitations of less kindly abstractions. Significantly, both poets choose the complex methods of the Imagists to relate that mystery in their work.

In the sudden, rising picture of the peasant as "Enduring like a tree under the curious stars", Thomas' effect recalls Pound's definition of the Image. Additionally, in its sure rendition of small humanity, it also recalls Larkin's uses of vorticistic design, especially at the end of "The Whitsun Weddings", where the couples are seen as "an arrow-shower/ Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain".⁴⁵ In both instances a recognition of the beauty and the mystery of the human being is registered, after an initial chagrin is subdued. Both poets use the complex

method of the Imagists to relate that mystery in their work.

"Lowri Dafydd", another of Thomas' rural poems, is also reminiscent of the Imagists. It recalls the kind of sensitivity which Pound managed in "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter":

My name is Lowri Dafydd;
Famous for nursing I was.
I rode pillion on a winged horse
Through the high passes of cloud
To come to a queen's palace.
Airy fingers undid the knot
In time's stubborn bandage
About my green eyes.
Who knows how long I stayed?
My pay was the sweet talk
In sun-dusted rooms
Of folk, busy as flowers,
Praising my hands' skill.
When I returned, stars were out
Over my roof, the door fallen
About its hinges, and on the hearth
A cold wind blowing for ever.⁴⁷

The concluding lines, in their naturally symbolic effect, and the poem's resistance against allusion and difficult erudition, perfectly matches Larkin's notion that a poem should be free of obscure clutter. The world of observation, the physical world as it manifests itself to the sensitive consciousness, is at the center of Thomas' poetry. And when his themes are not directly growing out of actual witness, the physical world is nonetheless closely involved in the figurative starkness of his language.

In the more recent poetry, that, for instance, of his volume H'm (1972),⁴⁸ Thomas moves outward from his usual theme of rural Welsh life, to deal in a manner which recalls

Hughes, with the drama of Creation itself. There is an energy released in that volume which is the energy of religious impatience. Thomas has always been a poet of doubt. His early poem "In Church" is one which captures that kind of spiritual ambiguity in its presentation of a pestered believer:

There is no other sound
In the darkness but the sound of a man
Breathing, testing his faith
On emptiness, nailing his questions
One by one to an untenanted cross.⁴⁹

The drama of Thomas' doubt takes place on a larger stage in the H'm volume. That stage is the entire physical universe. It is for this reason that it shares with Hughes' Crow a dimension of awe and dread which links their achievements, despite other differences. The religious dimension of his work shares with Hughes an unsettled quality. Additionally, Thomas' preoccupation with myth is one which is in constant dialogue with the fact of the physical universe. There is a willingness to explore, an openness in his concern with both mythology and the physical world. He is a poet quite willing to expel all forms of myth if they do not match the experiential fact of the world. Indeed, one can say that the main tension in his more recent religious poetry is between a Christian myth which he fears to be almost extinct, and a physical universe which is equally perceived as on the verge of collapse. This gives to his work a sense of urgency, a dimension of cosmic drama which takes it far past the form of

religious torpor which Larkin claimed for established religion in "Aubade", where he termed it a "vast moth-eaten musical brocade".⁵⁰ Thomas is a poet who deals with religious myth, but deals with it as placed in constant relevance to the contemporary experiential world. His is not a poetry of "myth-kitty"⁵¹ so much as a poetry that intently explores the relation of myth to contemporary fact. Thus, in "Making" there is an attempt to animate Genesis with a new liveliness by way of giving the reader a dramatic sense of the physical universe as alive and profound, not as only abstracted into "myth-kitty":

And having built it
 I set about furnishing it
 To my taste: first moss, then grass
 Annually renewed, and animals
 To divert me: faces stared in
 From the wild. I thought up the flowers
 Then birds. I found the bacteria
 Sheltering in primordial
 Darkness and called them forth
 To the light. Quickly the earth
 Teemed. Yet still an absence
 Disturbed me. I slept and dreamed
 Of a likeness, fashioning it,
 When I woke, to a slow
 Music; in love with it
 For itself, giving it freedom
 To love me; risking the disappointment.⁵²

It is Thomas' ability to dramatize the Creation myth which gives to H'm a power of existential suddenness, one which, if different in starting point, is effectively similar to that which we have noticed in Hughes' and Larkin's capacity for invoking the living presence of the physical universe. The enjambed sharpness of that line; "Quickly the earth/ Teemed.",

is characteristic of the volume's enlivened sense of the thunder of Creation. In its religious theme, this particular poem is relatively quiet in tone, manages a graceful effect in its concluding lines, but the volume contains more troubled poems, ones which bespeak the doubt which is so central to the paradigmatic "In Church". In "Via Negativia", for instance, God is seen as He who "keeps the interstices/ In our knowledge, the darkness/ Between stars".⁵³ In that poem God is given as an absence, an annoying incompleteness which we search for in vain. And in "Soliloquy", God is configured as a violent, Old Testament avenger, who looks down on his now materialistic, Machine-worshipping Creation, and decides to erase his error, to poison his work with "invisible/ Viruses"⁵⁴ -- which could be as general as pollution, or as specific as cancer. The total effect of the volume is one in which the fact of the physical world is dramatically placed in the context of a larger cosmic reality and viewed from an eschatological perspective. Because it is a volume of doubt, and also intermittently one of momentary reconciliation, the upshot is one which is intensely explorative. When John Press said that Thomas' poetry deals with "our element, our planet, our home", he didn't know at the time that Thomas would eventually move past the locus point of Wales to a locus point of the physical world as alive in space itself, viewed in the wide expanse of time which reaches from the immediate present to that far past which is almost inconceivable. Thomas' pictorial grasp of the Welsh

countryside has now grown to a vision of the entire universe.

