

Philip Larkin: Here and There

Peter Robinson

I

In a chapter called 'Italophils' from his memoirs *These the Companions*, Donald Davie distances himself from a state of mind associated with the most prominent poet of his generation:

I detect in his poetry as a whole, still more in the sort of admiration it elicits from English readers, a drastic and gratuitous contraction of experience for which it still seems to me that the right word is 'Little-Englandism'. The tight little island is nowadays all too proud of its tightness and its littleness. One sees very well that with the dissolution of the Empire, shamefully precipitate as that was, global and imperial vistas would necessarily be closed off for the English imagination. But there has been a wilful contraction far beyond what events dictated, until now patriotism and parochialism are thought to be one and the same.¹⁾

Davie also notes that Philip Larkin's career shows a 'refusal to go for experience outside England', which he calls 'a heroic exploit of self-abnegation'. Larkin's 'heroic exploit' does not form part of what Davie calls the 'shamefully precipitate' 'dissolution of the Empire' as the poem 'Homage to a Government', written on 10 January 1969, shows:

It's hard to say who wanted it to happen,
But now it's been decided nobody minds.
The places are a long way off, not here,
Which is all right, and from what we hear
The soldiers there only made trouble happen.
Next year we shall be easier in our minds.

(171)²⁾

Larkin's poem forms its complaints about a cost-cutting withdrawal³⁾ decided by Harold Wilson's Labour Government, with *rime riche*, deadeningly perfect

rhymes. He matches the same words of the first two line-endings with the final two of each stanza, and forms a couplet in the middle. With the second verse, this central couplet is slightly imperfect. Larkin rhymes 'here' with 'hear'. 'Homage to a Government' shares Davie's sense of a 'shamefully precipitate' withdrawal, and adds that it is done for the worst of reasons: because we can't afford it. As he says in the first stanza: 'We want the money for ourselves at home/ Instead of working. And this is all right.' (171) He also implies in the stanza above that a failure of imagination and concern is involved in the withdrawal, and that this failure is supported by a weak desire to be in the right, suggesting the failure of imagination by a use of 'here' and 'there': 'The places are a long way off, not here' and 'The soldiers there only made trouble happen.' Larkin's poetry is drawn to the imaginative co-ordinates of 'here' and 'there'. I begin to explore them by returning to the refusals and contractions of experience.

The renunciation of what is outside England appears less simple or single-minded when examined. It takes two main forms. First, there is his refusal of foreign travel and of poetry about places and people outside England. Larkin's friend Kingsley Amis announced during the 1950s that 'Nobody wants any more poems about...foreign cities.' It prompted ripostes in the forms of poems by Davie ('Via Portello'⁴) and Charles Tomlinson ('More Foreign Cities'⁵). Larkin has no such poems. Secondly, he has published no translations. Larkin was a stay-at-home. He once explained in an interview:

My father was keen on Germany for some reason: he'd gone there to study their office methods and fallen in love with the place. And he took us there twice; I think this sowed the seed of my hatred of abroad—not being able to talk to anyone, or read anything.⁶

His working life was spent as a librarian, principally at the universities of Belfast and Hull. Charles Monteith, in his essay 'Publishing Larkin', recalls that—

In the summer postcards arrived, and continue to arrive, from remote corners of

the United Kingdom. (As is well known, he concurs completely with George V's views on *Abroad*. Once, in a letter thanking me for a lunch at which I persuaded him, against his better judgement, to eat a Greek meal, he described Retsina as 'that interesting wine which tastes of cricket bats'.⁷)

There are exceptions to most rules. The mature Larkin found his way abroad on at least one occasion. A photograph printed in *Larkin at Sixty* shows the poet sitting next to his friend Monica Jones in the Kaisersaal of the Hamburg City Hall, where, in 1976, he is about to receive the Shakespeare Prize.⁸ Larkin has quipped that:

I wouldn't mind seeing China if I could come back the same day. I hate being abroad. Generally speaking, the further one gets from home the greater the misery. I'm not proud of this, but I'm singularly incurious about other places.⁹

'I hate being abroad', the poet states, as if echoing his own 'Poetry of Departures': 'We all hate home/ and having to be there'. (85) Larkin's dislike of *Abroad* can appear an uneasiness about being either 'here' or 'there'. Similarly, as in 'Poetry of Departures', his apparent disregard for poetry written outside England is a guarded and yet sustained dialogue with the French Symbolists.

II

In an interview, Ian Hamilton asked Larkin, 'I wonder if you read much foreign poetry?' to which the poet replied, '*Foreign Poetry? No!*'¹⁰) Barbara Everett's 'Philip Larkin: After Symbolism' takes note of this exclamation against poetry in other languages:

Perhaps the poet simply felt that a joke is a joke, and that one is not on oath in public interviews. Or perhaps he had not read much French verse at that stage, or much contemporary French verse, or had ceased to read it, or to remember it, or had sometimes read it in such excellent translations as C. F. MacIntyre's of Symbolist poetry, without which, a non-bilingualist can hardly feel sure he is really reading this very difficult verse; or perhaps the poet's obvious modesty, like that of scrupulous scholars who say that they have not read something, but only 'looked at it', made him deny reading much foreign poetry. The statement would tie in with the hatred of cultural pretentiousness that Larkin shows elsewhere: a

dislike of an abstract and unreal talk of 'poetry' or 'literature' or 'culture' at large which in fact destroys or renders sterile this book, this poem, this line. 'Foreign poetry', *No*; but yes, (perhaps) to an image or two experienced once intensely enough to make it survive for a good many years and then re-emerge with enough life in it for another man's poem.¹¹⁾

This is how Everett sustains her justified belief in the direct influence of some poems by Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé and Gautier, on Larkin. The poet softened his categorical disavowal in 1978 when he published a single poem called 'Femmes Damnées' in a pamphlet. The piece alludes to Baudelaire's poem of the same name. It was written by Larkin in 1943, and introducing its publication, he noted: 'The piece is evidence that I read at least one "foreign poem" thought I can't remember how far, if at all, my verses are based on the original'.¹²⁾ Larkin's 'at least' gives the game away. He has read a good deal of French Symbolist poetry, and the point was being made as early as 1955 by Michael Hamburger in his *TLS* review of *The Less Deceived*: 'he has a sombrely tender vein reminiscent of Baudelaire, as in the poem "If, my Darling." The Baudelairean question: "Vivrons-nous jamais?" haunts some of the finest poems in the book, those—like "Next Please," "Triple Time" and "Arrivals, Departures"—which deal with time and our incapacity to live fully in the present.'¹³⁾

There is a piquancy in Hamburger, a poet and contemporary of Larkin's at Oxford whose name is principally associated with translating poetry from German, launching Larkin's first major collection, and one which would help to give him the reputation for being against the foreign. Hamburger gets to the heart of the matter: he locates the Symbolist influence not so much in a stylistic imitativeness, but in an outlook, one of world-weariness and yearning. Larkin's apparent refusal to yearn, as in 'Poetry of Departures', is a resistance to an impulse, not its removal, and dependent on the prior Symbolist restlessness in poems such as Baudelaire's 'L'Invitation au Voyage', Rimbaud's 'Le Bateau Ivre', or Mallarmé's 'Brise Marine'. Hamburger has recently commented on this refusal in Larkin's own life. He is alluding to Laforgue's 'Oh qu'ils sont pittoresques les trains manques!...' and observes:

Not only missing, but refusing to take, trains that might have taken him out of his rut became a habit and a point of honour with him. I recall his deprecating grin when I delivered a message to him from Robert Lowell that he would be welcome in America [...] The stance of 'I like it here' does little to explain that oddity, since even his most conscientiously realistic responses to his immediate surroundings in poems tell us—with his peculiar honesty—that he did not like it, only endured or lumped it, out of a deep-seated failure to believe that, for him at least, any change could be for the better.¹⁴⁾

Larkin could make further self-deprecating fun out of his glum stance. He reports how once Auden asked him, 'Do you like living in Hull?' and I said, I don't suppose I'm unhappier there than I should be anywhere else. To which he replied, Naughty, naughty. I thought that very funny.¹⁵⁾

What appears to have been true of the place, may also have seemed so for the language at times. Larkin's English in the later poems shows an aggravated uneasiness with tones and idioms,¹⁶⁾ an exacerbated commonsensicality, often held between the tweezers of italic script. Everett has said of 'Sympathy in White Major' that it 'is in its way as brilliant and as learned a fragment of translation as one is likely to find: a fragment, rather, of that art of Imitation which the Augustans deployed, a form of translation which fully recognizes that change of times and styles makes literalism inappropriate.'¹⁷⁾ The poem consciously plays with Gautier's 'Symphonie en Blanc Majeur'—part of the joke being that Larkin's poem begins with a description of how to make a gin and tonic, brands of gin being called 'White Satin' and 'White Horse'. Mallarmé's 'Salut' starts, as Everett noticed, with a glass held up—as too in Larkin's 'Water'—but, where Mallarmé is toasting poetry and his colleagues, Larkin's speaker is raising a glass, sardonically, to himself. The sardonic distance is in the italic script of stanza three, which enshrines as if in amber or aspic, the dead and dying idioms of a slightly over-familiar public praise:

