THEMES AND IMAGERY IN THE
POETRY OF PHILIP LARKIN

ABSTRACT

THESIS
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ABSTRACT

Philip Arthur Larkin became the most admired poet of England in the 1970s. Though rooted in the thirties, he was recognised as a different poet only in the late 1960s. The past forty years have witnessed various studies on his poetic theory and technique related issues as well as biography. Very few tried to make a close analysis of his individual poems categorising different themes and their imagery. This close textual analysis is a consolidated study of his major themes as well as the characteristic image patterns. Larkin published four collections with nearly ten years interval between each. The first *The North Ship*, often ignored as juvenalia, has been given especial attention in this thesis to trace original bearings of his poetic sensibility. The remaining three, *The Less Deceived*, *The Whitsun Weddings* and *High Windows* have traced phenomenal phases in his poetic development. The predominating themes and the corresponding imagery were found to vary from phase to phase. Each separate theme has its own very private set of images. The *Less Deceived*, *The Whitsun Weddings* and *High Windows* evidence the many phases in his poetic development. The prime concern of this thesis extends
beyond mere critical discussion of his poetry as a whole as has been
done so far. It concentrates upon the prominent themes and the
inter-woven imagery which establish his entire poetic universe

Chapter I lays bare the social, cultural and intellectual milieu
in which Larkin honed his creative instinct and reached the acme of
poetic excellence. Pre and post-war political and cultural upheavals,
literary movements, influences of different schools of poetry and
leading poetic figures as well as Larkin's biographical impact have been
discussed to determine his place as a poet. The Movement poetry of
1950s and Larkin's advertent or inadvertent indebtedness to it has been
considered also.

Since, this study finds that the theme of death has multi-dimen-
sional bearings and is approached quite unconventionally, Chapter II
gives it extensive treatment. Death, traditionally a mysterious
phenomenon marked by inevitability and impenetrability becomes in
Larkin an occurrence or event internalized as an intimately personal
encounter. Probing into its recesses Larkin rediscovered the meaning of
death without relapsing into the easy solution of immortality. The death
group of poems are apparently fear obsessed, but their manner of
deeper probe demystified the trauma offering simpler meaning to the mysterious phenomenon. The image cluster are quite unusual making the approach of death a felt, heard and seen experience.

The next chapter deals with the theme of Alienation, another predominant issue in Larkin's poetry. Analysis of poems in this segment finds that both external and internal constraints had contributed significantly to shape the withdrawal psyche conspicuous in Larkin's poetry. His disjuncted personal life much less than reflections of a contemporary shattered social and political ambience, latent scepticism and wariness alienated him from absolutes, dogmas, and rituals. This personal stance itself prompted a mistrust of emotions. It led to a concerted working on a group of poems in which Larkin very clearly emerged sceptical, agnostic empiricist and quite estranged from religious belief, social and traditional institutions, and absolutes. It was an incompatibility and a deliberate distancing, and, enclosed him within his own psyche.

The illusion of the freedom to choose because man is a trapped victim of events rather than personal decisions is what is inferred from the analysis of poems under Chapter IV. Enveloping all the
fundamental issues of life the Theme of Choice encompasses the poems which often appear to have treated other subjects, but are actually concerned with the theme of choice. These poems are dramatic monologues in which Larkin uses the speaker-personae to help cancel the available options, alternatively, so that, what finally emerges is negative sublimity in all that is left to existence.

This study also finds that Larkin treats themes, otherwise not so dominating with no less seriousness. His other preoccupations categorised by critics have been love, sex, change, time, old age, faithlessness and inconclusiveness. Among these, agnosticism, time and old age and incompleteness were thought more prominent, and therefore, Chapter V devoted to study these. Poems analysed under the theme of Agnosticism deduced that Larkin's ruthlessness was largely a part of self disillusionment rather than the expression of the post-war sceptical mood. Faithlessness as guarantee of personal integrity had long become an integral part of Larkin's psyche. The Self is jealously guarded against all challenges to its integrity. However, Larkin was not altogether irreligious. He felt a dire need of a secular faith which he often expressed in his poems. But Larkin did not approve the
concept of spiritual edification or eternal bliss pleaded by religion. Therefore, the Time-Theme poems state that time as eternity, or, immortality has little meaning. Time is in graspable and Past, Present and Future for a human being cannot exist all at once together. The Theme of Old Age too is full of its horrors, Larkin appears furious at the humiliation of old age and horrified at the thought of sensibility that would follow final decay.

Finally, there is the Theme of Incompletion. Death, Alienation, Time, Old Age and illusive Choice make the poet also think of incom­pletion. Poems worked out in this context specify that Larkin remains inconclusive about his themes in all poems prior to the appearance of High Windows. In this last collection he emerges direct and declarative, harsh and conclusively polemical. He bursts into lyricism breaking all constraints and restraints. Poems in this volume are witness to Larkin's persistent conflict between the identity of the 'self' and the perception of an aesthete. The 'self' is effaced for infinity and absence, the beauty of 'somewhere you're not.'

For a deeper probing into his poetry his image-cluster were to be anatomised to see how they become integral to themes. Larkin has
created his own universe of images which engross our imagination with all senses together. Since they grow out of the very subject, they can scarcely be seen apart. At times Larkin utilized conventional images but with a unique fervour. He treats his theme at very next attempt with newer and better words, phrases, epithets and image-patterns. His imagery is, therefore, direct reflection of his strong obsession with his subject. The conclusion, therefore, defines the manner in which the persistent themes and singular images intertwine into each other to impart to Larkin's poetry his own peculiar flavour of expression.
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MOHAMMAD ABBAS NIAZI
INTRODUCTION

Since the appearance of *The Less Deceived* in 1954 till date, criticism of Philip Larkin's poetry has had its variety. However, a study of the prominent themes individually has not yet been done. This thesis proposes to analyse outstanding themes in his poetry, as well as, mark the imagery through which the themes are successfully conveyed. With this in perspective Chapter I is specifically devoted to the context, and the background, in which Larkin evolved as a poet. The chapter covers the various stages of his poetic development, ranging between the influential bearings of the thirties in his formative period, and the period of consolidation in the seventies. There is also an effort to ascertain which of the different phases was comparatively more significant. Thus, the thirties, forties and the fifties, had to be given special emphasis. Of these thirties needed to be discussed in greater detail in order to explore the depth of his work. This apart, influences of individual writers with their respective poetic assumptions, as well as, the different schools of poetry with specific ideologies also needed attention. Thus, Auden, Yeats, Hardy, Eliot, Dylan Thomas, Louis MacNeice, Vernon Watkins and Hopkin were the poets speaking loud and they could neither be ignored nor did the poet wish to do so; infact, Larkin both accepts and also overcomes their influence. Next, there were theories and movements in poetry, like modernism, symbolism, romanticism and neo-
romanticism which Larkin professedly resisted. However, he seems to have yielded to them off and on too, though not very pronouncedly. Further, the social and political upheaval that extensively affected current European culture had to be taken into account, so that the contemporaneity of Larkin's work, and, the extent to which the intellectual milieu underwent change, could be sufficiently determined. What chapter I is intended to find out is how this totally transformed the social and cultural scenario; how it prevailed upon poetic taste, as well as, human relationships generally, and, in Larkin particularly; and how was relationship between 'self' and 'other' on the one hand, and, between 'society' and 'isolation' on the other affected. Infact, under these circumstances the very material of poetry was altered at the grass roots. Thus, the language of ordinary expression acquired a new accent and significance: infact, it was transmitted to a poetic idiom itself.

The chapter also explores how modern technology had its effect on approach and attitudes in general, and, Larkin's poetic thought in particular. In an inquiry about the nature and stages of Larkin's poetic development, 'the Movement' occupies a significant position. When the poet-members of this group emerged in the 1950s, Larkin was all set to claim due acclamation as a promising poet. Chapter I, therefore, deliberates on the characteristic features of the group. The possibilities of Larkin's indebtedness to these bearings are also discussed despite his denial about association or commitment to schools or theories of poetry. Some historicist critics think that transitional effects in the sphere of society and poli-
tics also became important. Thus, the concept of Welfare State that emerged after the Second World War, and, its failure to achieve the desired goal, also had its consequences that seriously shook the intellectuals of the day. Larkin’s creation of a persona, and, his strategy of a ventriloquist mask, and, the trend of restrictiveness are part of the general post-war mood. What is explored, therefore, is whether these moorings in deviousness lie in Larkin’s own ‘emotional scarring’, or did they represent a general contemporary trend?

Thus, Larkin’s personae might also attitudinise his own ambivalence in human relationships. The chapter also attempts to trace the development of Larkin as a poet in the four collections of his work, as, in some other unpublished poems. This thesis tries to give to Larkin’s early work, its due place in his poetry very particularly The North Ship, which has rarely been given close attention. Critics have usually begun with The Less Deceived when quite a considerable part of the real Larkin gets revealed in his early poetic efforts also.

Next, putting his poetic effort in perspective, three major themes were marked for specific study and allotted a chapter each for the purpose. The major themes were those of Death, Alienation and Choice. However, it was felt that some other themes still remained and these were treated separately in chapter V.

Death seems to be very significant in Larkin’s poetry. His poems very often conclude at the thought of mortality in very different material as their subject. Of course, death is a universally felt mysterious phenomenon, and,
a traditional subject for poetry. Yet, it appears to receive a peculiarly uncon-ventional treatment, not only at the level of technique, but also as a concept in Larkin’s work. Dismissing all transcendental and theological interpretations, he is always busy concretizing the abstract notion of death with startling conclusions. His concern is for the experience of the event, and this, along with the treatment his technique gives to the experience, was felt a potential to be explored. Therefore, beginning with Going Chapter II analyzes as many as eight poems which articulate Larkin’s gradual progress in the understanding of the live experience of death. To enumerate: there is the experience of approaching death; of the attendant fear; of its inevitability; and, of its very occurrence, all of which are communicated through vivid imagery. Often his poems have a direct confrontation with the gradual approach of death crystalized through visual images. It’s trauma is also dramatised as a collective experience that strikes at the very psyche of man. The approach of death is personified with manifest live images which may be felt profoundly like ‘a standing chill.’

Larkin’s next major preoccupation in poetry was found in its many expressions of alienation. Larkin appears quite disgruntled, disjuncted, and is thoroughly wary of his surroundings. His hankering is for an anonymity to be achieved in all possible ways. For this, his device of ‘persona’ or ‘mask’ renders his poems both dialectical and dialogic, so much so, that the poems become almost performative pieces. It is the persona or mask that helps him achieve his goal of anonymity. With a dispassionate look at existence his poetry seems poised to counter illusions of all kinds. This ulti-
mately results in helping him arrive at the attitude of indifference or neutrality towards emotional moorings also. Bereft of social and political commitment, he draws away even from the culturally transformed world around him. A staunch iconoclast and non-conformist, Larkin writes poetry of shattered absolutes, broken symbols and images, and, debunked dogmas and rituals of a despiritualized man, who is himself homeless wanderer. Chapter III, therefore, concentrates in 'Alienation', and, selects poems which appear instances of marked estrangement, a theme which almost blankets the bulk of Larkin's poetry. Illustrating the illusion of faith integral to human personality Larkin explores the instinctive inward withdrawal into the psyche of the post-war homeless wanderer. The mooring of the church is gone but some sort of psychological prop is felt urgently needed in this group of poems.

A lonely individual in absolute disjunction with his moorings, split into several personae is represented by a speaker, each one desperately looks for shelter. They are explicit in their dialectical and dialogic stance towards all social relationships. His poems seem justifying alienation in favour of art, but, at the same time emphasising the importance of personal preferences and individual compulsions in matter of life and art. Larkin likes to attack all that is conventional and yearns for an existence unfenced, which could be found into the region of 'nowhere', a state which symbolically remains unachieved. The thesis explores the possible extent the alienated soul of the poet succeeds in remaining estranged from all established conventions, and under the circumstances, what is it that the poet strives
The next major theme that Larkin's poetry appears to work at is Choice. This too is a core-issue. Chapter IV takes up the theme of Choice, an analysis of Larkin's poems in this context reveal existentialist bearings. His approach may not always conform to the philosophy of existentialism, still, a penchant for it may not be ruled out. By reinforcing the futility of choice through either predeterministic fate, or, a circumstantial chain of events Larkin emphasises awareness and interest in existence related queries. Issues like marriage, love, faith, art, work, sociability are worked out in terms of human relationships. These poems nullify the idea of freedom in choice and assert that circumstances, coerce a choice. Some representative poems analysed in chapter IV emphasize the point that failures in life possibly prompted passivity and wryness in Larkin's attitude to choice. Multivocal personae purposefully communicate multifarious versions of the Self, to annihilate identity and achieve 'negative sublimity' as the primary concern of Larkin's poetry.

Chapter V considers some persistent secondary themes. Though categorized secondary, they are often at the centre of Larkin's poems. These themes are Agnosticism, Time and Old Age, and the phenomenon of inconclusiveness. Chapter V deals with these subjects along with the imagery which helps to convey them. The chapter analyses poems to gauge the extent of agnosticism in his poetry. Specific attention was required to assess whether it is the general post-war sceptical attitude, or, Larkin's own disillusioned psyche that leaves him wavering between faith and faithlessness.
Though very close to existentialist ideology, his poetry does not appear purely irreligious. In fact, he appears to want to secularize the system of religion itself. The imagery which contributes to give a picture of this theme is also sorted out.

Also, there is in Larkin's work a persistent anxiety about Time and Old Age, a theme which could be discussed together with the theme of Death in Chapter I, had death not been so exhaustive a subject of his poetry as to need an entire chapter. The sense of Time grew so strong in his declining years that it almost overwhelmed the idea of decency. Vehemence and harshness seem to mark the poems about Time and Old Age.

Inconclusiveness, evidently a technique, also, seems to emerge as a theme in Larkin. And this idea of incompleteness is not confined to any specific issue; rather, it often encapsulates all other themes in his poetry. Therefore, a comprehensive view of his poetry taken under this theme, repeats poems which were already dealt with in earlier chapters.

There are many more poems which could be discussed under the broad canvas of these themes, and, also, the poems analysed in this thesis had various shades other than they have been considered for. But a line had to be drawn. For this reason only Larkin's poetic technique has not been dealt with in depth.

This then is a brief introduction to the material this thesis takes within its purview. Of course, the thesis itself shall evidence how this is done and with what success.

References to all the five chapters are given at the end of chapter V.
CHAPTER I

LARKIN AND HIS TIMES
It is a coincidence that Philip Arthur Larkin was born, in the year, *The Waste Land* was published. Though Larkin’s poetic career began in the late 1930s, his sensibility was nurtured under the influence of prevailing thought patterns of the 1920s and the early 1930s. It was the time when Eliot’s theory of modern poetry dominated the poetic horizon so completely that even a juvenile imagination could not fail to imbibe its basic principles. Larkin grew up when Auden, (who radically opposed modernism) was at the helm of his poetic career, and significantly dominated English poetry. In his maturing years, Larkin witnessed the poetic flourish of Dylan Thomas’ Neo-romanticism. The fifties were not poetically very significant, for by that time Larkin had discovered his own voice. Therefore, Larkin’s aesthetic development, with its span of thirty years may tentatively be divided into four stages: the twenties were the period when poetry took seed; thirties saw it evolve; the forties helped it grow; and, the fifties finally matured his poetic expression. Therefore, the twenties and the thirties were important for Larkin as a poet. However, the thirties were more significant, because his indebtedness to this decade is explicitly greater. And, since the thirties are considered a reaction to the twenties, it does not seem irrelevant to begin with a glance over the poetics of the thirties with its attendant social and political compulsions.

It is a well-known fact that the aftermath of the First World War, and the social and political cataclysm in Europe, left the common man bereft of his moral and cultural moorings. Challenges of reorganising society were abundant
because the most striking question was:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow out of this stony rubbish?\(^1\)

G.S. Fraser, while dealing with the background of The Waste Land sums up the despondency of the situation in the poem:

> The Waste Land....expressed better than any other poem of that decade the sense of hopeless drift which afflicted all the more sensitive members of the post-war generation.\(^2\)

The two remarkable social transformations that followed the First World War were the enhanced political strength of the working class, and, the rise of Bolshevism. This resulted in narrowing the social and economic gap between the upper middle class and the ordinary workers. In the intellectual sphere the revival of interest in Marx, and the general acceptance of Freud's ideology seriously inflicted the unconscious mind of the common man. The global discussion of Einstein's theory of relativity further shook the reliable absolutes.

Revolutions in thought with the corresponding transformation of social structure coloured the poetic taste and mannerism of the age also. As an effect, traditional poetry was repudiated in favour of symbolist and intellectual forms of poetic expression. T.E. Hulme, propagating the symbolist theory, attacked the romanticism in life and art, which, Ezra Pound too had called "blurry, messy....sentimentalistic mannerish".\(^3\) Hulme stressed 'discipline, precision', upon 'the exact curve of the thing' and 'dry hardness,' and, 'clarity'. This theory waged a war against 'self expression as literary ideal'. The untidiness and unwarranted expansiveness of Victorian poetry
was written off. Hulme writes:

I object to the slopiness which does not consider that

a poem is a poem unless it is moaning or whining about

something or the other.⁴

An explicit sense of disintegration, disquiet, and bitterness prevailed over the whole generation in the post-war period. Resultantly the themes of barrenness and frenzied sexual relationship strikingly recurred in many a novel and poems of the 1920s. Ferocity of language, in dealing with abrupt and broken images, mirrored the chaotic conditions as well as the shattered human sensibility of Post war Europe. Eliot's Prufrock, Gerontion and The Waste Land, as the archetype of these features, had immense influence on the younger generation of writers. Pound's Cantos, drawn on a structural canvas, consisting of fragments of contrasting anecdotes, voiced his agitation against the relentless industrialisation and ruthless urbanisation. Perceiving unhappiness and aggressiveness all around Pound longed for the world to retreat to 'a society of small peasant proprietorship'.⁵ Experimental poetry of the 1920s, was an extension of the general mood of restructuring the things anew, after the total disintegration wrought by the First World War.

The Imagist Movement spearheaded by T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, though short-lived, set the fashion of clear and precise images. It advocated the exclusion of every extraneous word 'that did not contribute to the presentation', as also freedom in matters of metrical regularity. Practice of 'verse Libre', initiated at the behest of the symbolists became widely ap-
plauded.

In *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (1917), the so-called manifesto of the new poetic theory and practice, Eliot interdicted the use of personality in works of art. Asserting objectivity to help achieve perfection in the artistic enterprise he writes:

The more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates.6

This complete disjunction of ‘art and event’ gave to poetry a new definition, quite contrary to the Romanticist’s perception of it. In the words of Eliot:

Poetry is not turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion, it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.7

Despite the fact that the early works of both Eliot and Pound echoed the sense of isolation of the poet from society, and the melancholy that accompanies that sense, yet this hardly seems to be in conformity with what they later pronounced as well as practised.

The thirties had its younger generation evince a remarkable fascination for Hopkin’s poetry. This young coterie was later classified as the Auden generation. It was impressed more by the rhetoric than by Hopkin the poet’s vision. Hopkin attracted attention for its technique as well as for its moral themes. What was most widely espoused was his innovative ‘sprung rhythm’ which emphasised the count of stresses rather than sylla-
bles. This poetic technique offered a compromise between the extra conversational suppleness of Eliot's poetry and the over-dreamyness of Yeats' early work. Besides, to the practice of poetry in the 1930s it seemed to offer a fascinating combination of freedom and order, and an easy and expansive unravelling of the line, with strong and regular rhetorical emphasis.

The poets of the 1930's who began to react against 'Themuted despairs or defeated ironies of Eliot's work' sought shelter under Hopkin. Appraising the literary milieu of the 1930s G.S. Fraser records:

To Young poets, also reacting against the more immediate influences, ......the positive assertive force of Hopkin’s poetry was inspiring.

Hankering to stick to their old beliefs, these poets seemed to have had the earliest quest for faith of some sort. Hopkin’s leanings towards nature and religious devoutness allowed him to express the traditional romantic sense of an immanent spirit behind the beauty of Nature without lapsing either into vague generalities or into semi-pantheism.

The magnitude of Hopkin’s impact can be assessed from Fraser’s remark:

.... a fair amount of work by the Young poets of the 1930s tends to strike us, today, as Hopkin’s-and-

Meanwhile, the remarkable progress of science and technology unfolded great extents of knowledge and experience. This created diversities in approach and attitude. It would not
be an exaggeration if it is maintained that there were no two poets of identical convergence.

Fraser claims:

...the journalistic immediacy which was one common quality of all four poets (W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Day Lewis and Louis MacNiece) in the 1930s was imposed by the immediate tensions of the time rather than by common qualities of temperament or talent.¹²

Despite the great appetite for poetry in the early forties, critics maintain that the decade failed to produce any good poetry. The decade historically witnessed record turbulence at the social and political fronts which had inevitably to find way in variegated expression in current literature. Ofcourse, experience got variety but literature had no solid ground on which to plant anything substantive. No doubt Robert Graves, Edwin Muir and Kathleen Raine did draw audience in good numbers. Yet an adjectival figure, as well as, accepted poetic standards were missing. A small group of poets vaguely called Neo-Romantics including Dylan Thomas, George Barker and Herbert Read tried to fashion the image preferring this to sheer statement in their poetry. They showed a distaste for conversational idiom, disliked sophisticated imagery, and any specific concern in current events; these were the attributes identified with the Auden school of poetry. Other poets linked to this generation of poets were Vernon Watkins, Nicholas Moore, Tom Scot and G.S. Fraser, all of whom wrote a poetry of unrestrained intellectuality; it was more ornamental and less civilized. Ofcourse, the neo-romantics did not accept the poet as an analyser to study images
on an intellectual plane. They believed that images are born out of an unconscious mind, and therefore carry their own logic, as also, a need to be explicated. This was primarily the influence of Surrealism which made its impact in the late 1930s. Though Breton’s Manifesto on Surrealism appeared in 1924, in France, it was revived in English poetry through impressive writings by Herbert Read and Gascoyne. Prior to this, Dylan Thomas’ Eighteen Poems in 1934, and George Barker’s anthology of Poems the following year, had already set the norms for this school of thought in art and literature. Being influenced by Freudian ideology, the Surrealists advocated free functioning of human mind. Stressing upon irrationality as the prime factor they made incongruity a fashion in art. Logic in argument, relatedness in images, and traditional forms in versification were confronted with a deliberate challenge. The Surrealists, having little interest in matters of day-to-day life, used crude reality of life as the take-off point in their effort to transcend the world. Thomas and Barker, as a matter of principle, disregarded logical reasoning, standard morality and social and artistic conventions. They discarded the idea of art as a deliberate creation which tantamounted to a recommendation for ‘automatic writing’. Writing poetry should be automatic, and not deliberate. Incoherence in style and content as a popular mode, was inherited by the poets of the 1940s. Larkin, was testing his poetic sensibility at this time. Earnestly imbibing the topical influences, he himself recalls:

Looking back, I find in the poems not one abandoned self but several......The undergraduate, whose work a
friend affably characterised as “Dylan Thomas”.\textsuperscript{13}

The impress is distinct in Larkin’s experiment with the characteristic astray analogies, broken syntax, non-logical and non-chronological order, wandering hallucinations, together with the bizarre, and, apparently unrelated images, in a good number of his poems. It now becomes clear that Surrealism obliquely or unobliquely affected English poetics for all the three decades, from the 1930s to 1950s. However, the 1950s marked a major shift in English poetry with the emergence of what became known as the Movement. It was set move by a group, of which, Larkin was considered an important member.