The poetry of Thomas' H'm volume is more mythical, more visionary than his preceding volumes, and its ostensible base is not so immediately in the physical world as we find it was in the earlier volumes. Yet, in another sense it is more profoundly connected to the physical world than any of his other books, in that the universe itself, the planet and its position in the created cosmos, is the large frame of perception, or basic perspective, which the volume takes as its widened attention. As with Hughes' Crow volume, the cumulative effect of Thomas' volume is to give the reader an enlivened sense of his identity as a creature in the midst of an awesome, if at times dreadful, cosmos. The retrieval of the physical world and the physical universe as imaginative fact and as imaginative stimulus is at the expansive base of both of their visions, different as they might be in the temper of their myths.

Thomas' most recent volume, Frequencies (1978)⁵⁵ is, if we were to trust Colin Falck's judgement, a volume of all but terminal despair,⁵⁶ though from one point of view it also appears to be simply another intense step along the road of Thomas' exploration of the dark side of the soul. It is, of course, futile to guess where this journey will eventually lead him, but if pressed to respond to this very recent tendency in his poetry, we could refer to his "The Moon In LLeyn", a poem in which, after the speaker comes to the conclusion that "Religion is over" in the lengthy first stanza, the

motion of thought turns to a different direction. And it does so as a result of an attentive reading of the hints suggested to him by the church which he observes from the place he is standing, the physical universe in which he lives:

But a voice sounds
in my ear: Why so fast,
mortal? These very seas
are baptised. The parish
has a saint's name time cannot
unfrock. In cities that
have outgrown their promise people
are becoming pilgrims
again, if not to this place,
then to the recreation of it
in their own spirits. You must remain
kneeling. Even as this moon
making its way through the earth's
cumbersome shadow, prayer, too,
has its phases.⁵⁷

Thomas shares with Hughes and Larkin not only an empirical intensity, a basic disposition of imaginative witness, but an ability to perceive life as lived in a physical universe, a universe which is dramatically sensed in all of its dreadful, and at times wonderful, largeness and spectacle. In a very real sense he is the least likely poet to include in the tradition we are referring to, primarily because his concerns with Christian myth might make him appear to be a more abstract writer than the other three. Nonetheless, if the others can be loosely termed poets of wonder without religion, the experience of Thomas' poetry is one in which the reader grows to the conviction that this is a poet for whom religion is nought unless it can find evidence for

wonder in the fact of the physical world. Thus, while he is a poet of profound doubt -- as are the others -- he turns constantly to the plane of the physical for the wondrous sustenance of his faith. If, as we have found in the work of Larkin and Hughes, he also turns up moments of deep existential chagrin, the balance is in the continual righting by his moments of more edifying wonder. "Night Sky", from his recent Frequencies, is a poem which in a compelling way says much about Thomas' perspective on both religion and the physical world:

What they are saying is
that there is life there, too;
that the universe is the size it is
to enable us to catch up.

They have gone on from the human;
that shining is a reflection
of their intelligence. Godhead
is the colonisation by mind

of untenanted space. It is its own
light, a statement beyond language
of conceptual truth. Every night
is a rinsing myself of the darkness

that is in my veins. I let the stars inject me
with fire, silent as it is far,
but certain in its cauterising
of my despair. I am a slow

traveller, but there is more than time
to arrive. Resting in the intervals
of my breathing, I pick up the signals
relayed to me from a periphery I comprehend. 58

The middle portion of this poem gives us the Anglican Vicar's statement of the wondrous aspect of the physical heavens, one which Lawrence, Larkin, and Hughes all know as

spiritually invigorating past all forms of abstract thought. As the speaker says, "Every night/ is a rinsing myself of the darkness/ that is in my veins", and in a comment which is bound to recall our version of Larkin's antidote to despair, the following lines make the two more in kin than any division on the grounds of religion can contain:

I let the stars inject me
with fire, silent as it is far,
but certain in its cauterizing
of my despair. I am a slow

traveller, but there is more than time
to arrive. Resting in the intervals
of my breathing, I pick up the signals
relayed to me from a periphery I comprehend.

Thomas' wonder is not an agnostic one, but in its openness to the wondrous visage of the physical world, and its agitation by doubts, it is consonant with the precarious -- yet paradoxically strong -- sense of wonder which both Larkin and Hughes similarly convey in their poetry of the physical world.