*A decent chap, a real good sort,
Straight as a die, one of the best,
A brick, a trump, a proper sport,
Head and shoulders above the rest;
How many lives would have been duller*

*Had he not been here below?
Here's to the whitest man I know—*

(168)

The stanza moves through four lines of phrases that are dusty relics of earlier decades. Few would say about a person now that he or she was '*a proper sport*' or '*a trump*'; some would call a person a '*decent chap*' on occasion perhaps. These locutions were more popular once. The next two lines it is hard to imagine anyone saying, at any time, though they are sayable: '*duller*' and '*here below*' have a colloquial vitality. The last italicised line, which opens with a standard form for a toast '*Here's to...*', turns into a ludicrously unsayable compliment: '*the whitest man I know*'. Whitest has the odd tone of an advertising slogan. He is like a washing powder: whiter than white. The dramatic turn into the last line moves from a phrase that is barely speakable to a near colloquialism: 'Though white is not my favourite colour.' The thought produced by this deranged barrage of compliments is that you wouldn't want to be praised in *these* terms, and that you sound lame trying to refuse a compliment. It's a bad situation and the poem ends on a note of muffled despair.

'Sympathy in White Major' is a retrospective look at the Baudelairean question 'Vivrons-nous jamais?' The people who *lived* in Larkin's poem are the ones who 'wore like clothes/ The human beings in their days'. The speaker is one who couldn't do this, but brought to those who thought he could 'the lost displays'; this is the 'sympathy' of the title, or the sense of '*He devoted his life to others*.' The speaker has seemed to act selflessly, but couldn't get started on an ordinary selfish life, and is then praised by those who have, for being 'bigger' than them. What's more, the speaker is enacting this farce internally: he is toasting himself in this grotesque situation and these grotesque terms. The difference between the italics in 'Poetry of Departures' and 'Sympathy in White Major' is that in the first of these poems the language drawn attention to is the formula for a mode that is rejected, and sounds remote from ordinary speech: '*He walked out on the whole crowd*' or '*Then she undid her dress*' or '*Take that you bastard*' (85). These are transparently fantastic bits of pulp writing. In 'Sym-

pathy...' the italicised language is internalised, is part of the speaker's lumped or endured world. Those dusty idioms are the language he is presented with. What did Larkin gain by being quiet about his readings in Gautier, Mallarmé, or Baudelaire?

'Femmes Damnées' has four of his characteristic features, set in a context which diffuses their point. The poem has passages of typifying description:

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

(270)

It is focused, like 'Mr Bleaney' or 'Dockery and Son', by finding a name to which the animus of the poem can attach itself. In the room where Rosemary 'Sees books and photos: "Dance"; "The Rhythmic Life"' is 'Miss Rachel Wilson in a cap and gown.' Rachel, as her decor suggests, is a lesbian who has seduced poor Rosemary. In the penultimate stanza, Rachel 'smiles,/ As beasts smile on the prey they have just killed.' Like 'Deceptions', but without the criticism of the rapist's satisfaction, 'Femmes Damnées' attempts to fix the exact suffering of a woman. It ends:

The marble clock has stopped. The curtained sun
 Burns on: the room grows hot. There, it appears,
 A vase of flowers has spilt, and soaked away.
 The only sound heard is the sound of tears.

(270)

Larkin's poem has the distance from its suffering thing of 'Deceptions', but here the remoteness of the authorial consciousness from the event produces a voyeuristic glee at the suffering. In that last stanza the 'There, it appears', which prepares the rhyme with 'tears', indicates, perhaps accidentally, an unconcern or indifference to the detail of the situation which mimics Rachel's fierce sexualism, but also points to the poet's arrangement of the scene. This is not a problem in 'Deceptions', because the poet introduces himself: 'Slums,

years, have buried you. I would not dare/ Console you if I could.' (32) Equally, the poet, being a man, is aligned with the seducer and involved, as a representative of his sex, with the suffering of the girl. He expresses an attachment to her by admitting a respect for the inviolability of violation. In 'Femmes Damnées' no such involvement leavens the looking on, and Larkin, unlike Baudelaire in his final stanza, does not align or involve himself. Here is Baudelaire:

Vous que dans votre enfer mon âme a poursuivies,
 Pauvre sœurs, je vous aime autant que je vous plains,
 Pour vos mornes douleurs, vos soifs inassouvies,
 Et les urnes d'amour dont vos grands coeurs sont pleins!¹⁸⁾

[You whom my soul has pursued into your hell, poor sisters, I love you as much as I weep for you, for your bleak sorrows, your unquenchable thirsts, and the urns of love with which your hearts are full.] Notice how 'les urnes d'amour dont vos grands coeurs sont pleins!' has been Englished into 'it appears,/ A vase of flowers has spilt'. Larkin in 'Home is so sad' can wring the heart with 'That vase.' (119) But in his 'Femmes Damnées' the bosom returns no echo because any community of feeling we might experience is disallowed by the use of detail to place the scene elsewhere. It is a view of what other people do, but not me or you.

III

One refusal and contraction in Philip Larkin is the almost complete exclusion from his poetry of self-conscious literary and aesthetic preoccupations, of "talking shop".¹⁹⁾ Davie has noted that 'there is plenty of evidence that any talk of poetry as a calling (some have thought it a sacred one) pains and infuriates him as so much hypocrisy'.²⁰⁾ Larkin's poems are silent upon technical matters, but formally acute; their handling of tone and subject showing a tacit consciousness of problems and difficulties. Many poems display such problems of the self and world as specifically social, as the differentiation of a single individual from other people, and this differentiation reproduces

social relations outside poetry, of class, and of individuals as they single themselves out in a society of classes and groups:

The trumpet's voice, loud and authoritative,
 Draws me a moment to the lighted glass
 To watch the dancers—all under twenty-five—
 Shifting intently, face to flushed face,
 Solemnly on the beat of happiness.

—Or so I fancy, sensing the smoke and sweat,
 The wonderful feel of girls. Why be out here?
 But then, why be in there? Sex, yes, but what
 Is sex? Surely, to think the lion's share
 Of happiness is found in couples—sheer

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

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

(80)

The inclusion in 'Reasons for Attendance' of remarks about the art of jazz asks whether 'Art, if you like' is consistent with the poet's art. Its conversational style is meditative and internalized: the comically unanswerable 'Sex, yes, but what/ Is sex?' The parenthesis '(Art, if you like)' carries both a casual gesture apologising for the introduction of so heady a topic, and the indication of a strong, though disguised, authorial defensiveness upon the question of an audience: Art, if you want it. The colloquial sense, the shrug, contradicts any indifference to an audience. If, though Art speaks it does not speak to 'me', one of 'them', then why is it so tactfully addressing me, one of 'you' in 'if you like'? The individual sound of art insists that the speaker of the poem is individual, a first person pronoun too. The abstracting of 'I speak; I hear', to 'It speaks; I

hear' moves the poem's voice outside the socially located consciousness which must be placed to speak the poem, here, outside a dance hall. In this poem the individual sound of Art guarantees the security of the speaker's first person pronoun. Everyone else in the poem remains a 'them', and readers of the poem may be addressed as 'you'. I too, of course, can speak the poem, and its individual sound insists that 'I too am individual'. Larkin has placed that 'too' so that, while logically referring back to Art, which guarantees individuality, it also opens the poem's central position to individuals other than the speaker in his social context. We, too, are here. This is how the poem occasions what John Bayley has called, with evident admiration: 'the conspiracy between poet and reader, which appraises with secret equanimity.'²¹

The individuality assumed allows for a whole class of individuals to confirm their differentiated solidarity: we too are individual. The sound of Art confirms the 'I' of the poem as one such individual, but it would not if 'I' were not separated from 'it' in 'It speaks; I hear'. My individuality is a quality of my distance from everything else, and identification with 'it': Art. This distance is sustained by being carried over into the social arena of the poem. I am individual because I, the speaker of the poem as Art, don't speak for 'them', the dancers who 'maul to and fro', 'face to flushed face', in the 'smoke and sweat' with 'the wonderful feel of girls' over there.