Therefore, placing Larkin in the context of English poetry, after the Second World War seems difficult, unless the Movement together with its antecedents is kept in proper perspective. Branded as ‘journalistic invention’ and ‘rigorously excoriated for its corrupt ideology, flawed poetic assumptions, theoretical ineptness and artistic inadequacies, the Movement was positively a response to the social and cultural conditions of post-War England. It was formally recognised as a school of poetry when Anthony Hartley noticed it in his review article Poets of the Fifties (1954). These new-bearing were found rising prominently in reviews and literary journals of the early fifties, so Hartley thinks:

\begin{quote}
New names in the reviews, a fresh atmosphere of controversy, a new spirit of criticism- these are the signs that some other group of poets is appearing on the horizon.\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}
However, Hartley too denied it acknowledgement as a school of poetry with a specific programme or manifesto. Rather, Hartley discerned a ‘group personality’ building up in the new generation with a ‘dissenting and non-conformist, cool, specific and analytical’ sensibility.

In fact, it was Robert Conquest’s Anthology of the Contemporary Verse, published in 1956, that finally proclaimed the new trend in English poetry and thought it a Movement. The Introduction to this anthology, generally considered the manifesto of the so-called Movement, made it a clear case of reaction against the romantic exuberance of the poetry written in the 1940s. Conquest thought that the ‘diffuse and sentimental verbiage’ of the forties were discarded in favour of ‘a rational structure and comprehensible language’, a genre championed by the new generation of poets. Disregarding social and historical circumstances of the post-war England as determinants of the shift in this trend of new poetry, Conquest diagnosed the poetry of the forties as ‘sick’, and, that of fifties as ‘new and healthy’. The poetry of the fifties, Conquest claims:

Submits to no great system of theoretical constructs
nor agglomerations of unconscious commands.¹⁵

Under the impact of modern philosophy, the new poetry sounded empirical in attitude as it yielded neither to mystical nor to logical experiences.

Whether Movement did ever exist, or, was it a coherent group of poets converging to a single poetic theory, with definite aims and objectives, has been an issue of fierce controversy among the critics. John Press, for instance, in his version states:
To what extent the Movement was more than a lively journalistic invention is not easy to decide.\(^6\)

Ian Hamilton sums it as a take-over bid. This controversy exacerbated when some of the group poets themselves shrank from acknowledging their association with the Movement. Larkin, above all, when asked by Hamilton about his commitment to the group, said that there was 'no sense at all.' In 1964, Larkin distanced himself from the group saying:

Bob Conquest's New Lines in 1956 put us all between the same covers. But it certainly never occurred to me that I had anything in common with Thom Gunn, or Donald Davie, for instance, or they with each other and in fact I wasn't mentioned at the beginning.\(^7\)

Thom Gunn, another group constituent, also remarked:

I found I was in it before I knew it existed.\(^8\)

Besides, there is further, a longer list of critics who, if they do anyhow accept the Movement as a tradition in English Poetry after 1945, also appear sceptical about the efficacy of the work produced by the group's writers. This critical opinion will be briefly considered later. Now it shall be worthwhile to discuss the socio-political scenario in the post-war years, along with the features by which this school of poetics is identified.

With the Labour Party coming to power in 1945, a Welfare State was proposed to establish in England in order to mitigate social and political injustices in a class conscious and politically aware society. Great hopes were attached to democratic ideals, and, a liberal humanistic attitude supplanted
an aristocratic, self-centred legacy. As a consequence, dignity of the individual was heightened and a man-in-the-street culture became popular. The general air of reconstruction in post-war England did not spare the literary ambience as well, and, a need was felt to create an ‘accessible’ unself-conscious art, to supersede the traditionally aesthetic and robust writing. The poets of the fifties espoused conventional forms, and, regular structures of rhyme and rhythm that had been lost since the thirties. Encouraged by the ideology of philistinism, unpretentiousness and irreverence, ‘highbrow art’ of the 1940s was commonly abjured. Hence the poetry of the fifties primarily became counter productive, as it too contained the theoretical excessiveness of art that characterised the poetry of their immediate predecessors. In addition to this, the tense Cold War years did not adapt themselves to the kind of writing that was persuasively charged with exaggerated emotions. A cool and rational approach, as reflected in the poetry of Movement, was a natural outcome. Hewison rightly observes:

The cold war tended to freeze public attitudes, and counselled silence about private ones. It recommended a guarded private life, in which only small gestures were possible,...."^{19}

But then, Welfare State, to a great extent, failed to minimise the class-diversion and social injustice, the trust in egalitarian ideals also collapsed. Writers tried to balance between traditional inheritance and contemporary demands. The ambivalent attitude of this generation towards various issues is symptomatic in this sense. The Movement poets, as representa-
tives, chose a non-committal, cautious stance in order to be on the safer side. They took special care to keep the private away from public. The cautious and sceptical bent of mind idealised neutrality in approach, as a desired necessity, because these writers were now confronted with two kinds of audiences: an academic elite class on the one hand, and, a generally democratised public on the other. Apart from this, a guilt-conscious and fear-striken England encouraged the poets to rebuild what had been lost. For this reason, they preferred unrhetoric expression, an ascetic tone, and, an informal idiom. Prevalent liberalistic and democratic ideologies did not accept any mystical and visionary image from the poet. Rather the poet was brought down to earth as a responsible citizen, well aware of his duties. Therefore, avoidance of direct comment and non-commitment to any political doctrine became part of a strategy.

Generally, the fifties are accredited as the inheritors of the thirties, and, the forties are considered shut to its influence. But, a close study of the fifties, indicates that they were neither a complete imitation of the thirties, nor were they a total reaction of the forties. Efforts were made to preserve the best from both the traditions. Poetry of the thirties was evidently marked by political commitment and ideological dedication. The neutral and defensive stance, of the fifties, was definitely a shift from the socialistic bearings of the thirties. And, of all the Movement poets, Larkin’s creation of a persona as almost a perpetual presence exemplifies this restrictive approach as a trend. Wit and irony, a characteristic trait of these poets, was of course, a defence-mechanism, but, avoidance of direct comment was
also in accordance with the urbane and academic poetry of civilised writers who were faced with an academic audience, now well in contact with its poets.

After the Second World War, the creative artist was more disillusioned, and he was not ready to be deceived easily. The air of scepticism in general outlook is abundantly manifest in Larkin’s gesture of a chastened common sense and tough intelligence, which typified the Dylanism of the forties. Larkin introduced an anti-hero image in his poems. It was not only Larkin’s unwillingness to be deceived but also a desire, in general, to stay sceptical of visionary occurrences. Reacting to the immediate influences, the Movement poets wrote a poetry unmystical in content, unobscure in expression, and, simplified in structure. A greater reverence for the real person, and, the real event was a deviation from the practised end of the thirties. Marked by philosophical detachment, their poetry was anti-dogmatic, and, more aesthetically pure. What they retained from the immediate influence, was precision, and, what they retrieved from the earlier generation, was clarity and intelligibility. Surveying the poetry of Movement, Stephen Regan notes:

Many of the poems are too neatly prescriptive and look like pieces of versified literary criticism. Movement poetics, as it comes to its own, makes its course between the Auden school and the Dylan tradition. It appears cool and rational and contrary to the inflated rhetoric and sentimental excessiveness of the neo-romantics. Aesthetic philistinism and chastened purity accompanying linguis-
tic arrangements are Movement typicalities, independent of any heritage. In his appraisal of Movement poetry in *Rule and Energy*, John Press discerns:

Cautious scepticism, empirical attitude, measured accents, alert wariness, with colloquial ease, decorum, shapeliness, elegance.²¹

It is in a language marked by: precision, gravity, decisiveness and clinching finality. It is for these reasons that critics have often referred to it as neo-classicism in English poetry.

Larkin was identified with Movement adventitiously. It was only after he had appeared in print in several literary journals and anthologies, in the early fifties, that he was associated with the Movement group for his distinctive poetic susceptibility typical to all other poets of the group. Poems in *The Less Deceived* show his analytical bent of mind and his ability to state complex ideas simply and with clarity. Andrew Swarbrick attributes Larkin’s identification with the Movement to the success of *The Less Deceived*. Most of the poems in this collection register close affinity with the Movement programme. To what extent his poetry conforms to the Movement ideology can better be determined only after analysing his poems individually done in the chapters that follow. But only a casual reading of *The Less Deceived* will help understand, how, for the most part, it falls in line with the principles the Movement stood for. Creation of persona with self-effacing, self-deprecating, modest and ironic stances synchronizes with the guarded, restrictive gesture. His persona, a real existing being, though urban and civilized in behaviour, is wary of the metropoli-
tan, as well as, the cosmopolitan culture of post-war England. Attitudinised ambivalence in matter of propositions, closely related to human life, is conspicuous in many of his poems, as is *Church Going* in *The Less Deceived*.

Despite all possible effort on his own part to detach himself from any group identity, Larkin’s representation with eight poems in D.J. Enright’s *Poets of the 1950s*, and, nine poems in Robert Conquest’s *New Lines* the ten major contributions to Movement Poetry, is ample evidence that he was very much a part of the Movement. Donald Davie, one of the notable members (though later a bitter critic) recommended some guiding principles in his *Purity of Diction in English Verse* (1952) which he expected the members of the group to follow. In this self-styled manifesto for the Movement, Davie prescribed certain poetic virtues, such as, a language of prose for poetry, a reasonable approach to issues, an expression of common experiences, as well as, promotion of community feeling among themselves, as also their readers, a moderate style, and, most significantly, demystification of poetic perception. Davie realized the value of a purified idiom, which he thought, was preferred by some of the late eighteenth century poets. He viewed that Conservatism was more important than innovation, in the situation that prevailed, for dignity of the individual human being first needed to be restored at that juncture. Critics have also reproved Larkin’s poems in the light of Davie’s thesis, because, Larkin was private rather than public, and, he wanted his poems to have their own characteristic universe. However, much different in its own characteristics, Larkin’s
poetry, of course, represents the new generation of poets, who, having identi-
tical social backgrounds, being all of lower middle-class, had assembled at
Oxford or Cambridge by virtue of their scholarship. Taking it up as a point
venture, they wrote a poetry of academic value and marked a movement in
the study of poetry, when the teaching of genre became an important part
of the university curriculum. The widely used pronoun ‘we’ in their poetry
as against ‘you’ in the poetry of the 1930s, shows that these poets were
trying to foster a communion with their readers, through a colloquial idiom
and affable gestures. A moderate and intellectual approach helped reached
a consensus amongst them. Larkin’s conversational accent and courteous at-
titude is expressive of this very community feeling. His persona is always
unpretentious, clear-headed, and courteously rational. I Remember, I Re-
member is an example of the ‘anti-romantic’ and the ‘anti-phoney’ aspect
of the Movement:

...I sat back, staring at my boots.

‘Was that’, my friend smiled, ‘where you ‘have your roots?’

No, only where my childhood was unspent,

I wanted to retort, just where I started.

(Collected Poems. p81*)

*- Collected Poems-Edited by Anthony Thwaite, Faber & Faber, London,
1988. All future references in this thesis to poems of Larkin will be marked
as CP., p.-
Larkin's early poetry is characterized by its austerity, caution, weariness, apprehension and the restrictiveness of the post-war years which also saw the establishment of a Welfare State. *The Less Deceived* has many poems which conform to this mood. The circumscribed technical accomplishments, turn on endings, and, inconclusive arguments in his *Reason For Attendance* and, *No Road* are some of the instances of technicalities identified with most of Movement poetry. Following the traditional iambic structure, his poems repeatedly develop through rational arguments. The emotional weariness in his poems is an archetype of the Movement's typical withdrawal from all and any kind of political commitment. There is a neutral tone as a stereotype in *Whitsun Weddings* and *High Windows*. In presenting his persona as an awkward and sceptical individual, wavering between two extremes, Larkin emerges the sole representative of social and cultural duality in post-war England.

The question whether Larkin gained recognition from affiliation with the Movement, or, the Movement benefitted from Larkin is too complex to be answered. His conformity and non-conformity with this programme has been discussed at length. From the very beginning, Larkin tried to break from the group, but his renouncement was more pronounced in 1955, when he dismissed the very idea of adherence to any poetic theory as fundamental to his poems. On one occasion, when Enright requested Larkin for an introduction to a volume of poems which Enright was compiling, the poet observed:
I find it hard to give any abstract views on poetry and its present condition as I find theorising on the subject no help to me as a writer.^^

This casts a shadow on Larkin’s trust in the principles, the Movement school espoused. Larkin never favoured the intellectual and cerebral poetry written by some of the Movement poets. On the contrary, Larkin’s poem often appears to carry emotion along. And, Maiden Name and Born Yesterday, among many others, are typical examples. Larkin echoed this dissension off and on, and once even wrote:

We seem to be producing a new kind of bad poetry, not the old kind that tries to move the reader and fails, but one that does not even try.^^

In The Pleasure Principle Larkin sounds indignant at poets who wrote poetry for self aggrandisement. He finds their poems habitually unintelligible because of unrelated references. They did not seem to aim at inculcating pleasure in their poetry. To the contrary Larkin claims:

But at bottom poetry, like all art, is unextricably bound up with giving pleasure, and if a poet loses his pleasure seeking audience, he has lost the only audience worth having, for which the dutiful mob that signs on every September is no substitute.^^

Larkin’s scathing attack on the kind of poetry, notably written by the poets of 1950s, lays bare his relations with the Movement and its poetic assumptions. Dissenting with the ‘academic sterility’, Larkin distances him-
self from it stating:

For my part I feel we have got the method right—plain language, absence of posturing, sense of proportion, humour, abandonment of the dithyrambic ideal—and are waiting for the matter: a fuller and more sensitive response to life as it appears from day to day..."^^

The real magnitude of Larkin’s poetic class, indeed, does not lie in following the lines of the Movement programme, rather, in following the lines of the Movement from his volumed poems *Whitsun Weddings* and *High Windows*. Grevel Lindop contributed an interesting article with the title *Being Different from Yourself: Philip Larkin in the 1970s*—published in *British Poetry since 1970: A Critical Survey* where Larkin himself is quoted from a radio broadcast that he would prefer to write ‘different kind of poems; that might be by different people’. Lindop quotes Larkin saying:

someone once said

that the great thing is not to be different from other people, but to be different from yourself. 26

In Samuel Hynes’ estimation ‘Larkin’s work is more expansive’ and ‘more wide ranging’. The majority of critics value Larkin greater than all other Movement poets. Stephen Regan perceives that in Larkin’s poetry, in contrast to the work of other writers belonging to the cliche that the Movement had become, not only is there a deeper imaginative apprehension of social experience and its contradictions, exemplified, but there is exhibited in Larkin a far greater range of formal and stylistic devices and a more pro-
found sense of the linguistic and aesthetic possibilities of modern colloquial English.

The Movement or its associated bearings may be a phenomenal phase, but the itinerary of Larkin's musings formally runs from *The Northship (1945)* up to *High Windows (1974)*. Diverse stances, or, attitudes and vulnerable moods implicit in Larkin's works affirm that he is undoubtedly a poet of contradictions. The chronology of his poetic expanse is too involved to pin him down to any single criterion. What he articulates in *The Less Deceived*, and, prose writing, in the 1950s deflects from what he had said and practised in *The Northship* and other writings in 1940s. *The Whitsun Weddings*, in 1964, and then *High Windows*, in 1974, post another diversion from his earlier practice and ideology. The metamorphosis is the consequence of the continuous introspection he practised, from the beginning, to examine his own personality and establish his identity as an artist. In the early poems, Larkin appears paradoxical, on the one hand he seems to yearn for identity, and, on the other, he tries to move away from personality. In this effort, the poet employs the use of a 'mask' through which he succeeds in partial self-revelation, as well as, in simultaneous anonymity. Andrew Swarbrick observes:

> He (Larkin) eventually constructs or 'finds', his identity by searching for anonymity.²⁷

Infact, Larkin's creative genius got shaped with an amalgam of varied influences including romanticism, experimentalism, symbolism, imagism, surrealism, neo-romanticism and academicism. In the introduction,
which he added to the later edition of *The North Ship* he confesses:

Looking back, I find in the poems not one abandoned self but several- the ex-school boy, for whom Auden was the only alternative to 'old-fashioned' poetry; the under-graduate, whose work a friend affably characterised as 'Dylan Thomas', but you've sentimentality that's all your own'; and the immediately post Oxford self, isolated in Shropshire with a complete Yeats stolen from the local girls' school. This search for a style was merely one aspect of a general immaturity."^{28}

Anthony Thwaite in his introduction to Larkin's *Collected Poems* maintains:

The earliest poems are what Larkin...called 'Pseudo-Keats babble.'^{29}

Despite his bravado against modernist poetry, evident traces of Eliot's reflection cannot be completely ruled out in his early poems, since the poetry of the 50s, is said to have revived the tradition of the 30s. Also, predominance of Auden in his poems does not come as surprise. His first ever poem published in *The Listener*, in 1940, entitled *Ultimatum*, presents a model of Audenesque elegance and vitality. By his own admission:

Auden's ease and vividness were the qualities I most wished to gain."^{30}

But Auden was substituted by Yeats as soon as Vernon Watkins visited the English Club in 1943, and, Larkin attended a meeting with him. Larkin
Impassioned and imperative, he swamped us with Yeats....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. 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.\(^31\)

Later, his reading of Hardy again gave a turn to his poetic impulse and he wrote Waiting For Breakfast in December 1947, which, more than anything else informs that ‘the celtic fever abated and the patient sleeping soundly.’

“When reaction came, it was undramatic, complete and permanent. In early 1946 I had some new digs....I used to read. One book I had at my bedside was the little blue Chosen Poems of Thomas Hardy.\(^32\)

Quick shifting, from one writer to another, suggests Larkin’s essential power of absorbing certain vital poetic practices in his formative years which ‘helped him to produce a better work of his own. Larkin himself says:

‘......in fact the principal poets of the day- Eliot, Auden, Dylan Thomas, Betjeman- were all speaking out loud and clear, and there was no reason to become entangled in the undergrowth of Poetry Quarterly and Poetry London except by a failure of judgement.’\(^33\)
However, attempts have been made (Larkin himself encouraged it by his Introduction to The NorthShip) to undermine the poems in The NorthShip as
humours of juvenilia, but, the volume acquires significance in many respects.
It not only provides the history of Larkin’s gradual poetic development, along with his experiments with different models, but it also records the successive failures he met with in his personal life. Swarbrick feels that the Larkin of The NorthShip never disappeared:

His whole career can be read of as the often unresolved conflict between a romantic, aspiring Larkin, and the empirical, ironic Larkin, between the aesthetic and the philistine.  

There were a number of reasons, from personal and psychological, to circumstantial, which were responsible for the contending dualities in his poetic personality. He was obstructed by his ‘fatal gift for pastiche’ which was an extension of his childhood interest in mimicry.

His early poems “....and many of their successors, in effect extend that gift for mimicry.” As a boy Larkin was a precocious reader. In his early age he perused through most of his father’s library which contained works by Hardy, Lawrence, Shaw, Bennet and Masefield. He recalls “....I must have read a book a day, ever, despite the tiresome interruptions of morning and afternoon school. He remained uncommunicative aloof and reserved because of the taxing d\text{\textregistered}abilities of short sightedness and stammer. Speech impediment, by his own admission, was ‘a source of deep psychological estrangement and emotional scaring’. For him, observed Tim Trengove Jones, “Writing was a way of van-
quishing fears about the diminishment of self,“ and, not ‘his tenderly nursed sense of defeat’ as alleged by Charles Tomlinson. In his essay, *Not The Place’s Fault*, published in 1959, Larkin recalled his boyhood at Coventry, to the time of his entry to Oxford in 1940. “I wrote ceaselessly...now verse, which I sowed up into little books, now prose, a thousand words a night after home work...”

The three years stay at Oxford proved crucial as his creative instinct got sharpened thoroughly, coming into close contact with Kingsley Amis, Noel Hughes and Montgomery.

Larkin also gained notoriety for his obsession with music. A peculiar passion for jazz has played an important role in his life. In the Introduction to *All What Jazz: A Record Diary 1961-68* published in 1970, he attacked non sensical modernism in all forms of art as represented by Parker, Picasso and Pound. It was when the reading of D.H. Lawrence brought him close to his society that he learned to express his ‘suppressed emotions and impulses’. In his essay on Jazz written in 1943, he exposed his close affinity with the Lawrentian concept of unconscious art:

Jazz is the closest description of the unconscious we have...The decay of ritual in everything from religion to the lighting fire is resulting in the insulation of the unconscious........Jazz is the new art of the unconscious, and is therefore improvised, for it cannot call upon consciousness to express its own divorce from consciousness.”