Thom Gunn and Ted Hughes are the two poets in this tradition who are most often assumed to be similar. Their reputations for celebrating the will, for what Patrick Swinden has called in Gunn "a sort of poetic thuggery",⁵⁹ gives a kind of logic to Faber and Faber's publication of a combined selection of their work.⁶⁰ But Gunn's poetry has gone through an interesting change in emphasis in the past twenty years. And what is important to our interests here is the fact that there is a notable shift in his work away

from the early poetry of "poetic thuggery" and toward a poetry of the physical world. Gunn is a poet whose reputation for a thematic concern with subjective will and lonely psychology can easily distract the reader from this more recent shift toward an essentially Lawrentian and Imagist emphasis on the need to find a stimulus for art in the visage of the external world.

Of his early volume, Fighting Terms (1954),⁶¹ Gunn has said in 1964 that, "there is very little in it that I particularly want to keep",⁶² seeing that volume now as an immature one. The shift in Gunn's attention away from studies in sheer will, and toward the healing otherness of the world might well have its base in the kind of learning process we can witness if we read his reviews in The Yale Review. One, of course, never knows the full logic of a poet's development, is often guessing as gracefully as possible in these matters. But a review article which he wrote in 1964 is particularly interesting, given the kind of outwardly moving, more empirically based poetry he has been writing since roughly that time forward.

That review, which ranges across the work of five contemporary poets, addresses the question of the contemporary value of the Modernist experiment, despite its characteristic limitations. He says:

The only assumption shared by the poets who have emerged in the last ten or fifteen years is that they do not want to continue the

(revolution inaugurated by Pound and finally made respectable by the learned commentaries on the Four Quartets. Yet nobody has pretended that, once the revolution was abandoned, it was possible simply to take up where Hardy left off, as if the experiments of Pound and Eliot had never taken place. Clearly we must, without embodying the revolution, attempt to benefit from it, to understand its causes and study its mistakes.⁶³

What Gunn finds to be the strength of the "revolution" is a health which he associates with that aspect of the Modernist revolution which has its roots in the Imagist tradition, namely, the concern for what he terms, "exact delineation of the external world".⁶⁴ That concern is one which he finds central to the contemporary poets whose work he is reviewing, especially that of Alan Stephens. This is not at all to say that Gunn himself wishes to adopt completely the style of the Imagists. Like the other poets we have dealt with, the influence is one which is transmuted into wider interests, and blended with other very individual habits of style and language. Gunn ultimately finds the Imagists to have been too mute when it comes to the world of abstraction. In another context, an interview in The London Magazine, he has stated that a limitation of the Imagists was their absorption in the particular. And speaking of Robert Bly's poetry, he has said:

I certainly don't want to be like Robert Bly, who is writing purely in terms of particulars, and I don't want to be an Imagist, which is something rather close.⁶⁵

The single attribute of the Modernist revolution~~er~~ which Gunn admires is the basic epistemological cast of the poetry of the Imagist tradition. Very like Larkin, Gunn scorns the obscurity of the Symbolist tradition, while cautiously admiring the fundamentally empirical base of the Imagist example.

This relatively new respect for the empirical has interesting consequences for Gunn's poetry in the more recent volumes. In both Moly (1971)⁶⁶ and Jack Straw's Castle (1976)⁶⁷, Gunn turns exploratively outward to the physical world, and finds a "health howsoever brief"⁶⁸ in the contemplation of its presence. In both volumes there is an energetic attempt to transcend the self, to break the "span" of which he spoke in "Human Condition", by enacting a precept which he has attributed to Albert Camus; namely, that "the attempt to look outwards is more important than expression of self".⁶⁹ The title poem of Moly (1971)⁷⁰ could be seen as the expression of a poetic resolve in this regard. The swine/man persona searches for his humanity in nature by seeking the magic herb:

I root and root, you think that it is greed,
It is, but I seek out a plant I need.

Direct me gods, whose changes are all holy,
To where it flickers deep in grass, the moly:

Cool flesh of magic in each leaf and shoot,
From milky flower to the black forked root.

From this fat dungeon I could rise to skin
And human title, putting pig within.

I push my big grey wet snout through the green,
Dreaming the flower I have never seen.

This is not at all like the poetry of the physical world which we have been speaking of thus far, but it is a pivotal poem in the volume because of its expressed desire for a kind of healing, a "health howsoever brief". And though some would see the metaphor of the moly as a reference to Gunn's interest in drug-culture, it is striking that the "flower" he refers to above, becomes the sun in the poem "Sunlight", which ends the volume. That is, if the healing at all takes place in the volume, it is the result of a receptivity to something very like a Lawrentian "living organic connection" with the physical world. "Sunlight" is thus a poem which puts us in mind of Larkin's "Solar".

Some things, by their affinity light's token,
Are more than shown: steel glitters from a track;
Small glinting scoops, after a wave has broken,
Dimple the water in its draining back;

Water, glass, metal, match light in their raptures,
Flashing their many answers to the one.
What captures light belongs to what it captures:
The whole side of a world facing the sun,

Re-turned to woo the original perfection,
Giving itself to what created it,
And wearing green in sign of its subjection.
It is as if sun were infinite.

But angry flaws are swallowed by the distance;
It varies, moves, its concentrated fires
Are slowly dying--the image of persistence
Is an image, only, of our own desires:

Desires and knowledge touch without relating.
The system of which sun and we are part
Is both imperfect and deteriorating.
And yet the sun outlasts us at the heart.