Yet the 'I' of the poem does speak for them. It characterises them in the act of differentiating itself from them. 'Reasons for Attendance' hedges on its own authority, an authority deriving from the power to describe. The dash at the beginning of the second stanza and the 'Or so I fancy' take back the account of the dancers in the first, attempting to internalize the description as meditation and opinion. This diminished responsibility can be heard in the poem's rhyme-scheme. In the first three stanzas the poem rhymes and half-rhymes unemphatically, noticeably in the couplet-like pairs of fourth and fifth lines, where the turn of the thought across the gap between stanzas is heralded by a half-rhyme which fails to produce a full close. What, though, is a reader to make of the sudden confidence that the speaker gains in the final stanza when

his account is supported by five full rhymes?

The final line may reveal a diffidence in the speaker, fearing that he has failed to discover in himself a sufficient interest in, for example, 'the wonderful feel of girls', or as is equally implied, that the dancers may have failed to consider sufficiently reasons for attending to Art. Or, they all have, and concealed it. Yet the rhyming of the poem confidently insists that this is the case: they have misjudged themselves and lied. There is ambivalence, on the part of the poem's speaker, but is it just to infer the same of the dancers? Have they misjudged themselves? Values that are apparently endangered, or liable to be reduced—art, if you like—are tacitly reaffirmed by the poem's gain in formal confidence. In its close the rhymes affirm both a drawing together and a drawing away; they reproduce a fear in the speaker that his individuality will be eroded by a misjudgement or denial whose acknowledgement would introduce him into the smoke and sweat of 'them', and it alleviates that fear. However, outside such socially marked co-ordinates, Bayley affirms: 'It is assumed that the reader too "misses" life—"all the fuss"—but to feel the writer has missed it, and turned the process into art, produces a species of solidarity and consolation.'²²)

Elsewhere is important for Larkin's art if it is somewhere you might just, at times, if mistakenly, want to be. This is why 'Reasons for Attendance' is a significant and characteristic poem. It places the poet in a scene recognisably continuous with his life and interests. The scene is carefully Englished; any *recherché* glamour out of Yeats or Baudelaire has been exchanged for mundane facts. The poem is located around those two questions: 'Why be out here?' and 'But then, why be in there?' Compared to 'Femmes Damnées', it is clear that 'Reasons for Attendance' would not work if the two polarities of 'here' and 'there' were not linked by the fact that the speaker would certainly like, if he had his chance again, to have some more of 'the wonderful feel of girls'²³); whereas nothing in the world would or could have got him into Miss Rachel Wilson's room.

The answer to 'Why be out here?' is that the poet likes to listen to jazz.

The vast majority of great jazz trumpeters have not been English. Larkin's Little-Englandism does not exclude him from responding fully and passionately to the playing of Bix Beiderbecke, for example, or the dedicatee of his poem 'For Sidney Bechet'²⁴) The poet is united with, most probably, his mother in 'Reference Back', by King Oliver's '*Riverside Blues*'. He is playing the record to stave off boredom on a visit home. It calls him away like the poetry of departures, but then unexpectedly—

The flock of notes those antique negroes blew
 Out of Chicago air into
 A huge remembering pre-electric horn
 The year after I was born
 Three decades later made this sudden bridge
 From your unsatisfactory age
 To my unsatisfactory prime.

(106)

This is a key double movement in Larkin's poetry. Out of an apparent desire to be away, to live a different life, comes the recognition of a link, a community from which the poet does not want to be separated. This is a dynamic in his middle period poems, and is never entirely absent.

Just as listening to the jazz had initially kept him up in his room, away from his mother, who 'Looked so much forward to' his visits, so in 'Reasons for Attendance' the poet is separated from the dancers by the 'lifted, rough-tongued bell/ (Art, if you like)'. That little parenthesis catches Larkin's dilemma. He identifies the sharp distinction between art and life, then applies it to a situation in life, artists also having lives after all. But, in life, the dichotomy, the sharp distinction produces a false and damaging choice, a falsity and damage present in the ambiguous intonational range of 'if you like'—from a sign of disregard for others' opinions to a 'craven defensiveness',²⁵) attempting to keep in with them. The poet, as regards the 'here' and 'there' of 'art' and 'life', is drawn to being both here and there. The danger in wanting this is that you end up neither here nor there: 'If no one has misjudged himself. Or lied.' A problem with the poem's final line is that it is not the different people who may have mis-

judged themselves, or not told the truth, but the poet who has skewed the social occasion and choices involved by applying to it a dichotomy derived from the Romantic inheritance that Larkin is sometimes supposed to have put behind him.²⁶⁾ It is a variant of the ‘poet as hero’ contrasted with the ‘ordinary people’, or of art’s ‘eternity’ standing out against the transitoriness of life.

Outside this frame of contrasts, the ‘Why be out here?’ and the ‘why be in there?’ become misleading questions, for you can listen to jazz and take part in the life of art, and experience ‘the wonderful feel of girls’, while the dancers who ‘maul to and fro’ can, if they wish, find time in life for a novel by D. H. Lawrence, a few sides of Bix Beiderbecke, or *The Whitsun Weddings* by Philip Larkin. A key phrase is the ‘sheer/ Inaccuracy, as far as I’m concerned.’ If the speaker is wanting to justify feeling happy by listening to music, his reasons might have to apply to the dancers inside too, or they may not be reasons, merely tastes and preferences. Thus, ‘as far as I’m concerned’ means that the ‘Reasons’ of the title are specious, and that the speaker is kidding himself. No one would actually prefer ‘art’ to ‘life’, would they?²⁷⁾ The choice has no context in which it can be truly made. The ‘reasons’ in this poem are specious as reasons because they do not apply both ‘out here’ and ‘in there’. To be reasons they would have to make sense both here and there; but they don’t, they are said not to, and this is why there is a danger for poem, poet and reader of being “neither here nor there”.

IV

Larkin’s art is built on the denial of an alternative whose presence must remain felt for the denial to stay valid. On 13 June 1955, he finished ‘The Importance of Elsewhere’. It indicates that Larkin didn’t altogether dislike being abroad, if Belfast counts as that—

Lonely in Ireland, since it was not home,
Strangeness made sense. The salt rebuff of speech,
Insisting so on difference, made me welcome:

Once that was recognised, we were in touch.

(104)

In the final stanza he is 'Living in England', and 'Here no elsewhere underwrites my existence.' The elsewheres of stanza one are both Ireland and England. The speaker is 'there' at first, though 'here' at the end. This locates the poem for its British readers as English. When you are 'abroad', when you are 'there', both elsewheres underwrite your existence by contrastively defining you. If you try to gain contrastive self-definition 'Living in England', it is, as the last stanza has it, 'much more serious' because to refuse Englishness in England is to be unpatriotic, left-wing, a bohemian, an unregenerate romantic artist, a revolutionary. 'The Importance of Elsewhere' is an attractive poem in its pleasure at being in Belfast, where Larkin enjoyed one of his most prolific spells of poetic composition. However, it is neither characteristic of his output, nor does it foreshadow the theme of his work for the next decade and a half; these fifteen years or so produced Larkin's best poems, and found him identifying ways in which the 'here' of England contained a large range of elsewheres. In his 'Landscapes of Larkin', Davie suggests:

Some may have criticized what Larkin does with the truths he discovers, what attitudes he takes up to the landscapes and the weather of his own poems; but those landscapes and that weather—no one, I think, has failed to recognize them [...] On the literal level at any rate, no one denies that what Larkin says is true; that the England in his poems is the England we have inhabited.²⁸⁾

The separation outlined above between the poet and others means that his England is not the one that we, if by 'we' is meant the nominal subjects of his poems, have inhabited, even if 'we', meaning his readers, are in accord with it. The separation in Larkin's poems between the poet and landscapes with figures, and the co-extensive collusion between the poet and his implied reader divides his readers as uneasily from his subjects as he detaches himself. His work from these years repeatedly turns on 'here' and 'there', but now 'there' is

not so much an abroad, as in 'Poetry of Departures', as a difference, a separation at the heart of 'here'.

Larkin's great poem 'Here' consists of four sentences. The first of these covers the first three stanzas, twenty-four lines plus two words. The other three are in the final verse. The word 'here' appears five times: once in the title; and once in each of the sentences. Its first appearance introduces the description of Hull:

Here domes and statues, spires and cranes cluster
Beside grain-scattered streets, barge-crowded water,
And residents from raw estates, brought down
The dead straight miles by stealing flat-faced trolleys,
Push through plate-glass swing doors to their desires—
Cheap suits, red kitchen-ware, sharp shoes, iced lollies,
Electric mixers, toasters, washers, driers—

A cut-price crowd, urban yet simple, dwelling
Where only salesmen and relations come
Within a terminate and fishy-smelling
Pastoral of ships up streets, the slave museum,
Tattoo-shops, consulates, grim head-scarfed wives [...]