After romantic ideals failed his aspiration as an artist, a concealed wrath became
explicit in his wryness and was exposed in Toads and Money which remind us of the Lawrentian influence on the poet.

If personal life has anything to do with later attitudes it was the failure to get into civil service that probably accounted for his wryness and permanent intransigence. He was forced to seek a job of a librarian at Wellington, in Shropshire, which ran counter to his deepest dearest ambitions. In sharp contrast to Oxford, Wellington was a cultural desert. He had to cope with loneliness and frequently visited Bruce Montgomery who worked at a nearby school, but his lonely Wellington solitude, also made Larkin work relentlessly. Most of the poems in The NorthShip were the result of this prolific period. His second novel A Girl in Winter was also completed during this stay. The NorthShip comprises poems which the poet finished between 1942 and 1944. The early phases of his poetic career attain the metaphorical dimension of a rudderless boat, which, in its search of right direction, could even be influenced by the nudge of a current, and change course for sometime, if not permanently.

In a historical perspective, Stephen Regan has tried to see Larkin’s poems, written between 1938-45, as war-time poetry for the most part:

The insecurities of wartime Britain helped shape a poetry of restricted choices, quiescent moods and disappointed ideals, but in a more positive way produced a poetry of tenacious survival and vigilant awareness.40

This perspective is also supported by Larkin’s own comment:
....one had to live through the forties at one's most impressionable time....a lot of poems I wrote.....were very much of the age.41

Larkin contributed ten poems, mostly written between 1943-44, to the Poetry From Oxford in War time, an anthology published in 1945. These appeared in The NorthShip also, and, at about the same time. Utmost caution and uncertainty mark the mood of these poems. The Moon is full tonight, for instance, solemnizes the loss and the full moon 'definite and bright' is placed in contrast to the sceptical and chaotic world below:

The moon is full tonight
And hurts the eye
It is so definite and bright
What if it has drawn up
All quietness and certitude of worth
where with to fill its cup,
Or mint a second moon, a paradise?-
For they are gone from earth. (CP. p.274)

In the follow up, 'The horns of the morning' is pained to see the world full of unprecedented misery:

Here, where no love is,
All that was hopeless
And kept me from sleeping
Is frail and unsure;
For never so brilliant,
Neither so silent,  
Nor so unearthly, has  
Earth grown before.  
(CP. p.275)

One of the longest of the early poems After-Dinner Remarks, published in The Listener (Nov. 1940), carries a serious and sombre mood of ‘failure and remorse’ in the restrictive conditions of war. With war-time imagery, the poem sounds a warning of impending ‘horrors’ and ‘imminent death:

All the familiar horrors we  
Associate with others  
Are coming fast along our way;  
The wind is warning in our tree  
And morning paper still betray  
The shrieking of the mothers  
(CP. p.241)

Ultimatum is another despairing expression of fear-stricken Britain. It paints a state of hopelessness and lost faith in the ancient saying: ‘Life is yours’, because, ‘There are no tickets for the Vale of Peace’. As an elegy on the war-dead A Stone Church Damaged by a Bomb, published in Oxford Poetry (June 1943) describes the afflictions of war when ‘The dead are shapeless in the shapeless earth’ and ‘Nothing but death remained/ To scatter magnificence”. Many other poems written between 1940-45, such as, Observation, Conscript, New Year Poem, Out in the lane I pause, may be characterised as war-poetry for their immediate experiences of war-stricken Britain. Images of ‘night and darkness’, of ‘confinement and entrapment’, and ‘anxieties and dilemmas’ of ‘a society at war’, typify these poems to
show the emotional weariness of wartime Britain.

War poetry characterized a phase in Larkin’s early work, The NorthShip, the title poem, is also marked by the tension between the perfection of life, and work. He cannot resist the temptation to

Let me become an instrument sharply stringed
For all things to strike music as they please

(301)

but the problem was

How to recall such music, when the street
Darkens?, ........................................
and, that there were ..............................

Only hurrying and troubled faces. (301)

Oscillations between love and isolation, or, community and solitariness, or, work and leisure, echo very often in his poems reflecting this very same anxiety. Owing to this, poems in The NorthShip appear sullen in perception as well as imagery. In the XXIV poem of The NorthShip volume, romantic involvement, for example, is disdained and is thought not to help achieve perfection in art and therefore:

Love, we must part now.” because “In the past
There has been too much moonlight and self pity.

(280)

This mars in its implication, the artistic excellence of the earlier poetry. The title poem, The NorthShip, is allegorically drawn on a canvas of coldness and erotic love. His apprehension of sexual indulgence finds expression in the last
A Woman has ten claws,
Sang the drunken boatswain. (CP. p.305)

The main thrust of the poems in *The North Ship* is the issue of relationship between life and art which maintain their significance throughout his poetic career.

A study of Larkin's work prior to *The Less Deceived*, though less recognised and often forgotten, becomes imperative for its variety, as also, for the added benefit of helping to know him from his earliest days. The intervening period between the publication of *The North Ship*, in 1945, and *The Less Deceived*, in 1954, is marked by an abortive attempt at his first novel, *Jill*, in 1946, a second novel, *A Girl in Winter*, in 1947, and, also, the unsuccessful collections *In The Grip of Light*, in 1947. None of them could bring him the desired recognition. The reading public responded positively, yet his identity crisis remained unresolved. It continued to dominate the poems in *The Less Deceived*. The genesis of *The Less Deceived* lies in these successive failures.

Apart from personal regressions, *The Less Deceived*, has its roots in circumstances more disturbing than Larkin's Introduction to *The North Ship* cared to admit. The troubling circumstances were most probably the striking socio-political conditions of the post-war Britain. The illusion of a welfare state, created with the Labour Party coming to power in 1945, was deflated by 1951 when the party was ousted from power. Welfare programmes of a healthy free education, and, employment and housing did not
make much headway. The reason was lack of consensus among political parties. Stephen Regan observes:

Consensus became much more difficult to maintain in the 1950s.

The Labour Party’s slogan ‘Fair shares for all’, and, the Conservatives pledge ‘To set the people free’ as election campaigns, culminated in a fierce debate on true freedom which was cherished with great celebration after 1945. Britain’s dream of becoming a world power had also been shattered following its fast declining imperial power and clout.

In fact, The Less Deceived, may better be understood as the extension of the very mood of uncertainty and scepticism. The title itself converts Ophelia’s statement in Hamlet “I was the more deceived”. The ‘sad-eyed’ (and ‘clear-eyed’) realism as referred to by Larkin himself, in connection with this particular volume determines the extent of his disillusionment in ideals. Larkin strives in vain to make some compensation through a rationalistic and logical approach. Therefore, his polemics on work and leisure, marriage and isolation, love and sex takes up the major part of this volume.

However, Stephen Regan finds Alfred Ayer’s Language Truth and Logic (published in 1946) as an immediate influence on the substance and meaning of The Less Deceived. Ayer had insisted on the verification of any proposition after getting through ‘some possible sense experience’, in order to determine its integrity. Deception (previously titled The Less Deceived) incorporates the very notion of ‘verification of experiences and propositions’ which Regan perceives ‘a recurring impulse throughout The Less
Deceived. Larkin’s ‘sad-eyed and clear-eyed’ perspective, identified as the empirical bearing of Movement poetry was a part of the general tendency to re-evaluate traditional beliefs and values under the shattered post-war conditions. Utmost caution and implicit scepticism in The Less Deceived becomes symptomatic in this sense. Regan observes:

.........loss of power manifests itself in the wistful melancholy and elegiac lyricism of the poems, and it helps us to understand Larkin’s ‘sad-eyed’ realism.”

This may have the shades of his personal experiences also, including his reading of Hardy. Frustration in love, failure to gain fame, his disenchantment of routine life, and his concept about individual freedom in contrast to love, marriage and belief. Larkin’s claims that his poems in The Less Deceived, Wedding-Wind (completed in Sept. 1947), for instance, have their origin in Larkin’s romantic involvement with Ruth Bowman. Despite all hope for happiness, and the ecstatic mood of the poem, there seems concealed a scepticism about the permanence of the moment in the question:

Can even death dry up...? (CP. p. 11)

This ambiguity of feeling finds outlet in No Road, written in 1950, and in If, My Darling (May, 1950), which are explicit statements of his severance of relationship with Ruth Bowman. The former portrays the broken bond as a disused road, and pronounces a final verdict that “no such road will run/ From you to me.’ As a follow up, the latter misogynistically shocks the listener with:

And to hear how the past is past and the future neuter
Might knock my darling off her impriceable pivot. (CP.p.41)
An anti-woman offensiveness is distinct in the bluster which makes us feel sorrier for the woman than the man. It "shows a kind of unbuttoned intemperateness which would never have been allowed in The North Ship." These were some of the poems first published in XX Poems, and, then included in The Less Deceived. But, later in Latest Face, written in Feb. 1951, this stance seems to soften, in favour of relationship and emotional involvement, and it is discovered that the object of longing is best left remote and unattended. From henceforth unattainability of ideal as an imperative to avoid disappointment becomes a repeated assertion in the poems. After breaking his engagement, Larkin wrote to James Suttan:

Remote things seem desirable. Bring them close, and I start shitting myself.

The Less Deceived is anxiously preoccupied with the question of making a choice which, Larkin believes, shapes personality and decides the course of life. The poems, in this volume, voice a struggle against the trappings of identity, passing through various involvements and commitments, which per se involve illusions. Larkin deals with personal issues and externalizes them by employing personae, in an effort to escape identity. A sense of failure dominates most of the poems of the particular volume.

Larkin's departure from Belfast, in March 1955, marks the beginning of his third poetical phase. The Whitsun Weddings registers a phenomenal shift, not only in Larkin's creative sensibility, but also, in the social and cultural texture of British society between the late 1950s and early 1960s. Stephan Regan unhesitatingly refers to the period of The Whitsun Weddings as a phase of
change, 'From austerity to affluence.' His thesis is probably influenced by G.K. Galbraith's *The Affluent Society*, published in 1958, lamenting the careless mushrooming of materialism in the United States which foresaw the trend to be followed in Britain. There were reasons in evidence, as consumerism started riding high, in British society too. The necessity of rationing food, fuel, clothing was substituted by the luxury of refrigerators, television-sets and washing machines. Regan notes that 1957 was thought to be the first year of the new affluence and that it was in this year that Harold Macmillan told the people of Britain that they had never had it so good.

The booming economy was subsequently followed by rapid progress in the field of construction, providing indications that Britain was emerging from the post-war hardship. These were the social and cultural borders of a particular stage, in transition and transformation of the formerly imperialist society, which Larkin was obliged to portray in *The Whitsun Weddings*. But the poems in the volume do not merely reproduce pictures of society. Larkin explores areas, in an inimitable manner, to write his own individualistic statements. Eventually the perspective of the changing world becomes confrontational. The torment of his imprisoned soul echoes in *The Importance of Elsewhere*, a poem, that informs his perception about a sense of acute alienation, he feels among his people and their climate. Written on return to England from Belfast, Larkin in this poem, mourns for many reasons, ranging from personal to professional. In a nostalgic mood, the poem signifies strangeness as a positive sign for creativity which Larkin reaffirms in one of his interviews:
The best writing conditions I ever had were in
Belfast.46

Besides in England Larkin’s personal life seemed threatened on account of the
incongenial company of his widowed mother, and, formerly estranged woman
friends, whence he perceives,

‘Here no elsewhere underwrites my existence.

(CP.p.104)

Andrew Swarbrick rightly observed that the pre-eminent theme of
nearly all Larkin’s work was ‘the relationship between self and “others”,
between the individual and society.”

But poems in The Whitsun Weddings are distinct responses to the im­
mediate social and cultural metamorphosis. Here, for instance, opens the vol­
ume showing the growing impact of consumer culture, characterised by their
desires of ‘cheap suits, red kitchen-ware, sharp shoes, iced lollies, electric mix­
ers, toasters, washers, driers.’

Larkin’s seeming disapproval of the transformed vista is vivid in:

Here domes and statues, spires and cranes cluster,

Beside grain-scattered-streets, barge-crowded water.

(CP.p.136)

Mr. Bleaney, written in May 1955, is significant in the sense that it was the first
poem Larkin wrote after his return to England. The poem resorts to combine
his maladjustment with the ‘hired box’ surrounding ‘whose window shows a
strip of building land/ Tussocky, littered’ and his dissidence with the culture of
‘the jabbering set’. Larkin resents the increasing urbanisation and exasperating
industrialisation. In *Nothing To Be Said* he is keenly perceptive to:

In mill-towns on dark mornings,

Life is slow dying.  

*(CP. p.138)*

*Essential Beauty* and *Sunny Prestatyn* exemplify the world of advertising oriented glamour. To Larkin, it was.

Pure coldness to our live imperfect eyes

That stare beyond this world.............  

*(CP. p.144)*

A variety of stances or attitudes is voiced in the poems of *The Whitsun Weddings*. Thus, if *Toad Revisited* depicts reconciliation, *Dockery and Son* attempts at justification, *Ambulance* stands to warn, *Afternoon* grieves and mourns. Larkin succeeds in fusing together colloquialism and lyricism even while dealing with irony and parody. The dialogue form through slightly differentiated persona, creates dramatic effect and becomes part of his distancing strategy. After arguing at length Larkin leaves the verdict of the issue to the reader. This strategy often leads to a misunderstanding of his own attitude. This manner of complexity in his poems seems to be the extension of the confused state of the contemporary social structure. Regan maintains:

In a very overt way, the poetry of ‘The Whitsun Weddings’ functions as social discourse; its language is scored through with the conflicts and tensions of that historical turning from austerity to affluence.48

Consequently there is an oscillation between alienation and integration all through the poems of *The Whitsun Weddings*. Here, Mr. Bleaney and *Dockery and Son* are cognitive of the comparative contrast, between two
lives, distinct within different classes and cultures. Many more such poems in the volume offer resistance to the changing landscape of post-war Britain. Larkin tactfully balances the images of past and present Britain, in his delineation:

Luminously-peopled air ascends
And past the poppies bluish neutral distances
Ends the land suddenly beyond a beach
of shapes and shingle. (CP. p.136-7)

Poem after poem, The Whitsun Weddings portrays consumerism rampaging on the ideals of the welfare state. The social fabric was undergoing a complete transformation. Gloomy representation of this state of affairs echoes Larkin’s disapproval. However, a characteristic movement towards coherence is conspicuous in Rich Industrial Shadows, and, in Here, implying flourishing prosperity on one hand and distinct spoliation on the other. Larkin was not averse to the diverse constitution of the new society, with regard to the post-war democratic framework, but, he insisted on some kind of concord in the matters of value.

Archetypal tension, between classes and their cultures, dominate the poems of this volume. In this connection, Regan says:

Differences of class and culture are much more pronounced in The Whitsun Weddings than in Larkin’s earlier volumes.49

Here and Mr. Bleaney, among many others, have been pointed out as exemplary in exploring social and cultural differences. However, Nothing To Be Said appears a futile attempt to equate these dif-
ferences by emphasising the final inevitability of death which remains indiscriminate:

So are their separate ways
of building benediction,
Measuring love and money
ways of slow dying.  

(CP. p.138)

In similar fashion, ideological incompatibility between two persons is dramatised through a persona in Dockery and Son:

For Dockery a son, for me nothing

(CP. p. 153)

but ultimately they are paralleled because:

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.  

(CP.p.153)

The title poem The Whitsun Weddings regarded one of the finest poems of Larkin, achieves significance in seeking unity in the multiplicity and disparity of perceptions. Either it is about changing landscapes of town and country, or, in tastes and values, or, among different cultural attitudes. Regan asserts:

The interest of ‘The Whitsun Weddings’ lies not just in what is seen but how it is seen.

The poem, at the bottom, seeks to establish a common understanding in the varied perspectives, which were distinctly characteristic of a transitional period. Through a panorama of contemporary urban and rural Britain, the speaker of the poem asserts an integral homogeneity among the apparent social and cultural differences of geographical and historical values. Ignoring the ritualistic significance of the oc-
casion or the title, Larkin also conveys the agnostic tendency in the later part of the twentieth century. The absence of transcendental meaning in all issues relating to temporal life becomes prominent. Consequently the volume remains tormented by the obsession of loneliness and death. However, its landmark success reconciled even his bitter critics, like Al Alvarez, who very quietly recognised Larkin as a representative poet of his time:

Perhaps his special achievement is to have created a special voice for that special, localised moment: post-war provincial England in all its dreariness, with the boredom of shortage no longer justified, the cheap, plastic surface of things which nobody wants and everybody buys.\textsuperscript{51}

The Whitsun Weddings was followed by Larkin's last collection, High Windows nearly a decade later, in 1974. The volume attracted a large public, and had to be reprinted in the same year after 6000 copies were sold out, in just three months of publication. The cause of this acclaim was that Larkin, by this time, had consolidated his position as a poet of national reckoning. Andrew Motion sums up his progress thus:

'The Less Deceived' made his name; The Whitsun Weddings made him famous; 'High Windows' turned him into a national monument.\textsuperscript{52}

While grading Larkin's poetic stature, Motion surprisingly ignored his first collection The North Ship, the poetic piece which had prepared the ground for the
rest of his work. Grevel Lind op’s observation about *High Windows* has a par-
ticular significance in this reference:

More unexpected is the fact it (High Windows) shows the
re-emergence of tendencies kept carefully out of sight
since Larkin’s first collection ‘The NorthShip’.

Therefore, with a slight alteration, a metaphorical classification may be made
thus: *The NorthShip* tilled the ground; *The Less Deceived* ordered the place;
*The Whitsun Weddings* built upon it a house; and *High Windows* vociferously
enthroned him in it.

*High Windows* appears Larkin’s outcry against all inhibitors, rather than a
swan song. The sense of desperation seems intensified in the spiteful idiom of the
poems. More than anything else, the dread of old age and final decay strains his
relationship with community. Many poems in this collection refuse integration. Sig-
nificantly, the opening of *High Windows* with *To The Sea*, and, its ending on *The
Explosion* symptomatically informs that Larkin was grieved over the loss of
British glory. However, the concluding poem reflects the predominance of senil-
ity and extinction. *To The Sea* invokes the morning at the sea-shore as part of
century-old English tradition with a nostalgic indulgence:

To step over the low wall that divides
Road from concrete walk above the shore
Brings sharply back something known long before-

(CP.p.173)

There is a feeling of satisfaction that the old English is ‘still going on, all of
it, still going on!’ but, sad realization comes immediately, for it is discovered
that the ‘The white steamer has gone!’ In *Show Saturday*, he celebrates the
country agricultural show, and yearns, ‘Let it always be there.’ Representing a
group of poems in *High Windows*, *Going, Going* is a poetic piece that shows
Larkin’s anxiety for the loss of pastoral England:

> I thought it would last my time-
> The sense that, beyond the town,
> There would, always be fields and farms. (CP.p.189)

But it is a hope in vain, because:

> And that will be England gone,
> The shadows, the meadows, the lanes,
> The guild halls, the carved choirs. (CP.p.190)

But unfortunately ‘greed/And garbage are too thick-strewn/to be swept up now’. (CP.p.190)

More or less, in a similar fashion *Livings*, *The Card Players*, *Dublinesque* and *How
Distant* show Larkin’s so far unrecorded concern for the social and historical past
of Britain. The figures in *Livings* and *The Card Players* represent a world which
is bizarre, for its incline towards boorishness and inhibition on one hand, and,
distinct wonder and marvel on the other. Larkin’s poetry as a whole, and, *High
Windows* in particular, portray the very grotesque in:

> ...........sullen fleshy inarticulate men, stock brokers,
sellers of goods, living in thirty-year old detached
houses among the golf courses,...father’s of cold-eyes
lascivious daughters on the pill...and (of) cannabis-
smoking jeans-and-bearded stuart-haired sons, the men
whose first coronary is coming like christmas; who
drift........into the darkening avenues of age and
incapacity.\textsuperscript{54}

Despite the fact that in \textit{High Windows}, Larkin emerges as a wry, self-deprecator, conscious of the delusiveness of hope, the volume shows ample sign of development as compared to his earlier work. What is central to \textit{High Windows} is his effort to be a poet different from himself. In earlier works he made best use of masks, to project various stances and attitudes which were most of the time ironically self-critical. But in \textit{High Windows}, writes Andrew Swarbrick:

\begin{quote}
Larkin speaks much more unambiguously in propria persona, sacrificing the earlier masks.\textsuperscript{55}
\end{quote}

\textit{The Old Fools} exemplifies his unmasked bluntness in articulating his sickening fear of old age and approaching death. However, some critics have taken it as a positive move, from the strategy of detachment towards the compassionate identification with the trauma of old age:

\begin{quote}
What do they think has happened, the old fools,
To make them like this? Do they somehow suppose
It's more grown-up when your mouth hangs open and drools
And you keep on pissing yourself, and can't remember
Who called this morning?.... \textsuperscript{CP.p.196}
\end{quote}

Larkin's disgust with old people, because they frighten him reminding of his own future senility and death, is more unguised and direct. Bitterness in language plays importantly in denuding the latent dread. James Booth sums up this poem as 'embarassingly obvious' displaced terror of death.\textsuperscript{56}
In *High Windows* Larkin seems to have failed ‘to be different from himself’, though he wished it desperately. He is very much present in these poems with his frustration and sense of loss. His attempt is further defeated by the philistinism and juxtaposing cynicism all through the volume. Aware of inevitable senility and imminent death and deeply frustrated in life, Larkin is found disturbed in this particular volume. Desperate and guilt-conscious he writes to Monica Jones:

I feel rather scared these days, of time passing and us getting older. Our lives are so different from other people’s, or have been,—I feel I am landed on my 45th year as if washed up on a rock, not knowing how I got there or ever having had a chance of being anywhere else. . . . Of course my external surroundings have changed, but inside I’ve been the same, trying to hold everything off in order to write.’ Anyone would think I was Tolstoy, the value I put on it. It hasn’t amounted to much. I mean, I know I’ve been successful in that I’ve made a name and got a medal and so on, but it’s very small achievement to set against all the rest.57

Critics emphasise the characteristic loss of social and political consensus of 1970’s as the basis of ‘the fractured linguistic contours of Larkin’s final poems.” They point out the industrial unrest, severe economic recession and ideological conflicts and divisions which loom large in many poems of *High Windows*. Regan says:
If High Windows is sometimes savage and vehement in its outlook, it is also the most socially committed and ideologically engaged collection of poems that Larkin produced. Regan’s thesis is strengthened by the direct and jeering satire in Posterity, and, Homage to a Government.