Great seedbed, yellow centre of the flower,
Flower on its own, without a root or stem,

Giving all colour and all shape their power,
Still recreating in defining them,

Enable us, altering like you, to enter
Your passionless love, impartial but intense,
And kindle in acceptance round your centre,
Petals of light lost in your innocence.⁷¹

A remarkable thing about this poem is that it moves toward praise and reconciliation, while at the same time resisting the purely sentimental. It is very contemporary in its realization that the sun is limited, is part of a universe which is "both imperfect and deteriorating". The picture of the sun's relation to earth which is given in the first three stanzas is a nostalgic one, is in fact Medieval. The next two stanzas are there as antithetical, betraying the more poetic view of the universe which the previous ones have so happily evoked. The only way to characterize the concluding stanzas is to say that, despite the potential for crippling scepticism in the knowledge of the middle stanzas, a moment of beauty is nonetheless achieved. The wonder which is recorded is of a limited, passing order -- much like that we have seen in Larkin's work. The Lawrentian dimension of the poem shows in the expression of a desire for a healing "organic connection" with the physical universe, an attempt to retrieve a sense of the cosmos as living fact. But, as in Larkin's and Hughes' work, there is no "nailing down" of the moment into myth or religion. The "momentaneous" connection with -- to again recall Lawrence's words -- "the center of all things" is, let alone as important

unto itself.⁷² Gunn's desire to participate in the living presence of the sun makes for a moment of mysterious epiphany which transcends any abstraction which might dilute the effect of the moment. It is better left as a moment, a "pheasant disappearing in the brush".⁷³ The important thing is that the moment is recognized as wondrous and recorded faithfully. In terms of its relation to other poems in his chronicle, it stands as a flash of light next to the earlier, more despondent poems, such as "The Annihilation of Nothing", where the speaker says:

It is despair that nothing cannot be
Flares in the mind and leaves a smoky mark
Of dread.

Look upward. Neither firm nor free,
Purposeless matter hovers in the dark.⁷⁴

Gunn's development as a poet is to a large extent one which moves past just such a despondency at the prospect of meaninglessness, and into a discovery of "momentaneous" relationships with the physical world. Interestingly, they quite often take a form analogous to the moments of "pure relationship"⁷⁵ which we are familiar with in Larkin's work.

A willingness to participate in the world which surrounds him, continues in Gunn's most recent volume, Jack Straw's Castle (1976). As a volume it is varied in its themes; they range from a preoccupation with California drug-culture, to the turmoil of personal subjectivism. Many of the poems are, as Derwent May says, about the "lightness and balance of the

body",⁷⁶ or we might add, have a Lawrencian respect for all forms of rhythmic human connection with the world. Hence, in "Diagrams", there is registered a moment of praise which rises, Larkin-like, immediately from within the immediate, experiential world:

Downtown, an office tower is going up.
And from the mesa of unfinished top
Big cranes jut, spectral points of stiffened net:
Angled top-heavy artefacts, and yet
Diagrams from the sky, as if its air
Could drop lines, snip them off, and leave them there.

On girders round them, Indians pad like cats,
With wrenches in their pockets and hard hats.

They wear their yellow boots like moccasins,
Balanced where air ends and where steel begins,
Sky men, and through the sole's flesh, chewed and pliant,
They feel the studded bone-edge of the giant.
It grunts and sways through its whole metal length.
And giving to the air is sign of strength.⁷⁷

In its graceful appreciation of the kinship of the Indians with the suppleness of the girders, it finds a prosaic at-oneness which is moved into the poetic. In this poem, and in another in the volume, "Iron Landscapes (and the Statue of Liberty)", where he says "I'm at peace with the iron landscape too",⁷⁸ he indicates an opening of his imagination in consent to the industrialized landscape, which Donald Davie has seen as what accounts partly for the health of Larkin's perspective on the world.

The apotheosis of Gunn's recent urge toward an imaginative participation in the physical world comes in the Jack Straw's Castle volume in the long, four-part poem,

"The Geysers".⁷⁹ Throughout the poem the speaker both observes a sense of harmony which the hot springs locale provides, and in the final section, "The Bath House", in opening into appropriate free verse form, recreates the spiritual-sensual, sensual-spiritual transcendence which the bath provides. The poem ends with:

I yielded
 oh, the yield
 what have I slept?
 my blood is yours The hands that take accept

 torn from the self
 in which I breathed and trod
 I am
 I am raw meat
 I am a god.

This might sound literally and figuratively like so much hot steam, were it not for the fact that the entire poem moves slowly and carefully toward the state of being "torn from the self" right from the beginning. The transcendence, that is, is seen as contingent on the speaker's ability to remain openly sensitive to everything which surrounds him. The second section, "The Cool Stream", for instance, is an evocation of a bather's scene, which in its open delight in detail and grasp of the sense of ritual which underlines the event is reminiscent of Larkin's "To the Sea". The entire poem celebrates the scene, and its last stanza is paradigmatic of its appreciative glance:

And some are trying to straddle a floating log,
 Some rest and pass a joint, some climb the fall:
 Tan black and pink, firm shining bodies, all
 Move with a special unconsidered grace,
 For though we have invaded this glittering place
 And broke the silences, yet we submit:
 So wholly, we are details of it.