(136)

Throughout the poem there is no first person singular pronoun, and yet its voice, met 'Swerving' through the North of England and east into Hull, then out to the coastlands and sea, is ambiguously situated, and nowhere more so than in the stanza and a half about the town and its inhabitants. The passage may be indebted to Louis MacNeice's poem 'Birmingham', where the heaping up of clauses and references to colours and objects performs simultaneous gestures of attachment and pitying distance:

The lunch hour: the shops empty, shopgirls' faces relax
Diaphanous as green glass, empty as old almanacs
As incoherent with ticketed gewgaws tiered behind their heads
As the Burne-Jones windows in St. Philip's broken by crawling leads;
Insipid colour, patches of emotion, Saturday thrills
(This theatre is sprayed with 'June')—the gutter takes our old playbills,
Next week-end it is likely in the heart's funfair we shall pull
Strong enough on the handle to get back our money; or at any rate it is possible.²⁹⁾

Another indebtedness in 'Here' is to William Empson's *Some Versions of Pastoral*,³⁰ for the poem's orientation towards Hull and its 'cut-price crowd' leans on Empson's insights at two points. In the phrase 'urban yet simple' Larkin describes the people as like the swains in a rural landscape, who have the qualities of innocence and virtue associated with the shepherds; but these swains have been moved into the 'raw estates'. They are 'simple' in another sense: stupid, unworldly, not realising they are duped when they 'Push through plate-glass swing doors to their desires—'. Larkin is tacitly critical of the town's planners for the shoppers are brought down by 'trolleys', trolley-buses, and the phrasal verb 'brought down' allows them to be both *transported* through the suburbs and also *lowered, reduced*. They are 'brought down/ The dead straight miles': these roads are laid out with a ruler, they are 'dead straight' where the first adjective merely intensifies the second, and they have no life in them, they are 'dead' and also 'straight'. This is a 'fishy-smelling/ Pastoral' because Hull is a seaport with, in those days, a large fishing fleet, and because Empson has shown how to view the political settlements concealed in Pastoral literature with scepticism. Larkin has indicated in 'Here' how the social and political arrangement of the town has benign and dubious aspects interwoven.

In the final stanza, the poem moves beyond the town's 'mortgaged half-built edges' to the isolated and lonely countryside:

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.

(136-7)

Davie points out that the leaves are not 'unnoticed' by the poet, nor the waters 'neglected':

The insistence seems excessive—as if the poet were *determined* not to be helped

nor instructed by things that plainly he responds to keenly. (For obviously the leaves do not go unnoticed by him, so by whom are they 'unnoticed'? By the cut-price crowd, or by the country dwellers? And if by both or either, is this a good thing or a bad?)³¹

Just as the poet notices the leaves, so too do his readers, registering that they are unnoticed by some people. Impossible to say whether it is the cut-price crowd or the country dwellers who don't take note, but Larkin's readers are implicitly neither of these. The poet refuses to acknowledge his perceptions, pushing what is in the poem 'Here'—*there*. Davie acknowledges such a refusal, but assumes that the implied *here* from which the 'unfenced existence' may be 'out of reach', over there, is the 'raw estates':

In Larkin's poem one detects a perverse determination that the ultimate ('terminate') pastoral shall be among the cut-price stores and nowhere else. And the pity felt for the denizens of that pastoral, the 'residents from raw estates,' is more than a little contemptuous.

Something does smell fishy about this pastoral, for introducing the word 'come' instead of 'go'—and at the same time making it clear that he is not one of the 'residents'—Larkin can be both *here* and *there*. By the adroit placing of 'here' for 'there' and 'come' for 'go', Larkin's poem suggests presence to displace it with separations, whether of tone (distances of class, rank, intimacy or exclusiveness of feeling) or of physical space (that other pastoral of 'unfenced existence' which is 'untalkative, out of reach.')

What Davie catches is that 'Here' consists of places where the speaking voice is not. The 'cut-price crowd', for example, dwells 'Where only salesmen and relations come'. The poet, neither salesman nor relation, knows this. The 'here' points to places which are 'there': this is what is odd and alive about the final two lines where 'Here' is 'out of reach.' It is as if Larkin has located within the here and now of his England a number of elsewheres in the landscape and lives of other people which both underwrite his existence, perhaps in the sense of insuring it, but also isolate and define it as where he is not, but is drawn to — a here beyond.

Bayley, in a chapter called 'The Importance of Elsewhere', cuts through any suggestion of hesitation in Larkin between the here and there. He does not believe, as Davie does, that what Larkin says is on a literal level true, does not believe—

the assumption that gives Larkin his credentials among students—and not only among them—that he is a poet of today's life styles, celebrating our common surroundings and customs. A poem such as *Here* led Betjeman to call Larkin 'the John Clare of the building estates' [...] In fact Larkin's use of his material is not for any purposes of description [...] Larkin's peculiar vision alienates his people and places precisely by gazing at them so hard when they aren't looking.³²⁾

Bayley takes the spatial and tonal distances in Larkin's poems as forms of a split between Life and Art. With this fixed division, he can reintroduce the perversities that Davie found, the positional hesitations, as paradoxical contributions that Art makes to Life by not being part of it. Larkin's verse 'understood the needs of life by avoiding them.' And 'Art fails both its audience and dispenser, but—the crucial point—makes both feel closer to life.' This is a subtle reinterpretation of the Baudelairean question 'Vivrons-nous jamais?' The consolations of Larkin's poems are made available only in so far as Life and Art may be separated: 'we are not *there* but elsewhere, in fact in the lucid world of Larkinian art.' Yet, however lucid, that world is uninhabitable. Though a device of literary criticism, and a fact of literary history, useful too in locating a feature of Larkin's poetry, the division between Art and Life does not exist. In Larkin's poems the split between these two necessarily and continuously interrelated abstractions is contradictory and divisive.

While Bayley's account defines the division in his poetry and, more plainly than Davie, sees its implicit consolatory purposes, it does so by accepting that the compact between poet and reader is untroubled by divisions. This solidarity with the poet avoids the internal conflicts that are felt if we who read the poems find ourselves drawn closer to, by being distanced from, the needs of life that we did not expect or hope to avoid, if the solidarity of reader and poet is

threatened by a solidarity of reader and subject. Larkin's poem 'High Windows' exemplifies these conflicting loyalties, identification and solidarity with either position described being made purposefully difficult. The poem's opening quatrain appears miscalculated, so fantastic is its assumption about the young and an older generation's envy of their supposed sexual freedom:

When I see a couple of kids
 And guess he's fucking her and she's
 Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm,
 I know this is paradise
 Everyone old has dreamed of all their lives—

(165)

"When I see...and guess...I know ..." is the poem's mistaken trajectory of illusion and envy of the young who could *really live* in 1967. I was one of 'a couple of kids' when this poem was collected in 1974, and didn't think it true then, nor do I think it true now. This, though, may be beside the point. The poet is conjuring a mistaken attitude, and indicating it in the slide from stanza one to two: 'I know this is paradise/ Everyone old has dreamed of all their lives'. The quatrain ends on a complete, colloquial phrase ('I know this is paradise') but then takes it on—'paradise/ Everyone old'. The problem is that the continuing phrase should read "I know this is the paradise everyone old", so that the exclamation "I know this is paradise!" proves itself syntactically untenable. 'Everyone old' has made a mistake and it shows. The inaccurately colloquial 'Taking pills' makes it sound as though the young couple are also using amphetamines, though the proximity of 'wearing a diaphragm' indicates that the speaker guesses the girl is "on the pill". The unsatisfactory and envious attitude is not one which can be seriously held; the speaker's envy is as misjudged as the previous generation's mistaken feelings about people who have no God any more. That the viewpoint is unjustified means that the poem knows the young don't live like this, you can't be 'there' with them, and the old are wrong to think this way, so you can't be 'here' with them. This is why—

[...] 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.

(165)

Earlier the speaker has thought of the young 'going down the long slide/ To happiness, endlessly.' The poem concludes by suggesting that, because of its slithers between uninhabitable states, the only endlessness is neither here nor there but 'nowhere'.