Next year we shall be living in a country
That brought its troops home for lack of money.
The statues will be standing in the same
Tree-muffled squares and look nearly the same.
Our children will not know it’s a different country
All we can hope to leave them now is money.

(CP.p.171)

Several other critics also analyse the poems in High Windows as belligerent reactions to the changing social and political situation in the 1960s and early 1970s. Regard for mass values in his earlier work, significantly under the welfare-state ideals is absent in High Windows. The life-long conflict between a sense of identity and the value of art is brought to a despairing end. He lost faith in a shared sense of fear and deprivation. Therefore, there is hardly any compassion for other’s failure and misery. He ceased to ‘think of being them’. The shift from implicit meaning to an explicit assertion, also amounts to an admission of a loss of shared understanding between the poet and his audience. But Trotter interprets it differently:

......by shifting to a far more militant and assertive
stance than he had ever adopted before...Larkin began to affirm a connection between individual experience and shared meaning which he might once have left to chance. The shaming pragmatism of the sixties drove him to speak his mind, to give his poems the authority of conscious and unequivocal dissent.  

Larkin seems to have overcome his silence which wasformidably languishing with him since long. He is said to have written High Windows into silence. As a result there were the tensions between consensus and conflict, between integration and disintegration, between aestheticism and philistinism, between compassion and rancour, and, all this lay bared as the central theme of the volume.

Larkin's sense of worthlessness was intensified with growing age. Though he was profusely honoured towards the end of his life, he wrote very few poems after High Windows. Once when he was requested to write a poem in 1983, he answered:

Poetry gave me up about six years ago and I have no expectation of being revisited.  

The complexity of Larkin's multivocal poetry has invited diversified critical opinion about his achievements as a writer. The criticism of his poetics may broadly be divided into two categories. One that appraises his poetry prior to High Windows, and, the other, which reassesses his worth after this last work. The critical response after 1974 revolutionized all what had been said about Larkin previously. Earlier accusations of mediocrity, boredom, suburban mental-ratio, got substituted by an image of a provocative disquietening and original
Charles Tomlinson in his review of *New Lines* entitled *The Middebrow Muse*, in 1957, criticised Movement poetry in general, but, focussed his attack on Larkin whose poetic assumption he found lacking in many ways. He did not approve Larkin’s anti-romantic stance which he thought was just an unconscionable amount of self-regard, of acting up to one’s mirror image of one self.\(^1\)

Tomlinson seems impatient of his xenophobia and defeatism when he writes:

I can not escape the feeling of its intense parochialism. More over, the tenderly nursed sense of defeat, the self-skitting go hand in hand with an inability to place his malaise and an evident willingness to persist in it.\(^2\)

The charge of ‘parochialism’, or, ‘insularity’ implying ‘The Suburban mental ratio’, which, Tomlinson thinks ‘impose on experience’,\(^3\) is now seen as a prejudiced, hostile to democratic ideals. Andrew Swarbrick claims:

It is easy to detect here an anxious anti-democratic bias, a contempt for ‘suburbanism’ and ‘relativism’ which characterised some of the hostile reactions to the Movement (which was in fact incipient in Larkin and Amis).\(^4\)

Tomlinson’s criticism mainly rests on some of the few words like ‘Middlebrow’, ‘provincial’, ‘suburban’, which become part of his aesthetic judgement. Swarbrick claims:
Tomlinson could not know the buried history of Larkin’s romantic aspirations now evident in the posthumously published poems and newly available manuscripts and private material.\textsuperscript{65}

Another significant name in the criticism on Larkin is that of Al Alvarez whose polemic against Larkin in The New Poetry published in 1962, is directed to Larkin’s apathy to ‘a more urgent, experimental poetry, as being produced by modern American writers’. He charged Larkin for succumbing to ‘negative feed-backs’. Making an example of Larkin’s Church Going he writes:

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.\textsuperscript{66}

Another point of Al Alvarez’s criticism is ‘the concept of gentility’, that, ‘life is always more or less orderly...That God, in short, is more or less good.\textsuperscript{67}

Larkin’s poems, for example Deceptions, Wants, and, Absences deal with the existential trauma and psychological problems as opposed to the notion of gentility. Andrew Swarbrick comments:

This would have been less evident to Alvarez in 1962, but there is nothing in Larkin to support the reading of a God who is, in short, more or less good.\textsuperscript{68}

The hostility of criticism from Tomlinson upto the most recent time was crucial to show Larkin’s poetry unadventurous, and, aesthetically and experimentally timid.
Colin Falck in his review of *The Whitsun Weddings* makes an issue of 'Larkin's sense of futility'. Donald Davie, onetime Movement colleague of Larkin, disproves his being 'numb to the nonhuman creation in order to stay compassionate towards the human.' However, without opposing Falck's thesis, Davie supports Larkin's 'humanism':

Hardy and Larkin may have sold poetry short; but at least neither of them sold it so short as to make the poet less than a human being...I can sympathize with Falck's outraged refusal of the diminished world which Larkin's poetry proffers as the only one available to him; but he cannot escape that world as easily as he thinks.

What is an absolute disjunction in Larkin's work between desire and its object' is for Falck a romantic tradition of non-fulfilment, for John Bayley:

Disillusion is a working part of the dream...For Larkin, disillusionment actually intensifies the enchanted comforts of elsewhere and becomes part of Them.

Stephen Regan, one of the most balanced and genuine critics of Larkin in recent times, writes off all the traditional approaches to Larkin, including the thematic approach, practical criticism, as well as the linguistic approach. Recommend-
Regan argues that through these traditional approaches, Larkin’s poems are flattened out into a uniform body of work, with little regard for the relationship between the poems and a rapidly changing social context. Regan recognises that Historicist criticism tends to regard ‘literature’ as social discourse, a language activity within a particular social structure. The varieties of language found in different literary texts ‘constitute’ different world views or interpretations of ‘reality.’ Espousing structuralist criticism, Guido Latre categorised Larkin’s study on two levels, thematic and stylistic, which further interpret his poetry on two planes, one is ‘monistic’ which emphasises mainly one pole in the opposition, whereas the other is a ‘dualistic’ interpretation and determines the essence of Larkin’s poetry as a tension between two equally strong antagonistic forces. Under the latest critical trend, Larkin has been discovered an ambivalent inheritor of modernism. Barbara Everett in *Philip Larkin: After Symbolism* claims:

> His poems appear to have profitted from a kind of heroic struggle not to be modernistic, not to be mere derivative footnotes to a symbolism as much disapproved of as admired; they have wished to be, not merely after, but well after Eliot.

Most significant of all is Andrew Motion’s *Study of Larkin*, in which Motion attempts to answer all the agonistic inferences about Larkin’s poetics from an over-all perspective. He says:

> Larkin re-invigorates a ‘native’ tradition by marrying
it to some aspects of an 'alien' modernism which is perhaps a way of allowing Larkin to have the best of both worlds.\textsuperscript{75}

Larkin's masks emerge intensely self-revealing, and therefore, Swarbrick infers:

At the centre of Larkin's poetry is the pursuit of self-definition, a self which feels threatened by the proximity of others but which fears that without relationship with otherness the self has no validity.\textsuperscript{76}

Therefore, the apparent conflict between solitariness and sociability in opposition to selfishness and selflessness is an existential argument which is very much concerned with the nature of individual identity. In solving these questions Larkin goes through the vocabulary of separateness, of exclusion and difference, establishing a kind of negative self-definition. This 'vocabulary of nullity and anonymity, suggesting both the ultimate desire for oblivion and an absolute terror of death'\textsuperscript{77} oblige critics to identify 'a defining voice of Englishness' in Larkin's poetry.
CHAPTER II

THE THEME OF DEATH

Nothing stepped like death
Death was a major preoccupation of the Post Modern European and British Poetry. Creative artists had always been plagued by the sheer unpredictability and indisputable certainty of this mysterious phenomenon. Though everybody accepted the inevitability, few wished to formally converse about the occurrence. It was universally believed that probe into its recesses could lend greater meaning to life and the extant. Hence there was a felt need to rediscover rather than dismiss the concept as an abstract notion. The two world wars and the resultant blood bath also created in the western world a death consciousness: weariness at the futility and mindless sanctioned killing in the name of war penetrated into the psyche of the thinkers for whom death had always been a traditional subject for cogitation. With the personality theory of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard revolutionising the thought and life of average man illusions were fast fading. God and religion were things of the past. The serious thinker was rejecting even the refuge offered by theological treatises and established institutions. Promises of immortality which had earlier succeeded in pacifying many now failed to appease the shattered human sensibility in the name of perpetuity of spirit. The fact of death with its attendant mystery, anguish, misery, suffering thus lent itself to easy reference. Viewed earlier as a public event, an external fact with existence outside the individual, the experience became internalised into a personal and intimate encounter with the noctur-
nal forces of darkness.

Further the preoccupation with the motif of annihilation could partly be attributed to deteriorating social conditions and declining moral standards between the two world wars, specially after the second world war. Homer Lane, the psychologist diagnosed it as a moral and spiritual malaise of society dictated by gangster virtues and the individual psyche becoming irrevocably sick.

Though the early 19th century intellectuals maintained that insight into human nature provided awareness into the essence, the basic tenets of the existing philosophy emphasized precedence of existence over essence. Thinkers, explored the finite and infinite in human nature maintaining that individual consciousness does not merely function as spiritual and physical entity, but as a synthesis and amalgam of the two. The persistent interaction of the twin worlds result in pain, pleasure, stress, acceptance, deprivation, crimes, revolutions to mention some. This occurs on the level of the interface. An insight into the state was essential for existence. The fact of death as complete cessation of being increases appreciation for the variety and sanctity of life. It was generally believed that the enigma of death confrontation and acceptance of its factity, and its integration into individual experience imparts added meaning to life. Corporeality, the prime constituent of being entailed suffering, pain, misery, aborted existence, disgust, alienation, death and the bleakly pernicious experiences of life. Peter Koestenbaum in his book ‘Is there an Answer to Death’ submits that the age was influenced by existentialism and the in-vogue interest in death origi-
nated with prominent existentialist philosophers Kierkegaard, Sartre, Nietzsche and Heidegger who offered to redefine finitude as a neutralizer to the fear of death. Koestenbaum observes:

The anticipation of our death reveals to us who we are. It is an intellectual revelation, in that death helps us define human nature. But it is also an experiential understanding in that death puts us in touch with our deepest feelings- both anxieties and hopes, both needs and opportunities- as existent human beings.¹

English Poetry of the fifties and the sixties thus displayed a penchant for the non-extant. Larkin was no exception to contemporary thought and philosophical patterns of his time. The riddle of death, its enigmatic fearsome approach and the ensuing void became one of Larkin's obsessions also. In a world shorn of all illusions the poet sought to grapple with his favourite subject by connoting the unseen, unknown predator in terms of the manifest, seen and recognizable. The overt and implied image cluster of the death group of poems perform the significant task of demonstrating Larkin's preoccupation. His prime concern was an enquiry into the indisputable veracity of death as a fact, perceiving the subject of the abysmal void not only as an outsider but an insider also. Man was viewed as a helpless victim of circumstances, social conditions and environment. His lot was doomed to old age and death. The encounter with nothingness thus stemmed from external and internal factors as also a de-
cline in faith and religion. In this connection Andrew Swarbrick notes

There he looked at death from life: now he

looks at life from death.²

Releasing the concept from its hiding place he confronts it squarely. Overtly appearing death conscious Larkin was by no means morbid or depressive. Quite reversely the poet demonstrated an analogy between the twin principles of Being and Non-Being, which though counterpoints cannot exist in isolation, independent of each other. His poems exhibit cognizance of moments when deeper probings into the nature of the death premise lent added dimension to the extant. The approach of death is conceived in terms of a levelling anonymity in a language devoid of rhetoric. Its consciousness pervades the fabric as a nullity which threatens to render everything purposeless. Larkin’s poems and letters exhibit him almost preternaturally aware of death as the final annihilation of all endeavour and identity. However the inertia, numbness, pain, panic earlier associated with the cessation of life was skillfully counterbalanced by its irrefutable certainty. Larkin singled out the subject to the extent of rendering its original connotations ineffective. New meanings and definitions emerged forthwith.

Living toys are something novel,

But it soon wears off somehow.

Fetch the shoe box, fetch the shovel-

Ma’m we’re playing funerals now.

(C P., p.130)

The enigma generated in him diverse feelings of fear, defiance and bewil-
derment. The theme became one of his passions and the resultant analogies carefully incorporated private perceptions and moods. The poet also gauged in his reading public the desire for precise information as a consequence of deeper awareness. Larkin realised that modern man had become more vocal and could not be relied upon to passively receive the sedation of fantasy barbiturates. In this connection C.D. Lewis observes

Throughout the whole range of modern words,
from the symbolists onwards, we find a
tendency towards the illogical, away from
the old cause- and effect sequence of images
within the poems.³

The poetry of the era witnessed a profusion of broken images. Bold, enticing in content they tried to assimilate the inflow of new ideas and newer modern sensibility. Discordant, heterogeneous image patterns having no apparent intellectual or emotional relationship became fashionable and current. For Larkin the end of life was painful, though alluring from a distance. He deciphered it as an unresolved mystery, a cloud which could not be grasped, caught or claimed. Death figured in most of his poems, sometimes at the core, sometimes as a conclusion and often as a passing reference. He makes no attempt to romanticize the trauma of death, nor does he confuse one with the idea of immortality. Under the influence of existentialism Larkin regarded death not only as an experience but also a felt anticipation or as a sorrowful loss.

Andrew Motion and a host of other critics referred to him as “a hope-
less inflexible pessimist and the saddest heart in the post war super market". They figure the poets outlook on life bleak and gloomy due to frequent references to death. Employing correlatives from the seen and tangible world the poet sought to unravel the mystery of the unseen. When on the one hand he picked the images and symbols from the vicinity of recognizable, heard, felt, smelt, seen and manifest world, he also created his own symbolic system of phrases, language, and connotations. This accounts for the obscurity of his poetry. Beginning with traditional images of darkness, grave, shackles, paralysing weights, benumbing senses the poet slowly graduates to positive images which connote an acceptance of death. A gradual evolution towards a better cognizance can be clearly apprehended in Larkin's poetry.

The question whether the dominance of the theme of death in Larkin's poetry was the result of his pessimistic nature, or it was the impact of existentialism or the tragic death of his loved ones can only be resolved after analysing some prominent poems which refer to the aforesaid theme. An insight into poems beginning with 'Going' written sometime in February 1946 to 'In Times When Nothing Stood'in 1978, covering a span of thirty two years would serve to substantiate the above assertion.

'Going': the opening poem of the Thwaite edited anthology 'Collected Poems' has very few concrete images.

There is an evening coming in
Across the fields, one never seen before,
That lights no lamps
Silken it seems at a distance yet
When it is drawn up above the knees and breast

It brings no comfort

The regular association of all evenings is to darkening and a slow enveloping movement of night in order to cover fields and forests under a uniform blanket of darkness. This all enclosing cloud can be countered by artificial light provided by lamps. Because of its rarity Larkin’s evening “One Never seen before” instead of inviting light further enhances the descending gloom. Evenings such as this can only be understood in terms of old age or death.

The second stanza advances the connotation by developing an absent comfort. The enfolding approach had apparently promised warmth and security. But the expectations are thwarted. The embrace of death pledged contentment but the mortal minds failed to comprehend it.

Silken it seems from a distance

The final stanza offers some semblence of meaning because body and soul had together

Locked Earth to the sky

With the release of the soul the ‘Tree’ is no longer shackled. The ‘hands’ and ‘loads’ though felt, left him insensitive and numb, as unqualified preliminaries to the final surrender of the body to formlessness.

What is under my hands that I cannot feel.

Concrete images employed by Larkin correspond to the senses of sight and touch. The comfort of the body indicated through reference to “knees and breast”, and “the earth and sky”, figuratively also suggest the depth and extent of perception. They provide a correlative to the soul and body. Death thus
emerges as an enigma bewildering the sensibility and expectations defying discernment. 'Going' is an appeal for better understanding, an query about the phenomenon of death. The question it poses is "what loads my hands down". Larkin searches for the answer to this significant "what" in his subsequent poems.

With the sharpened quest to solve the enigma of death Larkin became more empirically analytical. In "And the wave sings because it is moving" his crystalline images corresponding to the movement of life appear dialectical as they suggest scientific reasons for continuity of life and its abrupt end. The poet maintains that sustenance of human existence requires no divine decree. Instead, it stems out like waves from the incessant ebb and flow of the tide of Being.

The introductory couplet announces the concept of unity of all elements- natural and human; natural being a compounding of the essences. Movement provides the integrality between the two. Cemented by this kinetic ability both the sea of life and the waves get

borne across graves together apart, together; (CP.,p.6)

The startling paradox of life is that the lifting wall that protects also imprisons

And so devised to make ourselves unhappy. (CP.,p.6)

The image of the wall traditionally represents security and shelter on the one hand and an isolation from the external world on the other hand. The unpredictability of 'Being' demands company when stricken by loneliness and longs for solitude among society. This constant flux of meetings and estrangements are represented by the ebb and flow of the tide.
Apart we wish ourselves together
Yet sue for solitude upon our meetings. 

The stream of unification and disjunction continues till the 'unhindered turning of the sea', a conceit through which Larkin connotes the mechanical termination of life. The deflection separates the wave from its course thus tearing off all its associations and bondage. In a Yeatsian manner Larkin visualises grief and comfort as two equipoised waves each straining to excel and obliterate the other in an effort to gain precedence. The activity continues till the unstoppable sea of life decides to change its course ending movement in every quarter.

Till the unhindered turning of the sea
changes our comforts into griefs greater
Than they are raised to cancel breaking them

Larkin pauses on sorrow

Such are the sorrows we search for meaning
Such are the cries of the birds across the water
Such are mists the sun attacks at morning

Dissecting the emotion into its components like 'the cry' and 'the mist' he extends the metaphor into 'laments, tears, wreaths and rocks'. Whatsoever the type, the human mind of the quester enquires into the true or exact meaning of the grief. It desires to know the essential sorrow, its quality, cause, effect and remedy. He concludes that these are 'false devices', which can be effectively countered by

...the shout of the heart continually at work
Transparent grief or misery is described competently through the phrase ‘silver tongued like a share it ploughs up failure’. Deep rooted in failure, sorrow interacts with other sentiments, states and elements. Hence ‘night’, ‘day’, ‘sleep’, ‘sky’, have to offer a share of profit to this ‘silver tongued monster’. This tax is mandatory, and none on earth can avoid it; because sooner or later grief demands and gets its due. Yet even this common sentiment loses power before death. The ‘tithe’ is collected from all excluding death. Sorrows “finds marrow in all but death to feed”. This uniformly felt emotion pales down on confrontation with the phenomenon of nothingness as “death it cannot invoke”.

Larkin’s desire to seek death leads him to the conclusion of a singularity as remarkable as the ‘sun’. Manifested as a ‘lone cloud’ in the vast illimitable sky it gains affinity with the sun which is also ‘alone’. The similitude between the two can also be converted to a study in contrasts with one representing total illumination and the other counteracting it as absolute and final darkness. Sleep and night are mere shadows or appearances of the final reality of total obscurity. The image of the heart ‘subdued’, ‘restraint’, ‘unquestioning’ at the advent of the nocturnal force of darkness get depicted thus by the poet.

Death is a cloud alone in the sky with the sun

Our health turning like fish in the green wave

Grow quiet in its shadow.

Death is without substance, graspless, intangible, beyond claim. The heart strives to oppose the impact, to outlast the intensity, to decipher its
meaning and outline the happening. Survival becomes impossible, for all the expertise practised by the heart is inadequate to escape the inevitable. The single available option remaining is “surrender the irrevocable keys”. With the realization of this vital truth, the tangible manifestation of existence in the poem ‘the Wave’, “falters and drowns”. The “coulter” which literally stands for the iron blade attached to the plough has significantly being employed as a qualification for joy. Recognition of one’s fate results in the termination of all joy. Larkin objectifies the sentiment in the phrase “the coulter of joy breaks”.

Cessation of feeling rings the death knell and grooves dig deeper into “Being” cornering existence into caving before the authority and might of the mysterious, inscrutable force. The deeper the penetration of the harrow, reactionary retaliatory ‘throwing up’ becomes more powerful. The faltering, drowning, throwing, moving, and singing of the waves together summarise the entire history of life and extant. The cycle of existence involves a display of movement and energy. It proved beyond doubt the essential realness of living, the spark and vitality of being alive. Movement on this count proves a generative exercise. The periodic churning of the waves expressed by the meaningful ebb and flow of the tide image visually denotes the life death syndrome. A profound perception of ephemerality of every living manifest in the ebbing water, along with a conviction of the universality of the phenomenon of death concludes the poem.

And the waves sing because they are moving
And the waves sing above a cemetry of graves. (CP., p.7)
The first line of the above mentioned couplet indicates the joy of being alive. It is coupled with the vibrant image of flux and mobility. The subsequent happiness shows itself in the resultant song. In the second line the same song emanates from a studied cosmic awareness. This knowledge pacifies the poet and the waves receding over the graves in the cemetery generate not sadness but a contentment of his own ordinariness. Larkin no longer feels unique and singular in his own individual plight. He becomes part and parcel of a cosmic scheme in which his cognition graduates from

And the wave sings because it is moving

to

And the waves sing because they are moving. (CP, p.2)

From an identification with a single wave his comprehension enlarges to embrace the entire design of creation in its plurality. Larkin reckons himself as a microcosmic part of a macro reality with common problems, suffering and disorders. The poem furnishes him with several insights. The progress from one to many, the difference between Being and Non-Being, the transience of life and the universality of death are vital insights that help the poet view his subject from yet another angle.