Earlier, the speaker notices a snake which rears its head from the water. In noting it he says "Tongue-flicker, and a fly has disappeared./ What elegance! it does not watch itself." Subjective consciousness, inward-gazing, self-consciousness, is seen as a destructive act of the mind. The external, physical world is seen as blessedly redemptive of that malady, seen in a Lawrentian manner to have a healing capacity which is everywhere evident in the wondrous glance of Gunn's speakers.

Like Thomas, Hughes, and Larkin, Gunn is a poet who is pestered with doubt and therefore a poet whose flashes of transcendence do not totally erase his existential qualms. But like these other poets, he has reached a juncture where the world is before him as potential surprise, reached a point where, to deflect his words from "The Annihilation of Nothing", when he does "look upward" he sees more than "Purposeless matter". He is as doubting a poet as the others, and is yet similarly capable of an open alertness to the physical world which he prizes as his only guard against meaninglessness. In "A Snow Vision", after the speaker describes a violent storm, he says:

It ends. I open my eyes to snow.
I can sleep now; as I drowse I know.

I must keep to the world's bare surface,
I must perceive, and perceive what is:

for though the hold of perception must
harden but diminish, like the frost,

yet still there may be something retained
against the inevitable end.⁸⁰

In his realistic desire to "perceive what is", and his openness to faith in the "world's bare surface" as source of inspiration, Gunn shares with Thomas, Hughes, and Larkin, an empirical attitude, one which unites them as part of an emerging tradition in contemporary British poetry. The comment which Robert Conquest made in 1956, that the poetry of the Movement poets is "empirical in its attitude to all that comes"⁸¹ has a resonance which now transcends both the time of the fifties, and the confinement of the Movement.

The contemporaneity of this poetry is certain guarantee that no critic can now presume to assess its full implications; the perspective is too much of an immediate one. It is nonetheless gratifying to come toward conclusion with a quote from D. J. Enright. In a comment made some time ago, he partially gave sanction for our insights here. Speaking of the poetry of the "new" poets who would follow the Modernist tradition, he remarked that:

Their poetry, I believe, is likely to be
'disenchanted' - not a poetry of
disillusionment so much as a poetry without

illusions: a poetry of realism, but careful, thoughtful and measured realism, and not a poetry of mere squalor. Not, like Eliot's, the work of a man who has accepted the Fall and all its implications, but certainly the work of a chastened man who sees his species in danger of physical extinction and speaks of what is worthy to be spoken of before the end comes. I suspect that the role of the contemporary poet is not, as Eliot saw it, to make men realize their spiritual shabbiness -- nor, as with the Georgians, to pat them on the back and cheer them up -- but rather, to dissuade mankind from committing suicide. This strikes me as a reasonably important role, and it is to be hoped that our poets -- the poets of all our countries -- will prove adequate to it.⁸²

Enright spoke these words as part of an address given to the English Literary Society of Japan, a quarter of a century ago. Though remote from us in both time and space they are strikingly immediate in their description. Indeed, they seem now to take on a prophetic dimension. The poetry of this tradition we have examined is characterized everywhere by its "thoughtful and measured realism". It is united by a thesis, one well phrased by Stevens when he said that "The greatest poverty is not to live/ In the physical world."⁸³ And while theirs is not a confidently romantic poetry, by comparison to the poetry of the Modernists and the Confessionals, these writers have found a good deal which can better enable us to "endure life" or to "enjoy life".⁸⁴ To that extent, a line which follows Stevens' comment on the physical world provides us with a final statement on the poetry as a whole, and our entire study of it:

The greatest poverty is not to live
In a physical world,

...
This is the thesis scrivined in delight,⁸⁵



NOTES: CHAPTER V.

¹M. L. Rosenthal, The New Poets: American and British Poetry Since World War II (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 7.

²While some would deny this version of modern literature, Rosenthal is not alone in his view. J. Hillis Miller, for instance, succinctly relates the point in his The Disappearance of God (1963; rpt. New York: Schocken Books, 1965). He notes: "One great theme of modern literature is the sense of isolation, of alienation, brought about by man's new situation. We are alienated from God; we have alienated ourselves from nature; we are alienated from our fellow man; and finally, we are alienated from ourselves, the buried life we never seem able to reach (p. 8)." In short, we are separate from the world, caught in a crippling subjectivism --in this view. Miller discusses the same sense of Zeitgeist in his Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-Century Writers (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966).

³Robert Lowell, For the Union Dead (1956; rpt. London: Faber and Faber, 1966), p. 11.

⁴A. Alvarez, The New Poetry (1962; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967).

⁵Philip Larkin, Comment in The Review Symposium. For context, see above, p. 36.

⁶Ibid.

⁷W. H. Auden, "Ode to the Medieval Poets." For context, see above, p. 37.

⁸DHL-CP., p. 515.

⁹Mathew Arnold. As quoted by D. J. Enright. See Note #10 below.

¹⁰D. J. Enright, "The Fountain Of Living Waters," in Literature For Man's Sake (1955; rpt. Tokyo: Norwood Editions, 1976), pp. 188-89.

NOTES CONT'D: CHAPTER V.