This sudden movement away from the coarse language and mistaken envies in the poem is inspired by a memory of words, but not English ones.³³⁾ Perhaps Larkin faintly remembered the penultimate stanza of Mallarmé's 'Les Fenêtres': 'Et le vomissement impur de la Bêtise/ Me force à me boucher le nez devant l'azur.' [And Stupidity's impure vomiting/ Forces me to stop my nose before the blue sky.] Or perhaps Larkin also had in mind the final two lines of another poem, 'L'Azur': 'Où fuir dans la révolte inutile et perverse?/ *Je suis hanté. L'Azur! l'Azur! l'Azur! l'Azur!*'³⁴⁾ [Where can we flee in useless and perverse revolt?/ *I am haunted. The Azure!...*] In each case Mallarmé balances the desire to escape against the pointlessness or danger of trying to do so. This careful thwarting of a possibility renders the desire finer and more intense. Larkin's lines are less passionate and haunted than the French poet's; for him the deep blue air is mysteriously cheering; the glass is 'sun-comprehending' and the windows are positively revealing, 'show/ Nothing'. This sounds like an echo, conscious or not, of 'Talking in Bed', another poem where the 'here' and 'there' might have been reversed. The second line, with its discreet pun on 'lie', reads 'Lying together there goes back so far' (129), suggesting that the poem is not situated in the bed, beside the other person. This, however, quickly changes, so that the point of view is from one lying together:

Nothing shows why
 At this unique distance from isolation
 It becomes still more difficult to find

Words at once true and kind,
Or not untrue and not unkind.

(129)

The tacit 'here' is indicated by 'this unique distance', where 'Nothing' has the active force and presence to 'show'. In 'High Windows', 'Nothing' has become the object, but in each case, life's disappointments issue the verse into an uplifting but emptied metaphysical spaciousness, not far from 'le néant' or 'l'abîme' of French Symbolism. We are in unfulfilment's 'desolate attic' (32) or in 'Such attics cleared of me!' (49³⁵)

Between 12 February 1967 and 24 April 1968, Larkin wrote a series of poems which show him, at the age of about forty-five, out of step with the years of love, peace and revolution. They were 'High Windows', 'The Trees', 'Annus Mirabilis', 'Sympathy in White Major' and 'Sad Steps'. Larkin's secret allegiances with French Symbolism, or, in the last of this group, his allusion to Sir Philip Sidney's 'With how sad steps, ô moon, thou climbst the sky', are strengthening him against the phase of English life ushered in by 'the *Chat-terley* ban' being lifted and 'the Beatles' first LP.' (167) 'Annus Mirabilis' is also a title with an allusion in it, to Dryden's poem of the same name. In each case, the title signals a divergence or disappointment. But in the last of this group, 'Sad Steps', the middle-aged dejection in love escapes from the self-pitying or self-mocking pseudo-envies of 'High Windows' and 'Annus Mirabilis' to find a continuity in distance. The tacit literariness deepens the outlook and saves the poem from reductiveness. Traces of French Symbolism have been found in this poem too, when Larkin canvasses a few modes of indicating the moon: 'Lozenge of love! Medallion of art! O wolves of memory! Immensements!' (169) That word 'Immensements' sounds like *Français*, as if Larkin were imitating Laforgue. The string of exclamations also recalls the last line of Mallarmé's 'L'Azur'. To have such a series of high-voiced ejaculations is not usual in Larkin's, or indeed in English poetry. This, 'Sad Steps' quickly recognises, for there is a turn after the word 'Immensements!' into the final two stanzas:

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.

(169)

I prefer the 'somewhere' of this poem to the 'nowhere' of 'High Windows'. The word 'pain' and the poem's allusion to Sir Philip Sidney suggest that while the sad steps are firstly those of the middle-aged man who is 'Groping back to bed after a piss', they can also be those of the moon itself, and they prompt, in the original context, meditations on infidelity and ingratitude in love. The poem neither says nor implies that being young and 'fucking' is 'paradise'.

V

'Mr Bleaney', finished in May 1955, seems to have been one of the first poems Larkin wrote after settling the contents of *The Less Deceived*:

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

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

Behind the door, no room for books or bags—
'I'll take it.' So it happens that I lie [...]

(102)

Jonathan Raban has directed attention to the stylistic devices employed to differentiate the characters in 'Mr Bleaney':

The two voices in the poem are—in British terms—immediately recognizable as

class spokesmen. The tired gentility of the narrator, with his waspish susceptibility to the annoyingly intrusive details of lower-class life, is loaded with Prufrockian ennui, with the kind of condescending irony that Wells lavished on poor Mr Polly. The landlady is there, like every Mrs Mop in the history of English fiction, to interrupt, to utter spine-chilling clichés in a voice as stale and predictable as cheap scent. Both characters are sprinkled by Larkin with a layer of fine grey dust.³⁶⁾

The poet gives this critic a test in which he can note the ‘immediately recognizable’, or the ‘stale and predictable’—occasions for a reading which glides over the text in nodding accord with the implied author, as Bayley suggested, and which curiously mimics the attitudinizing it appears to map. The details are recognized as ‘annoyingly intrusive’; there is revulsion from ‘cheap scent’ and an intimacy with clichés which calls them ‘spine-chilling’. This reading repeats the identifying of narrator in the poem with readers of it. The ‘I’ of the poem, and the mimetic homage of the critic, are distanced from the scene, and, at the same time, drawn somewhat towards it, if only by feeling superior, able to command the nuances of class differentiation, and to interpret the poet’s intentions through the sprinkling of dust. Comparing Larkin’s verse with Hardy’s, Bayley notes that ‘His [Hardy’s] verse is more casually attached to the world than Larkin’s can afford to be, and its banality is never so meticulous, so advertently adroit.’³⁷⁾ The separation of Life and Art here is a form of class-consciousness; detachment is maintained by an absorbed obsession with meticulous banality.

In Raban’s account, though never in Bayley’s, the narrator is distinguished from Larkin, and from Poetry, to protect what he describes as the ‘extraordinarily clean and austere metaphor’ in the poem’s conclusion from contamination by the ‘welter of shabby details which went to compose the first five stanzas.’³⁸⁾ Here is the rest of the poem:

So it happens that I lie
Where Mr Bleaney lay, and stub my fags
On the same saucer-souvenir, and try
Stuffing my ears with cotton-wool, to drown

The jabbering set he egged her on to buy.
 I know his habits—what time he came down,
 His preference for sauce to gravy, why
 He kept on plugging at the four aways—
 Likewise their yearly frame: the Frinton folk
 Who put him up for summer holidays,
 And Christmas at his sister's house in Stoke.
 But if he stood and watched the frigid wind
 Tousling the clouds, lay on the fusty bed
 Telling himself that this was home, and grinned,
 And shivered, without shaking off the dread
 That how we live measures our own nature,
 And at his age having no more to show
 Than one hired box should make him pretty sure
 He warranted no better, I don't know.

(102-3)

The extraordinarily clean and austere metaphor draws together the size of Mr Bleaney's room and the dimensions, the scope of his existence. However, to sustain that cleanliness it is necessary to overlook the larger box that measures Mr Bleaney's nature, which is the poem, and indeed, when reading the line 'how we live measures our own nature', the 'welter of shabby details' is to be taken as 'how we live'. The clean and austere metaphor is congruent with all the other details. The strategies by which Larkin leads a reader to the recognition of this life's limitedness are effected through the poem by the shifts of class accent and language. Bernard Bergonzi has noted in Larkin's verse 'a constant play between linguistic registers in a manner characteristic of educated but *déclassé* English speech; more emphatically, he can move between low, even obscene colloquialism to high "poetic" utterance and back in the compass of a single poem.'³⁹ The poetry and the advertently adroit banality are one in so far as they support the detachment of the narrated position from Bleaney, the problem in this poem that a 'here' and a 'there' have occupied the same box.

Veronica Forrest-Thompson points towards how limitedness in life is constructed in the writing:

the 'Flowered curtains thin and frayed', 'the strip of building land' equally refer back to the non-verbal world we already know. Similarly, the 'reflections' [...] on Mr. Bleaney's room—take us into the mind of the meditative poet, his reflections when confronted with the external world which we do not question and cannot escape.⁴⁰⁾

The passage Forrest-Thompson refers to also indicates how the characterization of Bleaney's room by the poem's 'I' voice cannot be separated from 'the poetry'. The description of curtained window and strip of building land is situated between the two statements made by the landlady, before the narrator has been introduced. What the landlady interrupts is not the narrator, as Raban suggests, but an unmarked voice of apparently neutral description; and the second of these unattributed passages, an inventory-like list, is interrupted by the narrator with 'I'll take it'. He then speaks the rest of the poem.

These two brief passages, which may be attributed to the narrator retrospectively, are first the poetry of an absent authorial regard, the neutralized description of the room without Mr Bleaney, the visible limits of his nature. What most characterises this world is its being reduced by adjectives and made limp with token verbs, or inert with no verb at all: the 'window shows a strip of building land,/ Tussocky, littered.' Work in this sentence is done by the enjambment serving to emphasise 'Tussocky', which juts into the glimpse of window and land. Wishing to present the restricted visual field of Bleaney's room, the poet limits it by the mimetic device of reducing to a vestige the capacity of poetry to enter and animate the scene. Mr Bleaney's world can be measured (the curtains falling to within five inches of the sill) and it can have adjectival qualities attributed to it, dirtying it mostly; but the word 'Tussocky', a dactyl among iambs, enlivens the world outside the window, a deft economy of limitedness, for the poem cannot be too vestigial.