Imagery in the poem has been taken primarily from the sea, agriculture, the human and natural world. References to ploughing, harrow, coulter allude to the time group of associations which in themselves are synonymous with death and comprehensively sum up the entire concept of a trapped, shackled mortal existence. The ‘sun’, the ‘stars’, and the ‘skies’ are mentioned to harness the extra terrestrial in an effort to decipher the meaning of Non Being.
Traumerei operates on the principle of dual perspective. The dream and reality sequence supply the underlying design, which is elaborated into a participant, spectator double vision. The opening and closing lines of the poem represent normal reality involving routine matters, the difference however lay in a dream.

In this dream that dogs me I am part
of a silent crowd walking under a well
and
The walls of my room rise, it is still night
I have woken again before the word was spelt. (CP., p.12)

The word ‘dog’ and ‘again’ testify to a persistence that obliterates the difference between sleep and wakefulness. Dreams after all overtly represent the preoccupations of the waking mind. Thematically ‘Traumerei’ concentrates on the ceaseless progress of life towards a partially understood goal. It is Larkin’s effort to figuratively spell out the implications of death.

The first prominent visual of a robot like faceless, silent multitude passes by. Agnostic philistinism apart Larkin fails to muster courage to put up retroactive resistance to this demand of abject surrender and his sleeping conscious complies to become a ‘part of the silent crowd’. ‘The football match’ they have left behind was symbolically their final game of life where evenly and unevenly balanced teams battled for supremacy and result. The first wall encountered by them signifies the incessant pressure of a predetermined fate forcing and pursuing all mortality “under the wall” perhaps “or a pit, all moving the same way.” The second wall differs
from its companion by "closing on the right, pressing us lighter." Light, life, energy, warmth get choked through suffocation. With the two walls slowly closing from both sides the helpless individuals are

Shut in like pigs down a concrete passage. (CP, p.12)

Lifting the head the speaker realizes that all source of life has been blocked. The defenceless humanity incarcerated in the prison of mortar could not be better represented. Against the sombre blackness of the surrounding pit, charade like the italicized icons of death make their entry. Three things distinguish them. The size which is 'giant', the colour which is 'stark white' and the remoteness.

much too high for them to recognise. (CP., p.12)

The explanation for the immensity and the fluorescence of the alphabet 'D' lies in the intention of striking a contrast, because the insensi... apathetic crowd could only be made to notice something singular. Existence flows both inside and outside the consciousness. The awaited 'E' appears and passes by as also the other images of life. The unquestioned submission of will to follow with bowed head subtly changes and the need to walk ceases. Movement now involves flowing

Like water through sewers

despite the tread that goes on ringing like an anvil

Under the striding A. (CP., p.12)

The pace of 'A' is decidedly more hostile than the previous two so Larkin completes his anvil image by making the striding 'A' officiate in place of the ab-
sent hammer. The reverberations of the impact of one metal against another get echoed in the loud beatings of the human heart. The letters move in their respective paces maintaining the remoteness and obscurity. The poet speaker who was curious about his ultimate fate 'crookes his arm to shield his face'. The next alphabet 'T' on appearance seems beheaded even before the end. “The huge decapitated cross, white on the wall, the T.” Awareness hovers within the poet's grasp. He struggles for a meaning that eludes him like the last alphabet. The continuum of movement begun with the phrase ‘dog me’ gets restored. The walls enclosing him in the end of the poem are part of familiar reality. They differ in quality from those that had earlier sucked him into near complete oblivion. But this day light reality deprives him of cognition into the greatest mysteries of creation. Larkin’s poems were not merely probes into the significance of death. Several of them endeavored to gauge it in the context of the experience of living. Existence entails not merely birth and death but a host of diverse happening and relationship.

Many famous feet have trod essays to view death from vantage point of keenly felt emotional questions which the poet relates to the elemental forces of nature and mortality. Seeking affinity to these basic components he attempts to analyse his essential theme of Non Being in contiguity with the forces of Being. In this poem Existence does not appear as a foil to non-existence. It instead aides and supports a better understanding of Larkin’s thematic preoccupation, with a greater emphasis on the intrinsic stuff of life rather than the forces of negation.

Larkin opens the poem with an obscure amalgam of certitudes, queries, truths and answers. Punning on the adjective ‘famous’ in an oblique effort to create the multiple images of philosophers, intellectuals, rulers, theologians (who gained ei-
ther repute or notoriety) the poet establishes the fact of an incipient elusiveness about the truth behind creation, mortality and eternity.

Many famous feet have trod;
Sublunary paths, and famous hands have weighed
The strength they have against the strength they need
And famous lips interrogated God

Concerning franchise in eternity. (CP, p.15)  

Limits of this right of ‘franchise’ were never determined. The seekers unsure of their boundaries had to be content with ‘a moment’s harmony’ in ‘many times and places’. Regardless of their spiritual and intellectual thirst for answers Larkin in this stanza lays emphasis by proxy on the rapid passage of time which gets depicted in figurative phrase bunchings.

Images of light, birth, life, day get ingeniously compressed in “the gold surf of the sun”, “sheet of light”, “places of light”, “shining river”. Each connote myriad possibilities of living amidst warmth, familiarity and relationships. The ‘gold surf’ hints at vibrant energy and intellectual vigour consumed during the metaphorical combat with forces of nothingness. The advent of night engulfs the luminosity. Just as the sun has to set every evening after exhausting its energy, needing the revitalization of a long rest (a period in which its lights gets eclipsed plunging everything in darkness) so too human life.

The trodden way becomes the untrodden way
We are born each morning
The river shining through the field of graves. (CP, p.15)
Night and sleep imply semi cessation involving a continuum. Larkin intends to emphasize this constant flux of everything mortal. However, such renewal "argues down" all "legacies of thought" which become automatically 'un-successful' because of their own impermanence. The rigid pattern of birth and death puts to naught all determined efforts by intellectuals to capture time and temporality within bounds of a stationary situation. Through the ages 'annals of men' have strived 'untiringly' to change thinking by fracturing the extant into its elemental essences. The hetrogeneity in implication of the 'wafers poverty' suggestive of exploration and penetration, the factity of stone, and the fathomless, fragrance of flowers have been individually notice for verdicts on the human predicament.

But never tried to learn

The difficult triple sanity

Of being wafer, stone and flower in turn. \[\text{(CP, p.15)}\]

The individual was broken into components and viewed merely as an embodiment of one constituent rather than an amalgam of all elements- the evident, the real and the perceptible which blend to constitute life.

After much deliberations on the nature of life Larkin ventures to explain it in relation to death. He discovered that the dichotomy between the living "silver coin" and the dead "discoloured copper coin" was limited to appearances, and disappeared on closer examination. Both were impenetrable.

Reverse or obverse, neither bare

A sign or word remotely legible. \[\text{(CP, pp.15-16)}\]

The spinning movement, "the double warp", "light and waking", "dark and
sleep", join into an endless stream of metaphors and image clusters used by Larkin to explain the mystery of Life, Death and Being. Like the earlier mentioned coin image where difference was only skin deep and existence was found sharing similitude with Non Being. For instance, the element of uncertainty, mystery about the future and the feeling of incompleteness constantly dogging Being were also present in the death phenomenon. With the 'double warp' signifying a mutuality, a correspondence of two opposites mortality becomes constantly dwarfed and trapped

Easier to balance on the hand
The waking that our senses can command,
For jewels are pebbles on the beach
Before this weaving, scattering, winged and footed
Privilege....

On account of the accessibility of life, the sensitivity of the primary senses and the availability of explanations which are like "jewels and pebbles on the beach", and the privilege of living 'weaving, scattering, winged footed', the human sensibility is able to read meanings into existence. Though "an unrecurring luck" even life is an unpredictable enigma. Becoming a correlative to death it objectifies all the intangibilities. Both emerge as parallels complimenting each other rather than opposing contraries.

Having successfully established an analogy between Life and Death, the poet explains the nature of the real legacy bestowed upon the human kind.

Two lineages electrify the air,
Lineage of sorrow; Lineage of joy. (CP, p.16)

Like "pennons from a mast" the jointure so deeply permeates "sleep, life and death" that even the sun is powerless to decoy the single seed of their origin. The difference, if there exists, is between these two emotions.

No longer think them as aspects of the same;
Beyond each figures shield I trace
A different ancestry, a different fate. (CP, p.15)

Elaborating on the subject of misery the poet maintains that it is engendered by "all that's bad", "each foiled weakness in the almanac", "the instinct to turn back", the common factor behind these causes lies in human weakness and vulnerability which Larkin confesses.

..."if there are sins should be called a sin." (CP, p.17)
because this instinct betrays preoccupation with the self, misery over unfulfilled desires and a mortal dread of death. He concluded that the urgency to arrest the instant in order to gratify wishes and a strong sense of lost time lay at the root of the death dread.

Because tides wound it;
The scuttling sand; the noose
of what I have and shall lose,
Or have not and cannot get;
Partings in time and space. (CP, p.17)

The "wounding", "scuttling", "nooses", are images reminiscent of the existential predilection of visualising life as a drudgery. Sorrow, a resultant of self love is never
coupled with a feeling of its own insufficiency and ineffectuality. Larkin who sensitively realises the apposition between them confesses

I know what it will not know. (CP., p.17)

His probings had brought the cognition that /years in winged span go across and over our heads/ Existence envisages a permanence against “dissolution” by erecting “houses of wax” while the speeding time “flies east to the ebb of dark”. Efforts to capture transience lending a modicum of permanence and stability are comparable to the “spider busy on a forgotten web.”

The “lineage of joy” stems out of this very flux when misery and sorrow demanded effort, and happiness is described as “motionless excitement”. It was a wave running counter to the parent current. Ultimate confluence with the ocean of nothingness was a foregone conclusion, but the resistance to “the flying years” form the central paradox of existence. Robert Frost captures a similar experience in his West Running Brook.

The black stream catching on a sunken rock
Flung backward on itself in one white wave
And the white water rode the black forever
Not gaining but not losing...

Larking also rejoices in ‘a mile-long silken cloth of wings/moving lightwards out of death/Lineage of joy into mortality hurled/’. The poet discovered this potential of resistance in joy to be an effective opponent to “slovenly grief” for happiness needed no goal and is enjoyed for the supreme pleasure of the experience itself. With patience to expose false desires, it is never stale and silent. Joy becomes the only medium of sustenance in an otherwise morbid, hypocritical existence.
The poet perceives that the fact of death has always been indisputable. Sorrow and grief are therefore not unusual in this mortal temporal world. But if the human mind learns the lesson on contentment accepting the time left as a respite, continuing to feel the pleasure of living, then life becomes meaningful. Transcience and ephemerality instead of goading and defeating the consciousness must act as spur to guide the mind into a deeper awareness, appreciation and better understanding of the essence of Being.

The Unfinished Poem written in 1951 attempts to reassess the death coda by skilfully counterbalancing conventional belief with some unusual answers provided to the poet by his own questioning mind. In the absence of complete understanding he had to be content with the partial fruits of his endeavour. When ‘Going’ recognised the cohesion of soul and body and released from temporal shackles, ‘Traumerei’ stressed the ontological dimensions of death, the ‘Unfinished Poem’ dramatised an effective encounter between Being and Non Being. Each effort marked a significant progress in understanding the mystery of this inexplicable phenomenon. In the present poem Larkin ventured to discover the truth about death by offering his own cognizance as a guinea pig for experimentation. The place determined for the combat of the equally potent twin forces happens to be a segregated lonely attic reached by ‘squeezing up the last stair’. The poet consciously chose his locale to authenticate his death wish.

Retreating from the world of living the poet speaker lay “quietly smoking”. Loneliness prompted his mind to compress the entire history of his extant into a few visual moments. Images pertaining to constraints of mortality, paucity of essentials and bareness of surroundings namely
That was a way to live—newspaper for sheets,
A candle and spirit stove, (CP, p.60)
get contrasted to the surfeit of noise, shouts, congestion,
a trouble of shouts
From below somewhere, a town smudgy with traffic!
That was a place to go, that emaciate attic! (CP, p.60)
The cold, dank grave like room surrounded by a glut of everything
around it, deliberately objectified through the image of ‘emaciation’ and
‘impoverishment’ encouraged in his sensibility a latent wish to “escape” leaving
the world of absurd contrasts. The poet employs the situation of stressed destitution
to counter the customary dread of death evoking instead a decided yearning
and anticipation to ‘let go’, and meet it half way, because perception and meaning
in the guise of “seeds of light” could be achieved only after a fruitful encounter.
As he “lay on the bed—There” patiently expectant
So it was stale time, day in, and day out
Blue fug in the room, nothing to do but wait...
..And the sun and the stove and the mice and the gnawed paper
Made up the days and nights when the missed supper,
Paring my nails, looking over the far below street
Of tramways and bells. (CP, p.60)
The figure of death with form, intelligence, memory, thought gradually emerged from
out of his own consciousness.
For (as you will guess) it was death I had in mind,
Who covets our breath, who seeks and will always find;
Taking his rents; yes I had only to look
To see the shape of his head and shine his book
And the creep of the world under his sparrow-trap-sky,
To know how little slips his immortal memory.  (CR, p.60)

Larkin may have been sceptical about age-old christian values of perpetuity of spirit but was confident about the immortality of the death phenomenon because its obdurate, undeniable inevitability could never be denied or dismissed. In the poet’s ephemeral mortal world death only boasted of deathlessness. There was no license for overdue rents as little slipped its “restless mind” and “immortal, unfailing memory.” Hence the poet protagonist had no choice but to remain waiting till he heard the ascent of the imperturbable step on the stairs, the sad announcement of its advent, the consistent sound coming closer and closer even though

To keep out of his thought was my whole care,

Yet down among sunlit courts, Yes, he was there. (CR, p.60)

Assumptions had prepared him into a death consciousness believing that its obliterates life without struggle-breathing choked, light blocked, total blindness as a resultant. With a view to circumvent the unflinching aim of its issued warrant Larkin allows himself a breather cunningly postponing the onslaught by shamming or preponing in the single minded hope of deluding Non Being through dissimulation—thus distracting its attention to images full of life

............... so I shammed death

Still as a stuck pig, hoping he’d keep concerned

With boys who were making fig when his back was turned.
Total escape was never possible and the premeditated took a definite form to confront his privity. Myriads of images collocate together to word paint the remarkable encounter of life with the spectral forces of negation. The helplessness of the extant in images like “time shrank”, “there was no defence”, “I sprawl to my knees”, “light cringed”.

The crack in the floor

Widening for one long plunge?

In a sharp trick,

The world lifted and wrung

dripped with remorse. (CP., p.61)

The fact of breathing tightened into a shroud merge to face the formidable confident adversary which was not deterred by closed doors. The inexorable approach of the forces of annihilation relentlessly pursuing their quarry came “straight to my door”. Larkin goes to great lengths to strike a contrast between the crippled impotence of Being and the pitiless strength of death, stressing the incongruity of a parallelism. Life thus is always at the mercy of death. Uptil this point the poet had been seeking to establish an equation and his conclusions are not very different from traditionalisms. It is in the final stanza that Larkin deviates from the existing norm because even though he was apprehensive of death the final emergent picture does not conform to a fear obsessed cognisance. The “seeds of lights” though sown upon the failure of the evening had already prepared him for a vision with a difference, an antithesis of his expectations therefore awaits him on
the threshold of the attic.

Nothing like death stepped, nothing like death paused,
Nothing like death had such hair, arms so raised. (CP, p.61)

Amazed at the singularity of the figure the poet incredulously asks

Why are your feet bare? Was not death to come
Why is he not here? What summer have you broken from?

(CP, p.61)

Which echoes an earlier

...down among the sunlit courts, yes, he was there.

(CP, p.60)

The 'Unfinished Poem' significantly titled thus explodes the traditional premise by seeing death surrounded not by its customary adjunct darkness but by the light of summer amidst the colour of spring. Released from its persistent lot of nullity it became viewed with a potential for association. The realization added a significant dimension of perception to Larkin's sensibility, enlarging upon his earlier decipherment. The poem as mentioned earlier was "unfinished"- as no single effort could offer a complete assessment. They were all explorations into the inevitable death enigma.

By reason of its remoteness the riddle of death fascinated Larkin inviting his probe for solutions. The poet was aware that no single definition could sufficiently explain the mysterious conundrum; so he approached it from diverse angles seeking to reach the latent truth. It was also an exercise in conquering his own personal dread of the phenomenon. Each poem therefore enlarges the earlier understanding
and added a little to its already established meaning. "Ambulances" aims at gauging this in its own individual manner. The obscurity of the fact, occurrence and experience of death demanded a correlative objectification through concrete imagery to fully impress the significance of its state. In a search for exactitude Larkin selects the symbol of the ambulances which automatically brought in tow its corresponding associations. The poem replete with imagistic pattern represents yet another attempt at defining death.

Closed like confessionals, they thread
Loud noons of cities, giving back
None of the glances they absorb. (CP., p.132)

Beginning with a two pronged attack the poet couples the connotations of his chosen symbol with inferences attendant to the specific ritual of confessions. The small confining cubicle where the devout christian "weighed", under a burden of guilt confessed his misdoing was a tangible reality. The closed oppressiveness of these tiny rooms shared similtude with the atmosphere of the vehicle which like death is unerring in its destination. The implications from the twin world of religion and death share a mutuality. Manifesting an identity in his primary symbol Larkin surrounds it with a virtual medley of images- "the weaving and threading through the streets, "the loud noon of cities", the absorption of received glances, "the light grey colour", the distinctive monogram of "arms in a plaque" and the temporary rest at the kerb patiently follow its unmistakable movement confident in the knowledge that no street shall be missed. The visitor though unwelcome was unavoidable.

After establishing the certitude of death's eventuality the poem contrasts the
extraordininess of its occurrence with the absolute normalcy of common life.

Then children strewn on steps or road,

Or women coming from the shops

Past smells of different dinners,... (CP., p.132)

The image of the playing children described by the unlikely conceit “strewn”, the shopping women, the different dinners is at variance with “the wild white face” beneath “the red stretcher blanket”. The starkness of the latter dwarfs the former image lending death a perpetuity and real life the “felicity of an occasional episode”. The women waited with arrested attention for yet another victim whose blanched face “overtops” the hallmark “red blanket” to be “carried in”. Though the sufferer displayed signs of life in his “wild face” he was still “stowed” and “taken away” as an already dead corpse. This mental picture helped Larkin realise the close mutuality between Being and Non-Being. The undercurrent of this inexorable movement continues throughout the poem.

In that single moment it appeared as if the dehumanised human mind had come close to solving the mysterious puzzle of “emptiness”, vacuity and non-being. The evasive answer seems tantalisingly close to the periphery of understanding.

And sense the solving emptiness

That lies just under all we do,

And for a second get it whole,

§o permanent and blank and true.(CP., p.132)

Larkin maintained that mankind collectively suffered from a death con-
sciousness primarily because it was believed to be more real than reality itself. The apparently “permanant, blank and true solution” suggested “only for a second” cancelled its own validity and the tentative answer is conveyed through fugitive words like ‘sense’, ‘solving’, ‘lies just under’ with meanings lying just beneath the surface of cognition. The realization of the imminent though occasionally overlooked was never forgotten. It, thus, continued to impress human sensibility with its importance. The drama of death, personified by the coming of the ambulance to take away the individual behind “fast receding doors”, elicited only a “Poor soul”, from the living as an answer to their own distress rather than sympathy for the dismembered soul.

In continuation with the earlier pattern “loud noon”, “solving emptiness”, “fast doors receding”, to signify death related connotation Larkin reinforces his symbolic image by visualising the atmosphere and surrounding air to be “dead”. The distant ambulance had performed its duty in more than one way. In addition to the customary ‘stowing’ the vehicle had woken mortality from the stupor of a false hope of permanence. It served as a cruel reminder of the inescapable future.

For borne away in deadened air
May go the sudden shut of loss
Round something nearly at an end,
And what cohered in it across
The years.................... (CP, p.132)

This could very well be the cause for the “deadened air”, as the spectre of nothingness threatening to sever the bonds of existence looms before all
eyes. The “sudden shut of loss”, therefore, continues the “misery” of the preceding “whisper of distress” in being a lament for one’s own self. The anthropomorphic “something” feeding for years on the life force gradually comes to an end. A slow loosening of ties with families and association begin. Sensibility which earlier thrived on the spatial with no seeming boundaries of life to start collecting itself for an interaction within limits of the approaching, encroaching darkness.

................. Far

From the exchange of love. (CP, p.133)

The extant has to step into a state of complete dis-association becoming estranged from all moorings because the final destination of a room beneath the ground was “out of reach” for all but the chosen. Impressed by the simultaneous singularity yet regularity of the event

The traffic part to let go by. (CP, p.133)

All the might, wisdom, status, and pomp of the world gets eclipsed by the still stronger forces of negation. Being slackens grip and the reality of Non Being establishes itself

Brings closer what is left to come

And dulls to distance all we are. (CP, p.133)

“Ambulances” published in January 1961 may have had its origin in post-war trauma. The poem embodies the immediacy of the death experience in an extremely underplayed fashion, when all the while the poet clearly intends to awaken humanity to the truth of its mortality. It is Larkin’s acceptance of the fact of death, and manifests a desire to objectify the mysterious to explain its enigma.
“Aubade” or the sunrise song appeared in the November/December issue of The Times Literary Supplement in the year 1977. Having journeyed at length through the city of blanks through dreams, nightmares still incredulous at death’s summary arrival and departure into nowhere, Larkin decides to collect earlier arguments assimilating them before proceeding into a fresh perception. His encounter this time takes place in the dead of the night progressing ahead with the growing light of the day.

Tired after a long days work the poet visualises himself asleep in a drunken stupor of discomfort “waking at four”. It was a twilight hour when the world is still surrounded by the remains of darkness from the preceding night and the tentative light of the coming dawn waits around the corner to obliterate it from another horizon. Until then the poet has to lie in ‘the soundless dark’ with many questions regarding death and Non Being plaguing him.

Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,
Making all thought impossible but how,
And where and when I shall myself die. (CP., p.208)

The fact of death has been proved certain. Every twenty four hour spent brings the living people closer to the vacuum. Death itself was ‘unerring and unresting’ and unrelenting’, a sentiment echoed from the earlier written “Unfinished Poem” which had mentioned ‘the restless mind’ and ‘the immortal memory’ of the phenomenon of nothingness. Hence ‘how’ and ‘when’ and ‘where’ could only elicit factual answers linked to the other certainty ‘I shall myself die’. Though the queries were believed to be futile or ‘arid interrogation’ yet
The dread
Of dying, and being dead,
Flashes afresh to hold and horrify. (CP., p.208)

The ‘growing light’ in time not only shows all things ‘that were really always there’ but also accelerates the fear and dread of the impending event.

The mind blanks at the glare (CP., p.208)

Owing to the engulfing darkness the poet feels that despite a concerted “I stare” he was denied comprehension. No sooner does the luminosity of light break into the curtain of darkness, the vision and intelligence withdraw into themselves as a result of the shock of glare. In normal course, fear of the dark ends with the coming of the morning light. The difference in Larkin is that apprehension is further intensified. The darkness of the night may be an illusion but for the poet the light of the day is also illusive because the stark reality of ‘total emptiness forever’ is revealed. In order to avoid misunderstanding of any sort Larkin clarifies that the ‘mind block’ was never a consequence of compunction or unrequited love, or a ‘good not done’ or even time wasted and misused because

An only life can take so long to climb
Clear of its wrong beginnings,... (CP., p.208)

The poet wished to impress the fact that the allotted span is insufficient to begin, make mistakes, rectify and start all over again. The arrested attention if not the result of the above mentioned options had to have a justification. Larkin explains it in the latter half of the stanza, when death is explained through graphic ‘thought patterns’ and ‘Total emptiness’, ‘sure extinction’, display his mortal fear of the non extant
...Not to be here,
Not to be anywhere,
And soon, nothing more terrible, nothing more true.

(CP., p.208)

The frequent repetition of 'not' and 'nothing' communicates his existential suffering at the idea of the total decimation of Being, which was not only 'terrible but true also. In poem after poem His cry of despair becomes more poignant. Each encounter with the painful truth leaves him feeling small and helpless. No amount of deception and trickery could outwit these powerful nocturnal forces. The dread evoked by them was therefore triggered by the inescapable certainty, in 'a special way of being afraid'. Employing an audio-visual image, of the "vast moth eaten musical brocade" for religious paraphernalia, Larkin recalls earlier times when the large singularly patterned interwoven cloth of religion provided the individual with answers. But the poet felt that the changing times have surrendered the legacy of the brocade to the moths because prior to its destruction by the insects it was discovered that religion was just 'an implausible pretension'. The deception about the true nature of death lay within religion yet it was powerless to explain. Creative thinkers like Larkin disowned religion because of inane answers as 'we never die'. This promise of perpetuity or immortality was to Larkin a deliberate effort to avoid facts and hoodwink, the gullible believers. He was even sceptical of the contemporary existential thought of his times branding it 'spacious stuff' to maintain that

...No rational being
can fear a thing it will not feel... (CP, p.208)

because it is this formlessness and imperceptible quality of death that he fears. This feeling of total obliviousness, when there is

..........no sight, no sound,

No touch, or taste or smell, nothing to think with,

Nothing to love or link with. (CP, p.208)

The estrangement from all moorings, the severing of bonds and ties, the utter defenceless impotence and powerlessness to combat or resist, leaving the individual prostrate before these forces. He christened it 'an anaesthetic' from which none come round because it delinks all association of love and relationships. His agnosticism convinced him of the sheer impossibility of an immortal life. In his poetic world nothing remained alive after the chilly encounter with death's numbness.

Encouraged by his own findings Larkin delves deeper into the recesses of this mystery. His earlier discoveries led him to a conclusion which is yet again echoed in the present poem 'Aubade'. The probable, yet elusive, solution to the riddle and the objectification of the experience go hand in hand, the only knowledge about the experience of death is through gradual progression from 'an unfocussed blur' to 'a standing chill' and finally 'the condition' of total indecision. Its very inevitability becomes sufficient cause for the dread and terror of the phenomenon.

And so it stays just on the edge of vision,

A small unfocussed blur, a standing chill. (CP, p.209)

In his attempt to demystify death the poet in the above lines manifests
the solution ‘it’ with an individual identity worthy of notice. The image of this identifiable thing remains “on the edge of vision” with the supposed rationale of distinctness if the pupil of the eye twins to view it manfully. The uncertainty of the definition gets pinned through transfer of epithets. The reinforced perception retard the impulse and dulls the mind. All decisions get influenced by its inevitability.

Most things never happen, this one will
And realisation of it rages out
In furnace-fear when we are caught without
People or drink....

(CP., p.209)

The ‘raging furnace fear’ paints the poets over petrified sensibility. He confesses the need for company or liquor, realising the inefficacy of the twin panaceas also. The definition of “courage gets changed”. Instead of indicating strength and mettle it implies “not scaring others”. Suffering, complaints or bold confrontation, no individual gets exemption from the death experience.

...Being brave
Lets no one off the grave.
Death is no different whined at than withstood. (CP., p.209)

The poet reverts back to his earlier premise of the slow rise of the sun, which in contrast to his dismal preoccupations lends life and form to the room. In the increasing light all objects in the room gradually gain shape. This idea has been proficiently indicated through the concrete image of a ‘wardrobe’. Larkin explains that the human psyche has never been in doubt about the veracity of the death principle. Human mind still refuses to
accept this vital truth preferring pathetically to escape the issue by avoiding it. And just when some members of society are grappling with the evasive fact, the rest of mankind continues to live uncaring and oblivious. The poem concludes with a surfeit of tangible images. The telephones crouching 'getting ready to ring', 'locked offices', 'uncaring rented world ready to rouse', 'the sky if white as clay' render a comprehensive image of an active and alert world busy in its own independent fashion. The activity is also unceaseless because

Work has to be done.  

(CP, p.209)

The final statement 'Postmen like doctors go from house to house' though indisputable as an illustration of life's essential flux', conceals an implicit analogy. The twin representation of existence merely imitate the regimen of forces of negation. The poet finds it difficult to differentiate between the regularity of the latter from the preoccupations of the former. Both maintain schedules, both visit all doors; why then Larkin seems to question that one is called life and the other death. The image of death becomes as commonplace as postmen and doctors. Lessening the mounting tension on Larkin's sensibility it allowed him to gradually to terms with its awful certainty.

The four lines "In Times when Nothing Stood" was written sometime in March 1978. It figured in 1946-83 section of the Collected Anthology. Larkin's search for interpretation and, insights covered his entire poetic career, when some poems pessimistically accepted the human lot and others treated the theme with singularity the above mentioned poem
propounds a novel idea. It provides a summary of Larkin's deductions regarding the opaque indefiniteness of death. Never a believer of God and religion the concept of immortality had failed to impress him. Still the idea of perpetuity was not foreign to Larkin's thought. In fact, the lack of perpetuity in the affair of death bothered him; but its certitude left no option for scepticism. Larkin's thought therefore is a queer mixture of belief and heresy. In an otherwise impermanent universe the poet appreciated stability even if it was manifested in a fact which had always puzzled him. He summarized his conclusions thus

In times when nothing stood
but worsened, or grew strange
there was one constant good:
she did not change. (CP., p.210)

The 'one constant good' for the first time relieves Larkin's mind of his tense burden. Death comes through the long journey as a dearly loved beloved who does not change in an otherwise unstable constantly worsening alienated world. It becomes a truth like Keat's Grecian Urn. A reader unfamiliar with Larkin and his preoccupation with this part, thence will certainly interpret it as a love poem complete with romantic ardour. Larkin, on the contrary, asserts that human world and existence is trapped emotionally and biologically within space and time. Death is beyond these limitations and trappings and the only permanent. Mortality, existence and other inconstants revolve around it. Constancy is its solitary goodness yet counterbalanced against the mentioned conditions of estrangement, change, aggravation and ephemerality it becomes the only goodness to live
for opposing ‘Nada’ or nothingness which implies complete negation, death appears friendly in a positive, dependable way. Viewed thus it ceased being the cadaverous monster of human imagination. The simplicity and compactness of the poem adds to the concentration and intensity of its implications. Larkin seems to have finally come to terms with the mystery of death having reached an amicable solution to the inscrutable secret of existence.

Images and theme are interdependent each specifically promoting and enhancing the implication of the other. The understanding gets gradually extended as each poem in the cluster dealing with a specific experience. The imagery is quite unusual and at times apparently unpoetic. But the language synthesizes with his attitude to the theme. It is an esoteric intense and evocative mode of delineation. The interconnected image patterns lend strength to each other. Excessive obscurity made Larkin occasionally obtuse but the brazen novelty of his images strike the imagination with wondering revelation.

Imagery basically consists of mental pictures deployed by a creative artist to convey a totality of elements cumulatively involved in an experience. They can signify tangible as well as qualities of sense, perceptions, describe visual objects or employ figurative language of metaphors, similies, patterns, clusters, motifs. By correlating emotions with unsuspected associations, they provide a concentration of experience and evoke the individual conscience. Emphasis shifts from boldness and intensity to a congruous pattern highlighting the central theme or preoccupation of the concerned artist. A single theme may be ex-
emplified through thought patterns from the entire experience of life. Apparently discordant these images merge into the thematic fabric with total concord becoming so much a part of the poem as to seem its natural language.

In the death group of poems Larkin’s imagery embraces a wide range of perceptions. The subject of death has its related associations namely- darkness, nullity, nothingness, extinction, spectral, being an inexplicably, surreptitious and unwelcome visitor from the subterranean world. Annihilation and night, its most common inferences and correlatives from nature, the seasons, and attendant fraternities were employed with great fineness by the poet to denote this experience of death in its entirety.

Beginning with ‘Going’ the first poem analysed, it is noticed that emphasis is on contrasts. Primarily a visual depiction the approximation and opposition of light and darkness, spatial and temporal, distance and adjacency connote the sense of loss evoked by the onslaught of these negative forces. The conclusion witnesses a concretization of images in which the physical corporeal adjuncts feel the burden of trapping and imprisonment. Death in such a situation becomes a release from the shackling and locking, it had been subjected to earlier. Progressing from this block of collages, the representative images of And the wave sings because it is moving are crystalline and dialectical in content. There is an excessive use of analogies from nature and an identification with the plight of human beings and the existence; because the essential principle behind everything extant, is flux. Nature thus became Larkin’s principal motif to connote the unending movement. The unification and disjunction of the two indicate abstruse emotions
and an abjectification of feelings like grief and comfort is done through reference to concrete symbols such as the plough, harrow and coulter.

'Traumerei' the third poem analysed for its apposition to the relevant theme, ontologically emphasizes the various components constituting the phenomenon. Each alphabet brings added comprehension to the faceless, helpless multitude which remain mute witnesses as testimony to the remorseless majesty of death. The 'closing walls' signify imprisonment and paralysis the uncountable number represent the universality of the occurrence and absent 'H' betrays the continuing mystery of death. The missing alphabet stands for complete comprehension which is denied to the mortal mind.

Cosmic energy, light, sun, elements comprise the visual montage of Many famous feet have trod. Being is divided into components, and the distinction and mutuality between death and light becomes highlighted through the coin image. Larkin rises above the subject of this obsession to assess what life has to offer. He concludes that 'Joy' is a patent to lessen the grief of loss and deprivation which is the essence of the death experience. Every moment of happiness- 'a mile long silken cloth of wings' is an ebb of a regression against the perpetual motion towards extinction. This opposing force deadens the impact, lessens and alleviates the sorrow stealing something precious from death.

The 'Unfinished Poem' concentrates on the conflict between Being and Non Being within the person of the poet. His own psyche becomes the battle ground. The title itself is a metaphor for his incomplete understand-
ing. Using the symbol of the attic as the grave, Larkin manifests death with form, figure, movement, volition, intelligence and decided human qualities. It is personified through allusions to normal human activity. The poet intends to cheat death but gets in turn cheated as the apparition does not conform to conventional norms. It is different from Larkin’s expectations. His deductions about death are seen going through surprising changes because instead of winter darkness and autumnal depression death appears in the guise of summer and spring.

‘Ambulances’ replete with imagery from the world of religion, hospitals and existence in general connotes Larkin’s thematic preoccupation in its entirety. The reiterated contrasts and juxtaposition of images of the living and the dying, the charged pace and the equally rapid stilling of movement resulting in severing bonds, punctuate the fabric of the poem. The vehicle itself becomes a concrete symbol of death. Its advent serves as a warning of its imminence the certainty of the fact and an awakening to the mortality of every single individual living. The distress and anguish expressed is not for the dying but an expression of their own extreme helplessness before the forces of annihilation.

In ‘Aubade’ the images of light and darkness act as continuous foils to each other. Comprehension is associated with luminosity. Throughout his poetic career Larkin coined phrases to express his feelings towards death. Repeated references to ‘total emptiness’, ‘sure extinction’, the blank, void and dread in the ‘not’ ‘not’, ‘nothing’ ‘nothing’ are attempts at defining the inscrutable mystery. His ‘nothing’ is different from Hemingway’s ‘nada’ in
which the nullity is the rootlessness, vacuity and futility of existence before death. Larkin’s ‘nothingness’ prevailed after the occurrence. It betrayed a sense of estrangement and break from the moorings emanating from the life force. A universality of the phenomenon concludes the poem with the statement that

‘Postmen like doctors visit every door’.(CP., p.209)

The shift in Larkin’s perception about the theme of death had been noticed and mentioned before. The fear and bafflement of the earlier poems had slowly given way to a gradual acceptance of its certainty and a stoicism regarding its imminence. Ratified thus the image of death underwent a slow change and ‘In Times When Nothing Stood’ the poet summarises his deductions. The four line poem concentrates his previous images in a set of three compact phrases- ‘the transience’ in ‘nothing stood’, the aggravation in ‘the worsening and the disjunction’ in ‘grew strange’. In the world of complete transition where things became bad to worse Larkin discovered that death was the one phenomenon that remained ever constant, never differed nor changed.
CHAPTER III

THE THEME OF ALIENATION

*Here is an unfenced existence*
Philip Larkin born in a respectable middle class family enjoying all material comforts and emotional security repeatedly recalled his childhood with scorn, derision, boredom and a deep rooted fear. Reticent by temperament Larkin’s poetic sensibility responded to pressures, external and internal to his creative conscious. An innate sense of insufficiency coupled with vulnerability consequent to a speech impediment and disturbances around him caused an instinctive inward withdrawal in his psyche. The disjunction thus experienced found expression in a body of poems permeating with the feeling of estrangement and alienation. Larkin’s work embodies the basic dissension of his personality because the poet constantly hankered for self expression and searched for definitions. Unlike other creative artists Larkin directed his energies to an annihilation or negation of his identity, striving for a state of indifference or neutrality. He achieved this through the unique medium of shredding his personality into manifold voices or “personae” which interact with each other. Such encounters help to underline the thematic patterns of the poems.

Deviating from the conventional poetic designs Larkins rendered the different hues of human personality as “masks” subjective and objective thus making his poems dialectical and dramatic. The self confessional nature of his work also demanded the concealment device for the alienated disjunct. His scepticism and wariness found justification in his disapproval of all illusions. Viewing
existence dispassionately and preoccupied with the desire for anonymity the stance of the alienated being suited him by its very conformity to his needs. He treated with mistrust emotions such as love, hate, desire considering them imperfect and inadequate even though their fusion constitutes human identity. Andrew Swarbick observes:

Larkin wants to resist not only romantic involvement but all forms of commitment because any such pledge to a person, article of faith or way of life involves an illusion.¹

Larkin believed that ultimate happiness was out of reach and relationships, fulfillment of desires, anchoring, roots were artificial and pseudo real. Shorn of moorings existence became one relentless nomadic movement for the sundered intellect.

The two World Wars the establishment and failure of the Welfare State and the liquidation of the British Colonial Empire further affected the susceptible and sensitive poet. His poems according to Stephan Regan depicted:

versions...of insecurities of wartime society through the austerity of the immediate post war years and the new found affluence of the late 1950s and 1960s to the eventual fracture and anticipated break up of the Welfare State in the remaining decades.²

The dwindling authority of the Church as unquestioned entity shattered not only the entire fabric of absolutes but also a complete system of symbols, images, dogmas and rituals which supplied the bedrock of immediate expe-
rience safely containing the entire psychic life of western man. Consequent upon the general perspective of objectivity and a certain desolate vacuity making his externalized extant an alien to himself, despiritualized man became a homeless wanderer. In his search for completeness the individual had to do for himself all that had earlier been done by the Church. Unrestrained advancement of science further sundered him from nature also. Subsequently he was provided with a neutral and detached universe. The growing indulgence in sophisticated gadgetary reduced personal involvement and the sense of individual accountability in routine matters. An iconoclast and a non-conformist by temperament Larkin became a hermit in his own surroundings.

During the post war years the poetry written fell under the broad sweeping category of Movement- a reaction against inflated romanticism, obscurity and mystification of language. Though Movement hardly existed as a coherent literary group it did come to be recognised as a shared set of values and assumptions related to the moods and conditions of those eventful years. John Press, Anthony Hartley, J.D. Scott, Enright and Conquest in attempting to define the term emphasized the need for a liberal human perspective and honesty of thought and feeling through clarity, consolidation and simplification.; Larkin’s early poems consisting of “In the Grip of Light”, “NorthShip” and “The Less Deceived” represent according to Regan:

this new classicism...especially the struggle for neutral ground, the creation of a self-effacing modest discourse and a self-
Larkin however rebelled against group identity and later years saw him breaking bonds with the cliche to operate independently writing poetry exemplifying deeper imaginativeness and greater aesthetic possibilities. Yearning to be anti-intellectual he vehemently controverted discursive verse with disjuncted images, specialized diction, symbolistic and metaphorical language typical to the modernist poetry of Pound, Eliot, and Wallace Stevens. Larkin disliked modernism because it destroyed the quality of delight and was the product of deliberate academism. In his essay entitled “The Poetry of Philip Larkin” Anthony Thwaite observe:

In a straight forward Wordsworthian sense he was a man speaking to men.

Relying heavily on colloquialism, precision and conventional form for his poetics the main thrust of Larkin’s poetry lay in a realistic representation of mundane problems of daily existence.

Apart from Larkin’s response to contemporary and current bearings in the world of poetry a significant reason for alienation lay in his inability to speak—tendency to stammer. A school teacher remembers:-

I can see him (Larkin) sitting at the back of the class as clear as now as then......He was uncommunicative, aloof and reserved, not the sort of boy one could approach and I was loath to appear intrusive.

The poet suffered the psychological trauma of this affliction till he was thirty. He
himself admits:

Anyone who stammered will know what agony it is, specially at school.\(^6\)

The deep rooted sense of deprivation and inadequacy resulted in an unconscious retirement, finding expression in the reclusive, self-effacing, self-deprecating persona of his poems. Writing helped him conquer his sense of diffidence and insufficiency. In an interview to a London magazine Larkin observed:

What one does enjoy- what the imagination is only too ready to help with is- in some form or other compensation, assertion of oneself in an indifferent or hostile environment, demonstration (by writing about it) that one is in command of a situation.\(^7\)

His poems were a therapeutic medium to purge and heal the schism caused by the collision between the self and antiself fundamental to Larkin's personality. The incessant conflict of two equally potent impulses prompted a poetry which could best be described as an encounter with forces of one's essential being. In the effort to shake off the miasmatic fog of inner helplessness and the outward forces of predeterminism the poet experienced a virtual trapping which resulted in his sense of alienation with both himself and the external world around him. Larkin states in the required writing:–

I've never had ideas about poetry. To me it's always been a personal almost physical release or solution to a complex pressure of needs.\(^8\)
Further Larkin’s scepticism, agnosticism, and empiricism estranged him from religious beliefs, social and traditional institutions and absolutes governing society. Incompatibility and discontent thus prevailed to encourage a deliberate distancing on his part. He approached the issues of individual identity, choice, isolation, chance, oblivion, through a vocabulary of negation, disjunction and nullity- a “negative self-definition” and “negative sublime”. This conscious yearning, withdrawal and retreat into himself gets repeated illustration in his poems, emerging as one of the prominent themes of Larkin’s poetry. An insight into some prominent poems provide substantive evidence.

The pathos of deprivation deeply enmeshed in Larkin’s sensibility alienated him from society and his own surroundings. At Grass on initial reading appears a poem of alienation wherein Larkin distances “horses” from “the glamours of silks”, “numbers and parasols”, “squadrons of empty cars”, “cups and stakes” recording their experience in the context of this displacement. Shorn of the romance of focussed arc lights the poem records total withdrawal from active social life and an encounter with the predicament of anonymity. The horses are neither old and debilitated nor are they on the verge of death and the extinction. Having won several races they have no reason to grieve. They have little cause for identity crisis as, “their names were artificed though to inlay faded”. The title At Grass, then is suggestive of abstention from participation; with the thrust of the argument focussed on a deliberate rejection and a forced regimentation which makes their extant inessential and superflous. This acts as the decisive determiner
obliterating past triumphs and joys of participation.

Larkin's *At Grass*—a montage of moving pictures graduating from situation to situation, shares decided kinship with Brownings dramatic monologue. The pathos of the predicament gets introduced through the adverb “hardly” which makes the visible image hazy and blurred, with “seeming” betraying partial obliviousness and lack of relatedness.

*The eye can hardly pick them out*

From the cold shade they shelter in. (CP. p.29)

Larkin displays remarkable dexterity in employing images with visual and emotional concurrence. The “coldness” of the “shaded glade” which supposedly “shelters” them enhances the distress created by the wind. Felt existence becomes italicised through the movement of the “tail” and the “mane”. The underlying theme of repeated desertion and subsequent anonymity accompanied by frightening loneliness gets depicted through the expectant yet helpless “seeming to look on”.