¹¹Joyce Carol Oates, in her book on Lawrence's poetry, discusses Lawrence's recognition of the need for an imaginative sense of the world which transcends the subjective ego. She relates that realization to the subjective qualms of Berryman and Plath. See The Hostile Sun: The Poetry of D. H. Lawrence (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1973), pp. 29-34. And M. H. Abrams underlines the tragedy of Sylvia Plath's pain by pointing out that she could see the potential for epiphanic meaning in the external, physical world, yet it was an option which did not work for her. In his Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972), he quotes from her poem "Black Rook in Rainy Weather," (p. 423):

I can't honestly complain:
A certain minor light may still
Leap incandescent

Out of kitchen table or chair
As if celestial burning took
Possession of the most obtuse objects now and then.

Both Oates and Abrams indicate the fact that Plath recognizes a power in the physical world, but it is there as an option for meaning which is--tragically--ultimately suffocated by a more powerful despair.

¹²A. Alvarez, The New Poetry, pp. 31-32.

¹³Ibid., p. 32.

¹⁴Wallace Stevens, "Esthetique du Mal," in The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), p. 325.

¹⁵See above, p. 31.

¹⁶Thom Gunn, The Sense of Movement (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), p. 18.

¹⁷Anthony Thwaite, Twentieth-Century English Poetry (London: Heinemann, 1978), p. 111.

NOTES CONT'D: CHAPTER V.

¹⁸This kind of objection to Hughes' work is well known, but for a particularly urgent condemnation in these terms, see Peter Abbs, The Black Rainbow (London: Heineman Ltd., 1974). For an essay which cites other criticisms couched in these terms, see Claire Hahn, "Crow and the Biblical Creation Narratives," Critical Quarterly, 19 (1977), 43-54.

¹⁹Ted Hughes, Poetry in the Making (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), p. 15. The book is a collection of programmes which Hughes wrote for the BBC "Listening And Writing" series.

²⁰Ibid., p. 18-19.

²¹Philip Larkin, in Poets of the 1950's. For context, see above, p. 98.

²²_____, "Philip Larkin Praises...Hardy." For context, see above, p. 5.

²³Wallace Stevens, Opus Posthumous, ed. Samuel French Morse (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 160.

²⁴Ted Hughes, Selected Poems: 1957-1967 (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 3.

²⁵Ibid., p. 50.

²⁶Ibid., p. 35.

²⁷Ted Hughes, "Crow Blacker Than Ever," in Crow (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 57.

²⁸_____, "Crow Alights," Crow, p. 9.

²⁹M. H. Abrams' Natural Supernaturalism is a book which adeptly relates the survival of the Romantic's insistence on freshness of sensation to modern experience. See especially, Chapter 7, pp. 373-408. So while it might seem a bit odd to speak of Hughes in terms of lifting veils of familiarity, the survival of the strategy is found remarkable by Abrams.

³⁰William Shakespeare, Macbeth, III, ii, ll. 50-51, folio, 1623; rpt. in Alfred Harbage, ed., William Shakespeare:

NOTES CONT'D: CHAPTER V.

The Complete Works (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 1122.

³¹Ted Hughes, Poetry in the Making, p. 43.

³²Philip Larkin, "Four Conversations." For context, see above, p. 19.

³³D. H. Lawrence, "Morality and the Novel." For context, see above, p. 162.

³⁴Philip Larkin, "Four Conversations." For context, see above, p. 98.

³⁵Wallace Stevens, Opus Posthumous, Morse, p. 162.

³⁶Ted Hughes, Selected Poems, p. 13.

³⁷_____, Poetry in the Making, p. 34.

³⁸Ibid., p. 76.

³⁹Ibid., p. 124.

⁴⁰H. W., p. 17.

⁴¹John Press, Rule and Energy (London: Oxford University, 1963), p. 149.

⁴²Ibid., p. 140.

⁴³R. S. Thomas, Poetry For Supper (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1967), p. 34.

⁴⁴R. S. Thomas, in Alvarez's The New Poetry, p. 77.

⁴⁵T. W. W., p. 21.

⁴⁶Ezra Pound, 1926; rpt. in Ezra Pound: Selected Poems (New York: New Directions, 1947), p. 52.

NOTES CONT'D: CHAPTER V.

- 47 R. S. Thomas, Poetry For Supper, p. 20.
- 48 _____, H'm (London: MacMillan, 1972), p. 17.
- 49 _____, Pieta (London: Hart-Davis, 1966), p. 44.
- 50 Philip Larkin, "Aubade," in Times Literary Supplement, 23 December 1977, p. 1491.
- 51 _____, "Four Conversations." For context, see above, p.
- 52 R. S. Thomas, H'm, p. 17.
- 53 _____, H'm, p. 16.
- 54 _____, H'm, p. 30.
- 55 _____, Frequencies (London: MacMillan, 1978).
- 56 See Colin Falck, "Think it over," rev. of Frequencies, The New Review, 5, No. 2 (1978), 120-24. Falck says of these poems: "Beneath their meditative surfaces one can feel an extremity of doubt that could well be called religious despair; and yet a single step further into disbelief and it could all be given back to him again as poetry. The main moral of Frequencies is probably that Christianity has drained the life out of Thomas' (and who can say how many other people's) vision for long enough (122-23)."
- 57 R. S. Thomas, Critical Quarterly, 16 (1974), 5.
- 58 _____, Frequencies, p. 18.
- 59 Patrick Swinden, "Thom Gunn's Castle," rev. of Jack Straw's Castle, Critical Quarterly, 19 (1977), 43.
- 60 Thom Gunn and Ted Hughes, Selected Poems (London: Faber and Faber, 1962).
- 61 Thom Gunn, Fighting Terms (London: Faber and Faber, 1954).