The verb 'show' emphasises the building land as a fixed boundary mark not to be attended to by the poet. The window simply has to be transparent, while the building land has to be inimically opaque, an opacity shared by the inventory: 'Bed, upright chair, sixty-watt bulb, no hook'. This part of the poem is more inert than the narrated remains of Bleaney's residence, for these objects

do not have the distinction of serving as emblems for Bleaney's life: 'the same saucer-souvenir' stands for Bleaney, positioning him socially, in a way the 'sixty-watt bulb' does not. The personalized lineaments of Bleaney's room resemble the hardly legible carbon copy of a Des Esseintes. Just as the aristocratic aesthete's rooms were decorated and filled with symbolic ornament to objectify the nuances of his personality, so the details of Bleaney's life and style are characterized through his habits and his tastes—not a liqueur harmonica, but sauce rather than gravy. The two men's emblematic ornaments differ in this respect: for the Decadent, the transcendence of his subtle personality is projected onto the objects themselves, and the transparency of being able to 'show' that personality is attributed to them, while, at the same time, this transparency, and the sophistication of the objects, grant an ineffable dimension to the limits of the aesthete's physical self. Mr Bleaney's world and Larkin's poem are composed of inert and opaque nouns whose function is to engender in the speaker 'the dread/ That how we live measures our own nature' by fixing the threateningly reduced dimensions.

As in 'Reasons for Attendance' the security of this bleak view is hedged around by the doubt of possible misjudgement. The hedging can be felt in the unstable syntax of the final sentence. It hesitates to attribute to Bleaney those thoughts which the final half line of the poem place in the narrator's mind, after a reader has been led to assume them to be Bleaney's. The 'I don't know' withdraws the speculation 'If he stood', syntactically, but seems to confirm the sense that 'I don't know' how he shook off the dread 'That how we live measures our own nature'. The drama of the poem is founded upon a fear of being identified with Bleaney by sharing the limits of his life. The individuality of the 'I' is threatened by Bleaney's residual proximity and defends itself by characterizing him in its distancing style: 'kept on plugging at the four aways'. Beyond any division between Life and Art or banality and Poetry, in an inescapably social context, the distances and divisions which Larkin's poems construct may produce a form of solidarity and consolation—but for whom?

VI

In 'Mr Bleaney' the separated participants, Bleaney and the speaker, have distanced relationships to the detail deployed in the poem. For Mr Bleaney it is sauce and not gravy, a television set,⁴¹⁾ a saucer-souvenir, Frinton and Stoke, while for the speaker it is the metaphor of which Raban spoke, identifying now the speaker's hesitant meditation with the poet's achievement: 'As Larkin gets into his stride in the last, breathlessly long sentence he retrieves an extraordinarily clean and austere metaphor'.⁴²⁾ The convenient division between Art and Life makes possible the praise Bayley and Raban have for Larkin's poems. If Art may possibly fail the speaker in 'Reasons for Attendance', it still consoles him for missing life; its possible failure is the occasion for its success.⁴³⁾ Similarly, if 'Mr Bleaney' fails to animate the banality it catalogues, still it transcends that banality in its conclusion, if hesitantly. Thus Bayley can write:

Larkin does two things which are so uncommon today as to be almost unattainable in poetry and in art generally. First, like Keats, he makes 'the disagreeables evaporate': he creates supreme beauty out of ugliness, emptiness and contingency, the trapped and the doomed. Secondly he keeps us continuously interested in himself, always wanting to hear more about him.⁴⁴⁾

Outside the Art-Life convention these two achievements are incompatible. The 'us', 'him', the ugly, 'the trapped and the doomed' are divided from each other, and within ourselves.

In 'The Whitsun Weddings' a series of distances separating the poem's detail, its observed protagonists, its speaker, and its themes, impedes the desired solidarities, the consolations, and makes dubious this poem's version of both the 'untalkative, out of reach' and the 'fishy-smelling/ Pastoral' in 'Here'. 'The Whitsun Weddings' concludes:

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.

(116)⁴⁵⁾

Bayley notes: 'The romantic beauty of those last images is also packed with a dense and down-to-earth suggestiveness of sex and longing'.⁴⁶⁾ The simile of sexuality, 'like an arrow shower', introduces a pastoral dimension to urban experience. The divergence between the poetic theme of fertility and the details of a limited world with its other people (the weddings, the postal districts) occurs in the development of the fecundation simile. Through the association of the London postal districts with wheat fields, and the arrival of the train with sexual metaphors, falling, arrows and rain, Larkin tries to combine the 'out of reach' natural processes and the 'fishy-smelling' pastorals, the suburbs and postal districts. This significance, the transcendent meaning that the poet discovers in his travelling coincidence (all the weddings) is obliquely and tactfully introduced into the poem. The provisional nature of the combining is hardly concealed. Its improvised simile leads Bayley to read the conclusion as a reassertion of division: "All the power that being changed can give...": the power of the poem—and the poet knows it—is in the function of *not* being changed.⁴⁷⁾ Is the conclusion to the poem an attempt at combining the weddings with their 'natural' significance? Or does the curious simile, like a conjuring trick, serve to stress the unlikely conjunction of the wheat and postal districts, re-emphasising thus the division between Poetry and banality? Could the poem do both consistently, and honourably?

Davie has noted that:

the collision between the organicism of wheat and the rigidity of 'postal districts' is calculated. It is the human pathos of the many weddings he has seen from the train which spills over to sanctify, for the poet, the postal districts of London, the

train's destination; the human value suffuses the abstractly schematized with the grace of an organic fertility.⁴⁸⁾

He has argued that the poem's success is achieved in the face of an anxiety on the part of contemporary poets in an urban, consumer civilization about the disappearance of imagery for the course of the seasons and the cycle of fertility in farming, a disappearance which distances poetry from sources that would maintain a continuity with the nature poetry of previous centuries:

Can we believe that it makes no difference to the potency of these ancient images, when more and more, as poets and readers, we know water only as it flows from a tap; when we can go from one year's end to the next without seeing a wheatfield, and when the bread we eat—chemically blanched, ready-sliced, untouched by human hand—bears no perceivable relation to the wheat-ear; when we talk and live no longer amid stone but amid concrete?⁴⁹⁾

The works of man are no longer taken as associated with natural fertility. So the bulk of Larkin's poem, made up of an urbanized scene and consumer items, is divorced from its apparent significance. In the 'here' of Larkin's landscapes the appearances of different scenes and the people who inhabit them are 'there', hardly able to bear the significance that they nonetheless exist in the 'here' of the poem's stanzas to enact.

VII

This contradiction is pressed upon Larkin by two impulses inherited from Pastoral and Romantic poetry which the industrialized landscape of Britain has divided against themselves. In the opening chapter of *Some Versions of Pastoral*, Empson makes a criticism of its myths: 'By comparing the social arrangement to Nature he [the Gray of the "Elegy..."] makes it seem inevitable, which it was not, and gives it a dignity which was undeserved.'⁵⁰⁾ Davie's praise for the fertility simile at the end of 'The Whitsun Weddings' assumes that the newly-weds are given a dignity by this poetic strategy.⁵¹⁾ Yet the division between the social arrangement, 'postal districts', and Nature, 'fields of wheat', which Larkin's poem also emphasises, simultaneously withdraws the in-

evitability of their dignity—and indeed the poem has gone out of its way to indicate how its subjects are not simply dignified:

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

Marked off the girls unreally from the rest.

(115)

The act of dignifying in the poem's conclusion is restricted to reader and writer; but it is a partial act whose strategies are derived from and retain signs of the ambition to reconcile the divided experiences of a social condition:

*The poetic statements of human waste and limitation, whose function is to give strength to see life clearly and so to adopt a fuller attitude to it, usually bring in, or leave room for the reader to bring in, the whole set of pastoral ideas. For such crucial literary achievements are likely to attempt to reconcile some conflict between the parts of a society; literature is a social process, and also an attempt to reconcile the conflicts of an individual in whom those of society will be mirrored.*⁵²⁾

Many of Larkin's poems are a hybrid of these pastoral ambitions. They are hybrids because the terms to be reconciled—the individual, his subjects in poems, the readers, certain facts about experiences such as death, sexuality, love and work—may only be partially reconciled by a re-emphasised splitting. The poet's reconciliations are temporary, and the consolations they bring, doubtful. This re-emphasised splitting is a retention of the poet's special view.