The following stanzas weave word pictures of the triumphs of their glorious past when “two dozen distances” were enough to “fable” them into living legends. The cups, stakes, handicaps and “long unhushed cries” culminated into “stop-press columns”. Larkin juxtaposes the images of the forgotten past when the mere turn of their heads were sufficient to heighten heart beats with the isolation and rejection of their present existential reality.

Reconciliation surfaces slowly and the trauma of the immediate present recedes into the deep recesses of the past. Their conscious desire now is to “shake off” the memories of the “starting gates”. the deafening
cries of the gathered gentry that plague their ears with an irritant buzzing sound, and sink deep into the “shadowed dusk of the unmolested meadows”. The hurriedly passing summers deepen into the “comfort and ease” and a drowning of identity.

Almanacked their names lives; they

Have slipped their names.” (CP. pp.29,30)

Nameless they are but the crucial issue highlighted by Larkin is that the animals retain the ability to “gallop for sheer joy and happiness”. However the only audience of their present feats are the groom and “the groom boy”. They exist in a void of rejection, insulation and non-participation totally alienated from their surroundings. The poem becomes a manifestation of Larkin’s need, approval as also a perception of failure. The poet views his subject from a triangular perspective of total subjectivity, partial subjectivity and objectivity. The images of the triple perspective of the quietly grazing beasts, the animals in action and the watching crowd coalesce and overlap each other in a perfect collage of visual imagery. The poem stems originally from the feelings of negativity, disillusionment, resentment but slowly and gradually rises above the inanity of these base emotions to a realisation of a distinct and separate identity that lies not in recognition and glamour of the demanding past but in the restoration of their innate dignity vis-a-vis the quite serenity of the lush greenery and serene landscape. Essentially a poem rooted in the rapidly receding ethos of rural and pastoral England typified by shady groves “classic summers” and “unmolested meadows”. At Grass is also a requiem to a lost world. Marked by a distinct heterogeneity in
image patterns Larkin in this poem conveniently progresses from one mode of experience to another.

At Grass thus depicts the trauma of slow and gradual detachment from all people, scenes and objects that had earlier constituted life's reality and joy. It is a drama of slow estrangement from "states earlier loved" but often taken for granted. The total experience lies in alienation through deprivation.

Larkin's Church Going echoes the circumstances and inclinations of post war England. Not only does this poem honestly reflect the war weary sensibility but also coalesces the poetic stirrings of the Movement group with which the poet got associated time and again. The neo-romantic poetry of nineteen forties was characterized with mystification and unwarranted obscurity. Larkin's constant redrafting of creative efforts is evidence of a desire to demystify poetic language from the pseudo intellectual jargon of his predecessors. Honestly confessional in context, his poems are attempts to reach and describe the very core of his experienced subject. Larkin's manner remains ironic, mocking and nearly always tongue-in-cheek.

Church Going marks an attitudinal progress in the poets approach to the theme of alienation. Earlier it was a success, failure, rejection resultant pattern. In the present poem he focusses attention on the ambivalent status of one of the most important institutional pillars of morality, ethics and society. This typically Larkinesque poem requires reading on two levels. Firstly from the point of view of parallel equation of the speaker and
the subject, and secondly from the visual angle of graphic imagery. Sceptical of institutionalized thinking assisted by rites, ritual observances and religious ceremonies the poet opens the poem with a general air of irreverence and disrespect:

"Once I'm sure there's nothing going on
I step inside letting the door thud shut". (CP. p.97)

Deliberately breaking "the tense musty unignorable silence" by the noisy "closing of the door" the poet an alien feels forced to "pronounce the verses" which end louder than usual and are echoed through sniggers. His intrinsic reaction becomes evident from these petty rebellious gestures. The speaker next summons the Almighty to surmise on the "time" required for "brewing" the "silence" he subconsciously desired when he made sure.

"...there's nothing going on" (CP. p.97)

However it is yet another unremarkable church with the telling images of "books", "matting", "seats", "stones", "dry brownish flowers" cut for Sunday "brass" and the "next organ".

The next stanza continues the familiarly unfamiliar pose of conscious disassociation. The "roof" looked "almost" "new", "cleaned" or "restored" arousing natural curiosity which is deliberately snubbed by

"Someone would know, I don't" (CP. p.97)

The mood betrays not only an inherent scepticism but also a professed ignorance. The perception:

"...I peruse a few

Hectoring large-scale verses, and pronounce
though ironical in content manifest a sense of strangeness and disenchantment with
the spirit and essence because accustomed reading could have been less laboured
and more moderate in tone. Larkin’s stance becomes reflective of the post-war ten­
dency of disbelief, scepticism and estrangement from long held ethical codes of con­
duct, behaviour and human relation. The implicit image of boredom and lack of in­
terest in the heavily trudging lines:-

...Back at the door

I sign the book donate an Irish six pence (CP.p.97)

reinforce the earlier impression of laboured effort and disinterestedness as the
speaker had merely chanced to visit an obsolete musty antiquarian monument. The
lines close with a satisfied rejoinder of

The place was not worth stopping for (CP.p.97)

The following stanza registers a subtle transition in the mood of the
speaker. The disjunction noticeable earlier was not a consequence of a spiritual
vacuum or vacuity, nor was the visit an inquisitive peering into a strange world.
On the contrary it was a conscious search for answers, roots and moorings. The
helpless confession

Yet stop I did in fact I often do,

And always end much at a loss like this,

Wondering what to look for,... (CP. p.97)

illustrates the futility of the search and an almost passive inertia and indifference
because of a betrayal by religion. The disillusionment experienced makes him won­
der over the future of these cumbersome monuments of antiquity. Disused they
could only be turned into museums with “parchment plate and pyx” locked in showcases and the rest offered “rent-free” to nature and its creatures. The last line continues in essence the earlier stated disenchantment.

Larkin continues to construct through relevant image patterns to visual picture of his subject and its predetermined fate of being reduced to an object perpetuating superstition which will survive even after belief finally ends. After dark dubious women in search of lucky stones and mascots for their “sick children” could also encounter “dead ones”. The illogical, irrational power of “good”, “evil” or “some sort” prevalent in the immediate present will cease some day, the ghost of belief and disbelief exorcised the building comprising of

Grass, weedy pavements, brambles buttress, sky.” (CP. p.98)

will be unrecognisable. It will merely be an outer shell marred beyond recognition. The positivistic affirmative values of hope, faith, charity, selflessness, love, duty earlier manifested in it becoming more and more obscure, the speaker wonders “who” will in the future seek it for these quintessential virtues. His scepticism duly answers his own queries. Possibly the “crew that tap and jot and know the rood-lofts”, or some “ruin-bibber”, or “christmas-addict” hunting for antiques, organ-pipes. The reference to “myrrh” evokes images of an earlier staunchly Christian belief and monumental transition from those basic tenets of religion. With the experience of alienation total and complete because the poet acknowledges

...for which was built

This special shell? For, though I’ve no idea

What this accoutred frosty barn is worth, (CP. p.98)
the diatribe gradually weakens into a self assessment. The speaker searches for weakness innate to his own psyche and perception. He wonders whether his insularity and isolation were not the result of his own boredom, lack of true knowledge, ignorance and a concerted reaction against traditionalism and ritualism because though alienated he experiences a compulsive urge to return again and again seeking something. It may only be the “pleasing silence” or “the sombre serousness” of the house and the “earth”. It could possibly be the “blent air” that quenches his thirst and assuages the hunger he feels in himself. Institutions can fall apart, become obsolete, fall into ruin and disuse but the spirit, the essence persists duly remembered by different names in different epochs. Destiny, fate, compulsion call it what one may reserves the right to surprise a basic human response in all psyche and evidence of the perception can be found in the countless number of dead buried in the churchyard.

Church Going manifests Larkin’s characteristic tendency of adopting a “persona” to examine a state and consciousness of being. Truly aware of the dissension in his own psyche he employs the therapeutic medium of poetry to settle scores and arrive at conclusions. His poems as noticed by Andrew Swarbrick are existential encounters with his being.

Larkin self-consciously bares his soul in his poetry hence the need for anonimity and concealment. The mask and personae, consistent self-mockery are efforts to hide his vulnerable self from complete exposure. Significantly the symbols chosen by Larkin for this soul searching experience of alienation rests yet again in a concrete image. Object by object, the poet
builds the complete visual of a derilict monument with its accompanying trappings and unlooked after unkempt surroundings. Its antiquity and the importance to art dealers and fanatics whom he deridingly addresses as “ruin-bibbers” get emphasised often. The cycle-clips”, ”the Irish-sixpence”. “the weedy pavements”, “brambles”, “parchments”, “the dubious women”. “the samples for cancer” are all image clusters culminating in a totality of “an accoutred frowsty barn”. However tangible and graphic the imagery Larkin chooses in order to describe the obsoleteness of the church the significant emergent fact lies not in these outward embellishments but the emotional sustenance, the deep profound and serious silence towards which the speaker of the monologue gravitates unintentionally and without conscious volition.

Mr. Bleaney written in May 1955 forms part of the poets third collection The Whitsun Weddings. Decidedly biographical in content, the poem is a bleak representation of one man’s isolation and alienation from his moorings. It renders in clinical terms the abject rootlessness of an individual and manifests yet another angle from which Larkin viewed the theme of alienation. The tendency for estrangement stems from the individuals thwarted need to fraternize with other living beings and correlate with the props offered by society and existence. Deprived, rejected and isolated, the Bleaney’s are sceptical of the sustenance offered by religion and kinship. Larkin aptly observes in his poem Here.

Here is unfenced existence...

Facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach. (CP. p. 137)
Apparently, the world of Mr. Bleaney is peopled by three characters—the landlady, the new tenant and Bleaney himself. The poem, a characteristic dramatic monologue depicts the interaction between the aforementioned people. It would simplify equation if the scholar views the poem as the poets recognition of his own being. Preoccupied to the point of obsession with existential flux, Larkin’s poetry embodies the many images of his own self. Mr. Bleaney is an experimentation in the mode of splitting his personality into different personae- in the pattern of association, disassociation and a repeated association. The tenant of the poem is the poet’s own voice—a deliberate counterpoint to the protagonist which gradually merges into the Bleaney personae to offer a summary statement on the perpetual emotional impoverishment of the lone individual.

The deceased (indicated by the recurrent use of past tenses was, stayed, moved) Bleaney’s lonely existence gets pieced together through a succession of images. The otherwise “flowered curtain”, “thin”, “frayed” falling five inches short of covering the window sill become poetic prelude into an incomplete life that lacks spiritual fulfilment. The “garden” outside that the protagonist had taken charge of is a mere strip of “littered”, “tussocky” land. The poet does not specify whether the “litter” and grass grew after Bleaney’s departure or was in evidence during his period of stay. However, the present state of the garden becomes a sad commentary on Bleaney’s exercise of responsibility because that bit of land can hardly boast of being labelled a garden. The lone bed, the single-chair and a dim insufficient glow with absolutely no hooks to hang garments and space to seat-
ter books and bags are almost clinically listed by Larkin. The protagonist who had spent the “whole time he was at the Bodies” in this bleak cold room; never felt the need to “relate and connect”. Larkin’s present poem, therefore, is no mere collection of images pertaining to a particular theme but becomes a metaphor of alienation.

The purposeful decision of “I’ll take it” spoken on behalf of the Larkin persona begins the exercise of association wherein he occupies “the bed” stubs his fags on the self same saucer souvenir. The Larkin-Bleaney fusion becomes counterpoint to the earlier stance of disassociation which is again repeated when the poet distances this combine from the scenes that follow. Hence “my” ears are stuffed to drown “the noise of the set he” pursuaded her to buy. “His” habits, “his” preference for sauce, the time “he” came down, the uncertain reason “he” kept plugging at the four-aways. “his” visit to the Frintonfolk and ’his’ sister at Christmas time gradually telescope the former’s entity as an added dimension to the psyche of the protagonist. It is, however, observed that the disjunction with the earlier consciousness seems forced and sudden because of the anthropomorphic representation of the “frigid wind tousling the clouds” the identification turns full circle. The “he” of the sixth stanza gets projected into the “we” of the seventh.

The prominent images of the second last stanza enhance the spartan austerity of the surroundings by relating it to the inclement weather. “The frigid wind” “disturbed clouds” and the “fusty bed” indicate a basic hostility. It is, therefore, not surprising that Bleaney thinking of “home” grins
to the accompaniment of a dread and a shivering. The evocation of the image of home with its related comfort and belonging is in contradistinction to the earlier picture of a rootless nomadic existence led by Bleaney.

The near complete identification of the speaker, the personae and Bleaney become evident in the pronoun “we”. Larkin next strives to sum up his commentary on alienation by seeking a pertinent definition for the plight. He was aware that

...how we live measures our own nature (CP. p.103)

The Bleaney estrangement, the poet clarifies, was not on account of forced circumstances because the choice was never arbitrary. His protagonist had deliberately rejected “home” and “family” to live his life in a “hired box”

...at his age having no more to show

Than one hired box. (CP. p.103)

The poet desires to emphasize that the individual is known by his surroundings and his temperament and mentality can be gauged by a measure of his habitual activities and daily schedules. The obdurate Bleaney

“...warranted no better” (CP., p. 103)

The significance of the conditional “If” and the tentative reminder “I don’t know” of the closing lines are also studied pointers to the fact that Larkin desired to withdraw behind the wall of uncertainty and project the plight of Bleaney as a characteristic condition, a state of mind typical to the alienated being. The information imparted is meant to lend credibility to his fantasy figure. The poem is an attempt to assess through a shift of focus the multiplicity
of moods, gestures and habits typical to an estranged lonely rootless existence.

Two more poems from "The Whitsun Weddings" and "The High Windows" substantiate the theme of alienation. Vers de societe is an ironical treatise on society, sociability and social relations. The Whitsun Wedding deftly sketches the assembly and dispersal of crowds on a moving train. The title poem enlarges upon the earlier discussed Bleaney metaphor which can aptly be described as Larkin’s alienation motif. Both poems directly and indirectly deal with the merits and flaws of society, emotional devastation, consequent to isolation, preferences for solitude and the relative merits of sociability.

The Whitsun Weddings a much deliberated and archetypal poem renders a montage of the myriad pictures of life. The journey and the sequential clips intermingle as participation and separation punctuate the shifting canvas of the world in seeming transition. Experiencing both alienation and oblique communion with the parties assembled on the platform simultaneously Larkin enjoys the position of a spectator participant. The paradox of this situation continues to permeate the fabric of the entire poem. The journey described is biographically a factual one. A white Sunday, the seventh after Easter is observed as a church festival in commemoration of the descent of the Holy Spirit. The trip undertaken by the poet became a liet motif for various constituents. The ceaseless progress of life, periodic congregations, the temporary and permanent estrangements, ritual marriages and divorces and sexual encounters form fluid collages, clustered under the central journey motif. The poet’s disjunction with his environs is suggested by the very first image of the introductory stanza.
"That Whitsun I was late getting away" (CP. p.114)

The reason for the delay lay not with him but the train which was "three quarter empty" had "shuttered windows" and "cushions hot". The unsympathetic reception that awaited him in the humid cage of voluntary imprisonment dampened his earlier enthusiasm. Thus

...........................all sense

Of being in a hurry gone (CP. p.114)

The familiar scenes of "horse-backs" blinding windscreens", the smelly "fish-dock" glide by and the gaze rests on the meeting point of the river, sky and land symbolized by the Lincolnshire landscape. The illusion of conjunction apparent from a distance does in no way undermine the separateness of their distinct elemental identities. The poet seemingly suggests that an individual despite his anchorings, relations and associations remains basically alone, a lonely alienated being surrounded by the artificialities of rituals and absolutes. These constitute the external trappings and though enmeshed deeply in the existential pligt are divorced and separate from it. Recognition of this indisputable certainty makes the individual rudderless and alone.

A marked negativity in the poets approach to industrialization and increase in progress oriented junk becomes starkly evident in the following stanza. The extension of "heat" through the metaphor of height and horizontality measure the long afternoon. The word "all" embraces "heat" in all its dimensions. Fleeting images of "wide farms", "short shadowed cattle", "the floatings of industrial froth", "dipping and rising hedges" move
by and entrance into a new town which is "nondescript" yet characterized by "acres of dismantled junk" betray Larkin's disenchantment with consumerism and industrial expansion. The journey, however, continues despite it.

The metaphor of marriage which is crucial to the poem becomes Larkin's next preoccupation. His apparent concern is to describe with the precision of a faithful spectator everything crossing his line of vision. The train, the journey and the onlooker supply, the unifying link to the disparate impressions. Larkin, a confirmed bachelor, despite his many liaisons with women viewed marriage with scepticism. His style is openly ironical and disrespectful and observation minute in detail. However, the poet's intention to extend the significance of the motif beyond the limitation of the visual cannot be treated lightly. "Marriage", which connotes a meeting and conjugation of two individuals in this poem, becomes analogous to all relationships though with a very significant qualification. The meeting is almost always short and temporary. Hence, the train with the platform, the passenger with the train, the rapidly passing nondescript towns, the crowds of people who frequent the station represent the casual encounters of life. Futility and impermanence thus enhanced the poet stands all alone in a crowd of faces. The poem is a statement on alienation with the constant flux of being rendered through the image of the train movement. Past and present reality get juxtaposed in a surrealistic stream of impressions against the certitude of a predetermined mortal existence. Beginning with the "long cool platforms", "whoops and skirls", "the grinning and pomaded girls", to authenticate the experience, Larkin journeys with interest along the irreso-
luteness, nostalgia and sad “good-byes” to “something that survives”. With a change of mood to curiosity he

Saw it all again in different terms. (CP. p. 115)

Worried fathers with “seemy foreheads” “loud and fat mothers” overburdened uncles “shouting smut” get differentiated from the brides of the day who are word painted in the following manner.

...........................................the perms

The nylon gloves, and jewellery substitutes,

The lemons, mauves and olive-ochres that

Marked off the girls unreally from the rest. (CP. p. 115)

Larkin’s intention is not merely to separate this image from the rest of the congerie but to push it centrestage in order to generate fresh images. Hence, while the timorous girls

..gripping their hand bags tighter, stared

At a religious wounding (CP. p. 115)

the spectator observes that

...........................................the rest stood around;

The last confetti and advice were thrown,

.........................each face seemed to define

Just what it saw departing; children frowned

At something dull; fathers had never known

Success so huge and wholly farcical,

The women shared

The secret like a happy funeral; (CP. p. 115)
because the perception of the extreme ludicrousness of this success and the secret of this joy which beckoned misery in tow was available only to the disillusioned older generation. For them

"Free at last" from the cumbersome burden of this avoidable ceremonial sending off the figurative train proceeds along areas that Larkin actualizes through concrete images, namely the city of "London" and "gouts of stream" emanating from the roaring engine, fields, building-plots poplars and major roads. Fifty minutes get telescoped into moments.

Just long enough to settle hats and say

I nearly died. (CP. p.116)

In one such moment, the metaphorical and actual

A dozen marriages get under way. (CP.p.116)

but

..............................................none

Thought of the others they would never meet

Or how their lives would all contain this hour. (CP.p.116)

because Larkin christens it “a frail travelling coincidence”. The undeniable certainty of the destination notwithstanding, wheresoever it lay atomised the ephemerality of the temporary contact. The poet asserts that although such encounters enhance the feeling of individual loneliness, they also alter the human mind in a subtle way. The “slowing” and “tightening of brakes” the “swelling” and “falling” are legitimate human experiences which certain fate
like an arrow shower

Sent out of sight (CP.p.116)

Whether it carries the potential of "becoming rain", only destiny can predict. The poet passenger on the meandering locomotive, remains a part, yet, apart from the rest in his separate lonely existence.

The italicised introduction of the Vers de societe wherein the poet and his mythical wife invite society as "craps" to "waste their time and ours" to a still more insulting destination is positive assertion of Larkin’s genuine dislike and aversion to society in general. The query

.................... perhaps

You’d care to join us? (CP.p.181)

which is indicative of uncertainty and tentativeness also betrays Larkin’s counter desire to be left alone undisturbed by external forces and pressures. The reason for the invitation rests in his confession:

I’m afraid. (CP. p.181)

The singular Warlock Williams, his addressed confidante becomes sole recipient of this honest revelation and the coarsely framed opening statement which explodes all decency of language has seemingly been triggered by the image pattern of innate fear. Thus, the extended invitation is consequent to an awareness of the dread and fear of loneliness uncared and mortally afraid of the plight of rejection. The “gas fire breathing”, “the sombre swaying trees”, attenuated darkness and encompassing obscurity of the night gradually intensify the feeling.

Stephen Regan in his book "Philip Larkin: An Introduction to variety criti-
cism” observes

The polite middle class society of warlock Williams is made to appear as uninviting as possible.¹⁰

Andrew Motion notices the “sinistery comical nature” of the name and feels that it has been used as a device to sabotage and undermine the false gentility of society. In typically Larkinesque manner the imaginary Warlock Williams personae dramatically asserts the conflict between individual yearning for solitude and compulsive infringement of society, on individual freedom and artistic excellence.

Later Larkin reaffirms his earlier avowal by visualizing himself interacting in different situations. The first of this series embody the poet speaker as a lonely individual bearing the harsh trauma of his plight, the second image depicts a man of the world and the third an individual who has probed into the deep recesses of truth and realized that

All solitude is selfish  \hspace{1cm} (CP.p.181)

The situations instead of being counterproductive are complements as each logically leads to the succeeding mode. Hence, Larkin, the loner, who acknowledges

Funny how hard it is to be alone  \hspace{1cm} (CP.p.181)

transforms himself into a gentleman “holding a glass of washing sherry” spending half his evening listening to inane conversation and responses of socialities who lacked intelligence andmouthed drivel that elicited cant or insincere jargon in response. The poet feels condemned to “company” with which he enjoys no mental compatibility. The experience only intensified his excruciating feeling of alienation
and an occasion to ponder

Just think of all the spare time that has flown,
Straight into nothingness by being filled

With forks and faces. (CP. p.181)

The focussed images of his wife and Warlock Williams, who represented definite people earlier gets diffused into “some bitch” which graduates into “forks and nameless faces”. Family, friends and mentioned formless, faceless people constituting the external world encroach on the desire for solitude, and time devoted to them flies into the void of nothingness leaving the human being abjectly alone. The tirade against society and its unreasonable demands softens into an expression of finer feelings and sensibility when the poet seeks to define solitude. “The noise of the wind”, “the sight of the thinning moon” which gets reduced to an “air sharpened blade”, “the repayment” provided by the promises of life’s total enjoyment, “the relaxed rest under a lamp” are visual and auditory images tangibly manifesting the experience of solitude. Yet, such is the selfishness of this mode that it can only be attained after a total rejection of the demands of self and society.