NOTES CONT'D: CHAPTER V.

⁶²_____, "Four Conversations," Interview with Ian Hamilton, London Magazine, 4 (November 1964), 68. Gunn says, "I'm a bit puzzled by the way certain critics--Alvarez is the one I'm thinking of particularly--who likes Fighting Terms more than anything else I've written. I can see that it has a kind of youthful clumsiness, and clumsiness can look like genuineness, but there is very little in it that I would particularly want to keep (68)."

⁶³Thom Gunn, "Modes of Control," The Yale Review, 53 (1964), 447. The poetry reviewed is by: Alan Stephens, Philip Levine, Louis MacNeice, James Wright, and Louis Simpson.

⁶⁴Ibid., 449.

⁶⁵Thom Gunn, "Four Conversations," 65.

⁶⁶_____, Moly (London: Faber and Faber, 1971).

⁶⁷_____, Jack Straw's Castle (London: Faber and Faber, 1976).

⁶⁸The phrase is from a poem (untitled) by Alan Stephens --quoted by Gunn in "Modes of Control," 448.

⁶⁹Thom Gunn, "Modes of Control," 448.

⁷⁰_____, Moly, p. 14.

⁷¹Ibid., p. 53.

⁷²D. H. Lawrence, "Loneliness." For context, see above, p. 174.

⁷³Wallace Stevens, "Adagia," in Opus Posthumous, ed. with intro. by Samuel French Morse (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 173.

⁷⁴Thom Gunn, Poems 1950-1966: A Selection (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), p. 28.

NOTES CONT'D: CHAPTER V.

⁷⁵D. H. Lawrence, "Morality and the Novel." For context, see above, p. 161.

⁷⁶Derwent May, "Burdens," rev. of Jack Straw's Castle, Listener, 25 November 1976, p. 686.

⁷⁷Thom Gunn, Jack Straw's Castle, p. 14.

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 15.

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 27.

⁸⁰Thom Gunn, Poems 1950-1966, p. 43.

⁸¹Robert Conquest, New Lines, p. xv. For context, see above, p. 8.

⁸²D. J. Enright, "The Future of English Poetry," in Literature For Man's Sake, pp. 203-204.

⁸³Wallace Stevens, "Esthetique du Mal," in The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), p. 325.

⁸⁴Philip Larkin, All What Jazz, p. 17. For context, see above, p. 101.

⁸⁵Wallace Stevens, "Esthetique du Mal."

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Woodcock, George. "Old and New Oxford Books: The Idea of An Anthology." Rev. of The Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse. Sewanee Review, 82 (1974), 119-30.

Wordsworth, William. "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey." 1798; rpt. in English Romantic Poetry and Prose. Ed. Russell Noyes. New York: Oxford University Press, 1956.

CURRICULUM VITAE
Mr. Terrence A. Whalen

Personal

Born, 1 Feb., 1944, Halifax, Nova Scotia
Married to Maryann Antonia Whalen
Four children.

Education

B.A. (Hon.), Saint Mary's University, Halifax, N.S. (1965)
M.A. (Hon.), Melbourne University, Melbourne, Australia (1968)
Graduate Certificate, Exeter College, Oxford University, England (Summer 1970)
Doctoral Program, University of Ottawa (1976--present) (ABD).

Awards

Full Graduate Scholarship Award, Dalhousie University, 1966 (not taken)
British Commonwealth Scholarship, University of Sydney, Australia, 1966
British Commonwealth Scholarship, Melbourne University, Australia, 1967
Teaching Fellowship, University of Ottawa, January-April, 1977 (half course stipend)
Teaching Fellowship, University of Ottawa, May-August, 1977 (single course stipend)

Teaching Experience

Tutor, University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia, 1966
Tutor, Melbourne University, Melbourne, Australia, 1967
Lecturer, Saint Mary's University, Halifax, N.S., 1968-70
Assistant Professor, Saint Mary's University, 1970--present
(Tenure granted in September, 1974)
Lecturer (Teaching Fellow), University of Ottawa, January-April, 1977; and May-August, 1977

Courses Taught

Introductory: Introduction to Literary Forms; Literature and Society; Project Parallel (Inter-disciplinary Seminar); English Drama for Francophone Students.

Advanced: Modern Poetry; Modern Novel; Literature and Thought, 1880-1920; American Literature (Survey); Shakespeare and His Contemporaries; The Study of Poetry (Poetics and Survey); The Theory and Practice of Criticism; Victorian and Modern British Literature; Honours Seminar -- Joseph Conrad; Honours Seminar -- D. H. Lawrence; Honours Seminar -- Contemporary Poetry; Honours Seminar -- Thomas Hardy.