Mr Bleaney's existence is delimited by the objects associated with him; so too for those involved in the weddings. Whereas in 'Mr Bleaney' the objects and appearances of the world are inanimate, fixed and opaque, here, where the theme is love and fertility, the details are simultaneously transparent and opaque. The girls are marked off 'unreally from the rest' by 'the perms,/ The nylon gloves and jewellery-substitutes,/ The lemons, mauves and olive-ochres'. 'The Large Cool Store' indicates what 'unreally' means in 'The Whit-

sun Weddings'. Its similar list of feminine colours, 'Lemon, sapphire, moss-green, rose', show:

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

(135)

Because they seem 'natureless', the poet of 'The Whitsun Weddings' must make their world of 'postal districts' like 'squares of wheat' and the train of their event 'like an arrow-shower/ Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.' Larkin's reading of consumer items seems a version of eighteen-nineties decadence where the trembling of the nightie intimates the consummation of an aetherialized passion. In 'The Large Cool Store' this promise introduces the theme of unfulfilled expectations and the transparency of the ecstasies is wistfully discredited. In 'The Whitsun Weddings' the girls are 'marked off unreally from the rest' to propose the prospect of love; yet Larkin's attitude to the clothes they wear, and how they look, renders them opaque. This gives another meaning to the division by which the poet knows, as Bayley suggests, that the power of the poem is 'in the function of *not* being changed.'

I have discussed the separation, though threatened by doubts and hesitations, of the poet 'here' from the landscape and other people 'there' which serves to confirm the individuality of the poet, distinct from that which he describes, and to contrast with the significances and themes the poet discerns 'there'. Boris Pasternak's autobiographical sketch *Safe Conduct* includes a critique of the romantic artist: he has Mayakovsky in mind. It could characterize, though in a contradictory and defended form, Larkin's position:

But outside the legend, the Romantic scheme is false. The poet who is its foundation, is inconceivable without the non-poets who must bring him into relief, because this poet is not a living personality absorbed in the study of moral knowledge, but a visual-biographical 'emblem,' demanding a background to make his contours visible [...]⁵³

This picture fits Larkin, but with the proviso that the internal conflict of the poems discussed is founded upon a denial of many characteristics of the unregenerate and emblematic romantic artist, though without a rejection of his position as the outsider.⁵⁴⁾ This position, whether lonely individual, bohemian artist, or man outside a dance hall, renders Larkin's landscapes and his people as sadly negated and banal, but present and necessary to make his contours visible.

The distance a romantic artist puts between himself and his subjects troubles the pastoral ambition to reconcile some conflicts between parts of a society. Industrialization divided the imagined homogeneous landscape of Pastoralism, where in fact the landowner, tenant and labourer lived within the same landscape, their often unstable relationships secured in art by Pastoral reconciliations. Romanticism adopts from Pastoral an objection to the urban and industrial, appearing to sustain a continuity in nature poetry. However, as Empson pointed out: 'the Romantic Revival was largely engaged in reviving not only the Augustan cult of independence but the perversions of traditional myth by which it was expressed; the chief difference was that the poet now stole the dignities of the swain and the hero for himself, omitting to add irony'.⁵⁵⁾ Even with irony, Larkin's romanticism silently assumes the dignities of the swains, who have become the 'residents from raw estates, brought down'. Thus Bayley can say that Larkin 'keeps us continuously interested in himself, always wanting to hear more about him.'⁵⁶⁾

On the poet as tragic hero, Empson concludes: 'the poet obtains a vision of eternal extrahuman beauty for an instant, by magic, at great cost, and then faints back to the normal life of the world.'⁵⁷⁾ In Larkin's hands this structure is revised, so that he may appear to create 'supreme beauty out of ugliness, emptiness and contingency, the trapped and the doomed.'⁵⁸⁾ This achievement is at odds with attempted solidarities and conciliations, for in working up to this transformation the poet does not draw himself and his readers among the trapped and doomed. Larkin's poetry distances part of ourselves as readers from ourselves as subjects so as to transmute an ugliness, even an emp-

tiness which may be cherished as 'a defence against the feeling of absolute loss'⁵⁹ into a form of supreme beauty. In 'Faith Healing', the women are described as 'Moustached in flowered frocks', but then, its readers are to believe that—

In everyone there sleeps
 A sense of life lived according to love.
 To some it means the difference they could make
 By loving others, but across most it sweeps
 As all they might have done had they been loved.
 That nothing cures. An immense slackening ache,
 As when, thawing, the rigid landscape weeps,
 Spreads slowly through them——that, and the voice above
 Saying *Dear child*, and all time has disproved.

(126)

This may be enjoyed to the full only if we acknowledge ourselves and the lives of others as unquestionably trapped and doomed; that is, if we finally accept with the author that what we love, along with that in us which loves it, is absolutely lost. Not drawn closer by being divided from life, we are caught between its negation and transcendence. And this occurs should readers for one moment doubt the 'conspiracy of secret equanimity' between themselves and the writer, imagine themselves for one moment closer to his subjects than his public—yet not necessarily trapped and doomed. The divisions which Bayley defines are not between Larkinian art and ordinariness, but between one form of life (which includes reading and writing poems, listening to art) and another (doing the things other people do in Larkin's poems). The arbitrariness of this division, and the ease with which both sides of it may be co-extensively inhabited, indicates a deception, a self-deception perhaps, that Larkin practised so as to remain less-deceived: he appears the fondly responsible poet of an English landscape⁶⁰ with figures and distances which is fraught with divisions between 'here' and 'there' separating the poet and his art from their apparent world. Thus, if readers are as one with the poet, they too are neither here nor there.

ing with the orientations and characters of these two words, 'here' and 'there', for most of his active life as a poet. They are filled with an intense sharpened awareness of what is involved in the 'million-petalled flower/ Of being here', which Bayley believes Larkin makes more vital for us precisely because he writes of having missed it. Larkin's having missed it, if indeed he did exactly, is articulated in his geographies of displacement and envy, of being 'here' but hankering to be 'there', of finding that 'here' is just another 'there' you no longer want, and finally, that however much you wish to be 'here' soon you will not be able to stay. His last large poem, 'Aubade' also returns to the words I have been harping on: 'Not to be here,/ Not to be anywhere,/ And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true.' (208)

That is not the place to end, for 'Aubade' is a weaker poem than 'The Old Fools' in which Larkin's devices are tired and strain to remain less deceived to the end. This leads the poet to make remarks about facing death which are neither true nor kind:

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.

(209)

Death for Larkin is the great social leveller. It is where all the heres and theres dissolve, and the sense of deprivation ('Deprivation is for me what daffodils were for Wordsworth'⁶²) is removed. No one is deprived of death. It would be possible to think that Larkin's great subject was sadness, but perhaps wrongly. Larkin's theme was the uneasiness produced by social envy, by seeing in the lives of others (Dockery, Arnold, the young mothers in the parks, the lecturer in a Comet, newly married people on a train) something he himself has missed, something he might not have cared to have, but could also be drawn towards as the life others enjoyed. Also in 'Italophils', Davie discusses the period 1959–1964 and reflects that 'the temper of my nation had drastically changed. What has been called the politics of envy, which I sometimes think

of as the politics of self-pity, had sapped independence, self-help and self-respect.’⁶³ Larkin wrote a poem called ‘Self’s the Man’, comparing and contrasting himself with Arnold, a husband and father, in November 1958. English society is still driven by envy and Larkin’s poetry is a struggle to make something of the divisions and displacements that occur in a country which attempts to sustain its economic growth and political order by deploying a destructive vice as the motive force for all that is to be praised. Larkin has said: ‘Some time ago a writer said to me—and he was a full-time writer, and a good one—“I wish I had your life. Dealing with people, having colleagues. Being a writer is so lonely.” Everyone envies everyone else.’⁶⁴ Larkin’s poetry is a complaint against the social and individual processes of envy, and what they were and are doing to a place in which he did not exactly feel at home:

No, I have never found
The place where I could say
This is my proper ground,
Here I shall stay [...]

(99)

Places get the poets they deserve. Philip Larkin is now regarded as the most important poet of England since the Second World War; it is as well to know what he is telling the English about themselves.

Notes

- 1) Donald Davie, *These the Companions* (Cambridge, 1982) p. 123.
- 2) Page references in parentheses refer to Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems* ed. Thwaite (London, 1988).
- 3) ‘I don’t mind troops being brought home if we’d decided this was the best thing all round, but to bring them home simply because we couldn’t afford to keep them there seemed a dreadful humiliation. I’ve always been right-wing.’ Philip Larkin, *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955–1982* (London, 1983) p. 52.
- 4) See Donald Davie, *Collected Poems 1950–1970* (London, 1972) pp. 56–7.
- 5) See Charles Tomlinson, *Collected Poems* (Oxford, 1985) pp. 31–2.
- 6) *Required Writing*, p. 47.
- 7) Charles Monteith, ‘Publishing Larkin’ in *Larkin at Sixty* ed. Thwaite (London, 1982) p. 41.