Academic Administrative Experience -- Saint Mary's University (past five years)

University Senate (Elected Faculty representative); Chairman, Senate Elections Committee; University Wide Appointments Committee (Faculty representative); University Wide Review Committee (Faculty representative); Member, Union Negotiating Committee; Member-at-large, Union Executive; Chairman, English Dept. Honours Committee; Chairman, English Dept. Curriculum Committee; Chairman, English Dept. Scholarship Committee.

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Publications

Critical Essays

"Heyst's Moral Oddity: A Reading of Victory." Conradiana, 3, No. 1 (1971-72), 39-45.

"On Philip Larkin's Detachment." Sift, No. 1 (Spring 1973), 28-35.

"The Canadian Imperial Idea: Sara Duncan and Carl Berger." Sift, No. 5 (Fall 1978), 20-35.

"Wilfred Campbell: Poetry of Harmony." Completed and Forthcoming in Journal of Canadian Poetry, I (Summer 1979).

"Wilfred Campbell: Poetry of Doubt." Completed and Forthcoming in Journal of Canadian Poetry, 2 (Winter 1979).

"Wilfred Campbell: Poetry of Mysticism." Completed and Forthcoming in Journal of Canadian Poetry, 2 (Summer 1980).

Review Article

"Too Genteel: A Review of Vapour and Blue: Souster Selects Campbell," ed. and introd. Raymond Souster. Dalhousie Review, 59 (Spring 1979), 176-79.

Reviews

"The Academic Rowdyman." Rev. of Chemical Eric, by Gildas Roberts. Atlantic Provinces Book Review, 2 (June 1975), pp. 1-2.

"Teach or Perish." Rev. of Faculty in Higher Education, by Bornheimer, Burns, and Dumke. Canadian Association of University Teacher's Bulletin - CAUT Bulletin, December 1975.

Review of Brave New Wave, ed. and introd. by Jack David. Quill & Quire, 7 September, 1979, p. 8.

Review of The Sorry Papers, by Don Bailey. Completed and Forthcoming in Quill & Quire.

Review of An Introductory Guide to THE ANATHEMATA and SLEEPING LORD Sequence of David Jones, by Henry Summerfield. Completed and Forthcoming in Quill & Quire.

Unpublished Theses

B.A. Thesis: "T. S. Eliot's Theory of Literary Criticism."

M.A. Thesis: "Conrad: Tradition, Morality, and Scepticism."

November 1, 1979.

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT
Mr. Terrence A. Whalen

THE RETRIEVAL OF THE PHYSICAL WORLD
IN THE POETRY OF PHILIP LARKIN

The criticism of his work to date does not explore the full implications of Larkin's return to the physical world as stimulus to poetry after the largely more abstract example of the Modernists. A survey of the major perspectives in Larkin criticism shows that Larkin is usually viewed as a poet of common experience, a provincial poet, and more centrally, in negative terms, a bleak and withdrawn writer whose major theme is failure and decay. This study attempts to dispel that limiting image of his work by way of a careful examination of his unusual concern with the physical world and its specific detail, with experiential reality as a vital stimulus to poetry.

The first chapter surveys the major perspectives of Larkin criticism. It isolates the view of his work which sees it as a product of aloofness and claims that it is the most prevalent view and the most damaging one. The second chapter confronts this view with a close analysis of central poems, showing that there is a curiosity about the world at the explorative center of Larkin's work. It claims that much of Larkin criticism is aimed at the psychological base of the poetry and mistakes a surface irony and a tone of sadness in the works for the poet's own voice. Beneath these surface effects there is an empirical temper of mind and a talent for discovering beauty, even in the midst of decay.

The third chapter examines Larkin's poetry and his criticism in the light of Imagist theory. The Imagist's insistence on the need for a stimulus from the physical world

is seen as in keeping with Larkin's claims as a critic and with his craft as a poet. His kinship with Imagist theory is also in step with his respect for the works of John Betjeman and Thomas Hardy. Larkin's claims about the essentially epiphanic nature of his own work is also related to the Imagists. T. E. Hulme's comments on "the classic of motion" are recognized as appropriate to Larkin's quality of caution in the midst of his otherwise romantic flights.

In various ways, this study asserts that Larkin is not simply an ironic and anti-romantic writer. It claims that he is also a poet of praise and a poet of wonder. The fourth chapter examines the poetry centrally on this point. Larkin's talent for discovering mystery in the human world and the physical universe is related to the example of D. H. Lawrence's poetry. Larkin shares with Lawrence a conviction that solitary communion with the physical universe is not only necessary for the maintenance of a sense of self-possession, but is central to any realization of the mystery of being.

The conclusion assesses the poetry as it is viewed from the perspective of its attention to the physical world. It suggests that there is a kind of realism in Larkin's work and that its capacity for praise and wonder firmly transcends all easy commentary on its boredom and/or bleakness. In some ways Larkin's work provides us with an option for meaning which is not as readily available in the traditions of Modernist and Confessional verse. Larkin's poetry of the physical world is then related to the works of Ted Hughes, R. S. Thomas, and Thom Gunn. The work of all four poets is seen as constituting an emerging tradition in contemporary British poetry. It is appreciated as a valuable tradition next to that of the Confessionals.