- 8) But see Janice Rossen, 'Philip Larkin Abroad' in *Philip Larkin: The Man and his Work* ed. Salwak (Basingstoke, 1989) p. 49: 'The prospect of the journey and festivities seemed to Larkin at the time to be "VERY FAR from all very well", as he wrote in a letter to Sir John Betjeman.'
- 9) *Required Writing*, p. 55.
- 10) See Ian Hamilton, 'Four Conversations' in *London Magazine* vol. 4 no. 8, Nov 1964, pp. 71-7.
- 11) Barbara Everett, *Poets in Their Time* (London, 1986) p. 238.
- 12) Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin* (London, 1982) p. 73.
- 13) Michael Hamburger (anonymously), 'Poetic Moods' in *TLS* no. 2807, Friday 16 December 1955, p. 762.
- 14) Michael Hamburger, 'Philip Larkin: A Retrospect' in *PN Review* 60, vol. 14 no. 4, 1987, p. 76.
- 15) *Required Writing*, p. 67.
- 16) It has been increased by the restoration from the first edition of *High Windows* of an error or misprint in 'Posterity', *Collected Poems*, p. 170, whose penultimate line should probably read 'Not out for kicks', as in the paperback reprint of *High Windows*, rather than 'Not out of kicks', which doesn't mean anything.
- 17) *Poets in Their Time*, p. 236.
- 18) Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres complètes* 2 vols., ed. Pichois (Paris, 1975) 1, p. 114.
- 19) See *Required Writing*, p. 76 where he says 'You must realize I've never had "ideas" about poetry.' His reviews and essays in the same volume, however, contain much good sense and indicate sure instincts about the art.
- 20) Donald Davie, 'Larkin's Choice' in *The Listener* Vol. 89 no. 2296, 29 March 1973, p. 421; and see Barbara Everett, 'Art and Larkin' in *Philip Larkin: The Man and his Work* pp. 129-39, where she defends the poet's apparent 'philistinism'.
- 21) John Bayley, *The Uses of Division* (London, 1976) p. 170.
- 22) *Ibid.*, p. 180.
- 23) Miriam Gross asked Larkin, 'Did you dance as well as listen to jazz?' to which he replied that it was 'Not a jazz thing' and 'you had to do it with somebody else'; asked about Oxford men's colleges accepting women, he said: 'I'm a little envious, too: it would have been nice to have been part of the experiment.' (*Required Writing*, pp. 50-1.).
- 24) See Hilary Kilmarnock, 'A Personal Memoir' in *Philip Larkin: The Man and his Work* p. 156 where she records that Bechet's 'Blue Horizon' and Beiderbecke's 'Davenport Blues' were played at his Memorial Service on 14 February 1986 in Westminster Abbey.
- 25) Donald Davie, 'Remembering the Movement' in *The Poet in the Imaginary Museum* ed. Alpert (Manchester, 1977) p. 72.
- 26) In his 'Introduction' to the second edition of *The North Ship* (London, 1966) pp. 9-10, Larkin explains that 'The predominance of Yeats in this volume' was an 'infatuation with his music' and that, thanks to the influence of Hardy's poetry 'when reaction came, it was undramatic, complete and permanent'. My claim is that reaction to a

- Yeatsian relation of artistic outlook to quotidian life was less complete.
- 27) See *Required Writing*, p. 84 where Larkin notes: 'To write a poem is a pleasure: sometimes I deliberately let it compete in the open market, so to speak, with other spare time activities, ostensibly on the grounds that if a poem isn't more entertaining to write than listening to records or going out it won't be entertaining to read.'
 - 28) Donald Davie, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (London, 1973) p. 64.
 - 29) Louis MacNeice, *The Collected Poems* ed. Dodds (London, 1979) p. 18.
 - 30) It is hard to imagine Larkin unaware of Empson's work, and in his *Paris Review* Interview he jokes with the title: 'A writer once said to me, if you ever go to America, go either to the East Coast or the West Coast: the rest is a desert full of bigots. That's what I think I'd like: where if you help a girl trim the Christmas tree you're regarded as engaged, and her brothers start oiling their shotguns if you don't call on the minister. A version of pastoral.' (*Required Writing*, p. 70)
 - 31) For this and the following citation, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry*, p. 81.
 - 32) This and the three following citations are from Bayley, pp. 168, 172, 180 and 171.
 - 33) See *Poets in Their Time*, pp. 240-1. Given the demonstrable connections between Mallarmé's poem and Larkin's, the following remark seems particularly wrong and perverse: 'Foreigners' ideas of good English poems are dreadfully crude: Byron and Poe and so on. The Russians like Burns. But deep down I think foreign languages irrelevant. If that glass thing over there is a window, then it isn't a *Fenster* or a *fenêtre* or whatever. *Hautes Fenêtres*, my God! A writer can have only one language, if language is going to mean anything to him.' (*Required Writing*, p. 69)
 - 34) Stéphane Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes* ed. Mondor and Jean-Aubry (Paris, 1945) pp. 33, 38.
 - 35) Larkin has acknowledged of this poem 'Absences' that 'I fancy it sounds like a different, better poet than myself. The last line sounds like a slightly-unconvincing translation from a French Symbolist. I wish I could write like this more often.' See Philip Larkin, in *Poet's Choice* ed. Engle and Langland (New York, 1962) p. 202, and quoted in Motion, p. 74.
 - 36) Jonathan Raban, *The Society of the Poem* (London, 1971) p. 31.
 - 37) Bayley, p. 174.
 - 38) Raban, p. 32.
 - 39) Bernard Bergonzi, 'Davie, Larkin, and the State of England' in *Contemporary Literature* vol. 18 no. 3, 1977, p. 356.
 - 40) Veronica Forrest-Thompson, 'Unrealism as the Poetic Mode for this Century' in *Spindrift* no. 1, 1977, p. 21. A different version of her discussion appears in *Poetic Artifice* (Manchester, 1978).
 - 41) Anthony Thwaite has expressed the possibility in conversation that it may also be a radio set.
 - 42) Raban, p. 32.
 - 43) Larkin has said, 'Poetry isn't a kind of paint-spray you use to cover subjects with. A good poem about failure is a success.' (*Required Writing*, p. 74.)
 - 44) Bayley, p. 182.

- 45) Louis MacNeice may also have provided a hint for this ending in the conclusion to part one of *Autumn Journal*, which also describes the opposite sex on a train approaching London:
- Her eyes inept and glamorous as a film star's,
 Who wants to live, i.e. wants more
 Presents, jewellery, furs, gadgets, solicitations
 As if to live were not
 Following the curve of a planet or controlled water
 But a leap in the dark, a tangent, a stray shot.
- (*Collected Poems*, p. 102.)
- 46) Bayley, p. 174.
- 47) *Ibid.*, p. 173.
- 48) *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry*, p. 66.
- 49) *Ibid.*, pp. 72-3.
- 50) William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London, 1935) p. 4.
- 51) Larkin seems to agree: 'The line, "Its postal districts packed like squares of wheat" refers to London, not England. It doesn't seem "diminutional" to me, rather the reverse, if anything. It's meant to make the postal districts seem rich and fruitful.' (*Required Writing*, p. 74)
- 52) *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- 53) Boris Pasternak, *The Collected Prose* (London, 1945) pp. 115-6.
- 54) Larkin was asked, 'As a bachelor, have you sometimes felt an outsider?' to which he replied, 'Hard to say. Yes, I've remained single by choice, and shouldn't have liked anything else, but of course most people do get married, and divorced too, and so I suppose I am an outsider in the sense you mean.' (*Required Writing*, p. 65)
- 55) Empson, pp. 206-7.
- 56) Bayley, p. 182.
- 57) Empson, p. 207.
- 58) Bayley, p. 182.
- 59) This is an allusion to a passage in Adrian Stokes's *The Invitation in Art*, which reads: 'Most urban individuals today seem to stomach well a predominantly hostile resonance from the visual world. For instance, we know of a particular warmth cultivated within the reserve of those who live among the overcast wastes of the industrial north. I have written elsewhere of an attachment to ugliness as a defence against the feeling of absolute loss [...] in Adrian Stokes, *Collected Writings* ed. Gowling, 3 vols. (London, 1978) 3, p. 285.
- 60) See, for instance, 'Going, Going' in *Collected Poems*, p. 189-90.
- 61) *Required Writing*, p. 54.
- 62) *Required Writing*, p. 47.
- 63) *These the Companions*, p. 133-4.
- 64) *Required Writing*, p. 62.