The contradiction which serves to enhance the creative tension inherent in the lies in the comprehension of the futility of hankering for solitude because

All solitude is selfish, (CP. p.181)

and Larkin’s conscious preoccupation with it as a personal preference. The hermit with his “gown and dish” communing with an absent God required solitude as a condition and a theological necessity. But
No one now/Believes him. (CP. p.181)

In Larkin’s world of post modern beliefs emphasis rests on social interaction.

Being “nice to people”, “doing it back somehow”, “Playing at goodness like going to Church”. These social rituals and routines become boring because of their mandatory forcedness and a consciousness of social ineptitude on the part of the participant. The crude, coarse and indecent jargon of decent niceties elicits a disgusted “O hell” from Larkin.

The final stanza compares the freedom of youth with the ephemeral transience of time left at the disposal of old age. The duration of peace peters off into clouds of rumination bringing disquiet and “other things” entailing past failures, lost causes, self-realization, nostalgia, memories and remorse. The individual, thus, in his escape from society seeks solace in solitude which offers no panacea but opens old wounds. The difference between isolation and solitude ends, and for Larkin they become two sides of the same coin.

The theme of alienation continues to permeate a vast body of Larkin’s work. Poems such as “Here”, “Deceptions”, “The Importance of Elsewhere”, “Reasons for Attendance”, substantiate the claim that his creative genius thrived on conscious difference from the conventional. The novel and unconventional appealed to his poetic sensibility. His technique consisted in presenting attitudes essentially contradictory to each other, in the initial stage Larkin inevitably concludes the arguments betraying secret sympathy for the exceptional.

The controversial poem “Deceptions” originally titled “The Less De-
ceived" employs Henry Mayhew's "London Labour and the London Poor" to initiate a debate about desire and suffering. Essentially it is a poetic record of the manner in which an innocent girl was drugged and raped. The poet sympathises with the victim in her unconsolable grief. The occasional references to the excruciating misery felt by the victim get registered in lines such as:

...I can taste the grief,
Bitter and sharp with stalks,

and

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

and

...I would not dare
Console you if I could.

But Larkin, the alienated philistine, becomes operative in the following line when his sympathies start shifting from the victim to the perpetrator of the shameful act making a subtle distinction between the grief "exact" and ill defined betrayal by one's own desires and expectations. Andrew Swarbrick, in his book on Larkin, observes:

The girl, the rapist and the speaker are fundamentally isolated: the girl in her desolation, the rapist in his delusion and the speaker by history.  

Though all three are loosers, the poet felt that the rapist mocked by his own illu-
sions became the worst sufferer and the greatest looser. In his instance, deception was complete. Larkin so sympathises with the ‘agent’ that he too becomes an accessory. The poet’s stance and treatment of this very controversial subject, however, were evidence of his desire to be different. The deliberate effort to break away from the moral and ethical coda of believed and practised values illustrate Larkin’s iconoclastic break from norms. Estrangement in this instance is attained through identification with those that are socially and morally ostracised.

In *Reasons for Attendance* the poet chooses alienation as a justification for his art. The title emphasizes its own negative implications lending support to the non-conformist predilections in Larkin’s temperament. Hence, the poem defines reasons for not attending rather than the obviously stated. The motif of dance and music gather in their wake images of movement, energy, sound, feelings, sensation and colour. “The trumpets voice”, “the lighted glass”, “the flushed face”, “the best of happiness”, “smoke and sweat”, “feel of girls” concatenate to establish the pleasure of sex. Yet in a typically Larkinesque manner the poet disqualifies the happiness as he is conscious of

Sheer/Inaccuracy, as far as I’m concerned, (CP. p.9)

thus, countering all earlier arguments. The dance acquires added dimensions as a metaphor for art and literary proccupations. The poet later explains, thus

What calls me is that lifted, rough tongued bell

(Art, if you like) whose individual sound

Insists I too am individual. (CP. p.80)
This concerted design by desire to remain singular individual not joining the mainstream of creative activity remained an obsessive concern of Larkin. He was an alien by choice because he acceded to the dictates of his inner psyche.

It speaks; I hear. (CP.p.80)

The bell though coarse and rough tongued appealed to the recesses of his poetic sensibility and Larkin elevates the poem from an ordinary dance hall situation to a philosophical truth about the individualistic nature of art. The speaker prefers individual fulfilment in art to yearning for happiness in partnership. Hence the conclusion

...others may hear as well,

But not for me, nor I for them; (CP. p.80)

Therefore, he decides to “stay outside” believing in the truth of his observations and experiences and they continue to “maul to and fro” assured of the authenticity of their happiness. The final statement

If no one has misjudged himself Or lied (CP.p.80)

reiterates the importance of personal preferences and individual compulsions in matters of life and art.

“The Importance of Elsewhere” depicts the speaker as a recluse, an alien in his own environment. He feels comfortable with strangers in a foreign country where cultural differences, variations in dialect and speech emphasize and underline the fact of his individual identity. Alienated in his own native country as self and ego got reduced to a cipher, Larkin welcomed isolation as it aided awareness and perception. Ireland, in this poem epitomised the
land of alienation whereas England symbolised the traditional conventional value ridden world where the poet had been trapped against his will.

The loneliness felt by Larkin got ratified by the realization that “it was not home”. The compensation lay in the recognition of his Separate identity:

Strangeness made sense (CP.p.104)

through its very eclectic nature and dissimilarity to the usual. The hurdle he had to cross was “the salt rebuff of speech insisting so on the difference”. This distinction provided him with a particularity and specificity. Once it gets recognised “we are in touch”. The endemic draughty streets”, “end-on-hills”, “the archaic smell of dockland”, “the herring-hawker’s cry” are employed as topical representational image traits. Yet, they italicize the separateness of his existence and simultaneously establish a “workable” relationship with the Irish people.

Life in England deprived him of the right to stand apart. He suffered an identity crisis on account of being a mere number among the innumerable. In his native country Larkin experienced an unseen yet distinct coercion as

Living in England has no such excuse

These are my customs and establishments

It would be much more serious to refuse (CP.p.104)

Citizenship, nativity, familiarity have their own demands, compliance being one of them. It, however, results in the drowning of the essential human personality and individual will. The Larkin personae, therefore, prefers the cultural alienation of a
The concept of distance "Here", "there", and "Elsewhere" continued to be a recurrent subject of Larkin's poetry as the perspective offered by spatial and temporal remoteness helped reinforce his own thematic preoccupations. Toying often with the pattern of juxtaposition of the far and near in terms of existential reality the poet simplistically translated it on the basis of their antithetical contrast. The closeness of "here" and the distance of "elsewhere" provided him with the polarities between which he could dextrously manipulate his images to accentuate the feeling of a fractured disjunct.

The opening poem of "The Whitsun Weddings" entitled "Here" ostensibly described a town through which he travelled aiming for a destination that was always "out of reach". In the course of the journey the poet "swerved" thrice. The initial movement was towards "east" away from rich industrial shadows and traffic. This was followed by a detour through fields and meadows to "the solitude of skies" and "the widening river’s slow presence." The third conscious exercise of choice to his surprise delivered him to a town. Characterised as a "large" place it boasted of details which Larkin listed for the next two stanzas:

Here domes and statues, spires and cranes-cluster

Besides grain-scattered streets, barge-covered water.

The town also catered to the whimsies of the consumers

Cheap suits, red kitchen-ware, sharp shoes iced lollies
The concrete urban jungle continued through the tattoo shops, consulates, and the "mortgaged half-built edges" receding slowly into the "isolate" villages of the Suburbia. The 'here' of the title becomes defined in the concluding stanza and the hard images of the earlier lines taper into the luminosity of colour and feeling. The all pervasive "silence" that could "stand" in its continuity, the profuse "leaves" thicken and unnoticed weeds display their ability for the occasional flowering. The flow of water quickens and the scented air ascends past the poppies into "neutral distance". Could this be the hereness that Larkin was in search of because existence is free. However, the soothing balm of his surroundings failed to supply him with the props of relatedness. The "unfenced existence" which was "untalkative" on account of its uncommunicative nature remained tantalisingly peripheral. The alienated soul persists in its quest for pseudo supports to establish compatibility, correspondence flitting from one unfamiliar mode of existence to another remaining unsuccessful.

The image patterns in Larkin's poetry become powerful mediums for communicating the manifold possibilities of his prominent themes. The imagery in a poem roughly speaking involves mental pictures conjured through the evocation of memories and associations stored in the subconscious mind. It is an illogically structured self-subsistent world ruled by the governing principle of the theme. The perfect concord between the themes and images is essential because the former grows by the deployment and control of the latter. Images, thus provide a concentration of expression for
correlating emotions and unsuspected mental analogies.

Larkin skillfully exploits singular and unusual probabilities in his use of images and imagery inorder to explore the theme of alienation. The feeling of disjunction stems from an inability “to connect”. This failure to relate to people, ideologies, institutions, absolutes, society and above all his own self got rendered through motifs, figurative language-clusters, juxtapositions, collages, patterns and the dramatic medium of viewing his persona from different angles. The interaction provided him with necessary perspective and distance to successfully render a picture of his alienated self.

The poems analysed are Larkin’s private, almost esoteric experiences in estrangement. Church Going, The Whitsun Weddings and Vers de Societe depict his incompatibility with established outmoded rituals defunct beliefs, and human huddlings in the name of society. Employing the core image of an old church, a dance and couple of weddings which are manifests and can be usually presented through concrete imagery and sense perceptions, the poet weaves a web of picturesque designs teeming with images of all colours. Against the tangible symbol of the church, the poet places the abstract concepts of belief, attitudes and proclivities narrowing upon the central theme of isolation and estrangement retaining the ambivalence of the Church as a persisting symbol despite the cleavage between theory and practice.

“The Whitsun Weddings” is a procession of moving pictures, comprising of assemblies and dispersals. The governing motif of the poem is the train journey. The rhythmic movement of the locomotive, its association
with the successive platforms and the people, congregated to welcome or bid farewell to the wedding parties gets unfolded through a bunching of precise images which actualize the experience. The visual, the seen and the felt is in constant flux. *Verse de Societe* represents a similar tendency of deploying the dance metaphor to convey the fact of his preference. Society isolation, solitude are imparted tangibility. For this Larkin yet again takes recourse to concretization through pertinent and proper images the intention being to present a composite picture of the relevant theme.

"Mr. Bleaney" is a metaphor of alienation. It is an illustration of Larkin's technique of splitting his personality into separate voices. Each dismembered psyche has its representative image cluster to graphically lend credibility of portraiture and roots to the figure. The estranged Bleaney thus lives in a world very different from the other persona. This Larkin poem depicts his alienation from himself. Bleaney is a disjuncted sensibility. The images are thus less concrete and the language of the poem is figurative. Time sequences have no significance as chronology collapses. Past, present coalesce as each becomes projected into the other mode with the utmost dexterity. In "Deceptions" the picture of the ravaged girl and the misery of her devastation could not have been presented in a key lower than exploited by Larkin. The underplayed emotional trauma, the shifting sympathy and the shock delivered by the concluding lines have Larkin's hallmark.

Larkin employs language to good use. The unusual phrase constructions generate novel meanings. Though the images used by Larkin are often concrete yet they do not share empathy with the brittle, hard, brilliance of
the Imagist poetry of Pound and the dislocated non-sequential and esoteric images of Eliot. In Larkin's poetic world innumerable fluid sensory images glide by inabsolute synchronisation enhancing the semantic content of the poem.
CHAPTER IV

THE THEME OF CHOICE

Horny dilemmas at the gate once more
In many a poem Larkin deliberates over the existential issue of choice and its ultimate integrity. Series of failures in personal life, a ‘forgotten childhood’, unhappiness with the parents, romantic frustrations with more than one woman, and, the setback he experienced with thwarted aspirations, as well as, failure as a novelist, had prompted in the poet both, passivity and wryness. Larkin displayed scruples over options in matters of love and sex, marriage and bachelorhood, religious faith and agnosticism, work and leisure, sociability and isolation. Critics have often described this attitude as the extension of the post-war mood of insecurity, uncertainty and emotional bankruptcy. Only a thorough textual study of his work may determine the extent of the impact of prevailing social conditions, and private issues over his work. However, he attempts to delicately balance these apparently infirm alternatives cancelling their importance, and maintaining that the freedom to choose or prefer is itself an illusion. Circumstances coerce choices pursuading at the same time an assumption that the concerned individual is responsible for the right, or, wrong decision. Choices simply expose desires which results in branding the individual with a particular label for identification for the rest of their lives. Larkin asserts that human predicament is not the result of individual fault. Instead, it is a consequence of predetermined fate. Human beings are merely dis-concerted victims of a trap of choices. In one
of his letters Larkin writes:

My views are very simple and childish: I think we are born and grow up, and die... Everything we do is done with the motive of pleasure and if we are unhappy it is because we are such silly bastards for thinking we should like whatever it is we find we don't like .. If we seriously contemplate life it appears an agony too great to be supported, but for the most part our minds gloss such things over and until the ice finally lets us through we skate about merrily enough. Most people, I'm convinced, don't think they want and the subsequent consequence keep them busy in an endless chain till they're carried out feet first. As for how one should spend one's time, that's usually decided for you by circumstances and habit.

There is one more thing he points out in his poems, that, individual encounters same fate on either side of the two options: the craving for the unattainable. Choices prove futile because expectations do not come true. Hence, life cannot be made happy and fulfilling by sheer exercise of choice. His poems reveal that the life of a husband is no better than that of a bachelor and "a flight is not worse than home." From Larkin's point of view, the apparent happiness in either case, that is, marriage or celibacy, is a bigger illusion, as it is yet another trap, for, the embrace is of an endless chain of choices. The ensuing circumstances preoccupy us all the way and
we fall prey and always meet a pre-determined end. Larkin appears committed to the existential trauma of life in the following letter:

I refuse to believe that there is a thing called life, that one can be in or out of touch with. There is only an endless series of events, of which our birth is one and our death another... Life is chiefly an affair of ‘life-force’: we are all varyingly charged with it and that represents our energy and nothing we do or say will alter our voltage or wattage...greatmen... are those lucky beings in whom a homy sheath of egoism protects their energy, not allowing it to be dissipated or turned against itself.2

Larkin’s reaction against Romanticism is evident in his total denial of the transcendental, and, his conformity with the existential. The first pronoun ‘I’ in the individual experience of the Romantics is differed by Larkin by splitting human personality into multiple personae. This makes James Booth speak of the quest for the ‘negative sublime’, in Larkin’s poetry, a description which counters the expression used by Keats for the poetry of Wordsworth. Keats characterised Wordsworth’s poetry as an expression of ‘the egotistical sublime’ which was an extension of the imagination into the phenomenon outside to the extent of complete imaginative identity with it. Larkin appears so disillusioned with the Romantics that through the different personae he institutes in his poetry, he completely debunks all notions of an egotistical sub-
lime. Rather, it becomes, with him, a matter of one personae cancelling out the next. Thus, the cumulative effect of Larkin’s poetry is so instinct with multifarious versions of the Self, that an effect of ‘a sense of negative’ is created, which, because it is communicated through poetry, catches the contingent sublimity peculiar to art generally, and, poetry in particular. Thus, it appears that the term ‘negative sublime’ used by James Booth is critically quite appropriate. Larkin’s poetry has just to be read for this feature of its ‘negative sublimity’ to show itself a profound ‘imperative’. This also subdues the nihilism considerably for ‘the negative sublime’ emerges as its primary concept.

Consequently, even when it comes to choices, cancelling out each other, as do Larkin’s various personae, the effect is not as that of depression, or, despondency, because the personae are only dramatically visualized, and, the success of the dramatic portraiture lies in the fact that when a choice is cancelled, there comes more affirmation in the cancellation than negation. This is so, because the dramatic construction of each poem concludes, just where, the drama of each choice as-worked-out-in-dramatic-terms stands concluded, as a plain much ado. Larkin is often faced with a choice between the perfection of life and perfection of work. Confronting this thorny dilemma, his choice falls on perfection of work. Thereafter, deft upon perfection, he looks upon work as an art form. Drama comes into play, and, a debate is launched. The choice is worked out in a particular situation dramatically, in which, a decision is always what the debate is all about. Different personae first uphold
the ethical side of the situation so emphatically that the reader is satisfied by the stance adopted. But, just when, the stance is about to be dramatically instituted as true, the last moments in the drama counter this righteous stand with the negative perspective. Of course, an element of irony had all along kept this ‘negative’ lurking behind the righteous ‘positive’. The negative counter-statement at the end of the poem rejects, in one thrust, all the righteous arguments, thus establishing that the obvious joy of an ethical option is illusory. The ultimate reality is negative. Going for marriage and begetting children, for instance, is also infused with the ‘negative sublime’. Reader’s agreement, or, disagreement with a point of view is not a matter of much concern for Larkin. What is significant in his poetry is his dialectic in the poem’s drama. And, it is not Larkin who forces the reader to accede. His personae at their colloquial best, debate, giving arguments and counter arguments, generating a creative tension in the process, which alone, is what carries the reader.

In his pursuit of deflating the credibility of choice, Larkin polarizes work and leisure in Toads. He contrives to disfavour work. This is reflected when Larkin treats work as the much loathed toad. The argument about choice is always begun by Larkin with the alternative, which too is finally cancelled as the debate becomes dramatically persuasive. Thus, the first five stanzas of Toads rhetorically censures Larkin’s own kind of work, and thus, for many reasons. The poem is introduced with two questions sketching the caricature of a disgruntled speaker-

Why should I let the toad work
Squate on my life? (CP.p. 89)
Who comically suggests-

Can’t I use my wit as a pitch fork
And drive the brute off? (CP.p 89)

The image of the toad itself, and then, the procurement of a ‘pitch for’ to ‘drive the brute off?’ arouse the sense of the despicable. Noticeably, here ‘toad’ is not work in general, but, the particular work which the speaker is unwillingly obliged to do. Interrogatives make the argument colloquial and more emphatic. However, as in drama always, irony arouses scepticism. In the forceful interrogative, ‘should I let the toad work/squat on my life?’ there is felt the compulsion behind ‘the toad work’.

In the next three stanzas, the speaker discusses an alternative calling, which is of course, other than his own. Although there is no elaborate comparison, yet what transpires from the alternative arrangement of ‘Lecturers, lispers/losels, loblolly-men, louts’ portrays Larkin’s contempt and jealousy of university dons. These stereotypes are actually work-dodgers, who survive on wit to make a living. The poem makes these university dons stand in line with the common folk, in order to reinforce Larkin’s persistent attack on an excess of artificiality, on academicism, and, on genteel postures of the academia, which too had compelled Larkin to break off from the Movement poets. Incidentally, six of the eight among these poets were university teachers. Andrew Swarbrick, while discussing Whitsun Weddings says:

Whilst decrying the speaker’s attitudes,
Larkin treats him as he treated many of his
university lecturer colleagues, with a mixture of contempt and jealousy. Of course, as is obvious, the speaker in the poem does not want to elaborate on the intricacies of a calling. Larkin's own unhappiness with his kind of work is portrayed as the most heinous of its kind with 'its sickening poison'. And here, the toad image is quite frankly discernible. But then, there are external compulsions like 'paying a few bills' which does not let Larkin 'drive the brute off'. In this, the antipathy between desire and necessity becomes quite manifest and this helps the poem develop logically.

In the fourth and fifth stanzas, Larkin compares and contrasts himself with the folk who just about manage to survive. 'With fire in a bucket/Eat wind falls and tinned sardines' This, the speaker counters, for he too 'could' choose to live like them! Indeed, 'they seem to like it'. But then, their's is a despicable state. for, 'their nippers have got bare feet/their upspeakable wives/Are skinny as whippets'. Could there have been a preference for such a wretched life, for Larkin had always strongly felt the wish to opt for a way of life or vocation other than the one he at a particular time pursued? And, this counter comes as a self revelation, as well as, a self-deprecation when he admits his weakness blatantly-

Ah, were I courageous enough
To shout Stuff your pension! (CPp 89)

Indeed, he does not have the courage. He cannot even opt out for other preferences. Consequently, if he still chooses, it will be under compulsion, and therefore, a forced choice! This is Larkin's style of looking at an exis-
tential situation, and, at the options available. He states a position, argues and counter-argues, and in this way communicates the difficulty of choos-
ing an option. A choice is therefore, a dream indeed-

But I know, all too well, that’s the stuff

That dreams are made on. (CP.p.89)

Next, two toads are imagined, one possibly symbolizing the nature of work, and the other could be human temperament itself. The sharp contrast between the two toads pinpoints the conflict between work and leisure, and between desire and need. But then, there is yet another toad, and, it is in the seventh stanza; it is not infact a toad, but something very toad-like, personifying possibly the inner urge to work more persistently a feature hard to dispel-

It hunkers are heavy as hard luck

And cold as snow......................... (CP. p.89)

It is hard and heavy, as ‘heavy as hard luck’, and, it is passive and unfeeling, and, therefore ‘cold and snow’.

The main thrust of all these deliberations culminate in the second last stanza when the speaker articulates his real urge to achieve worldly success-

......................to Blarney

My way to getting

The frame and the girl... (CP p.90)

And, therefore, it becomes a dream which is thwarted by that inner urge to work! Yes, even be it a counter, yet it is there, and ‘something toad-like’. Ofcourse, it is different from the ‘toad work’ which is how Larkin portrays his present occupation. The statement, the counter-statement, again another shade of
the statement, and, yet another counter-statement this is how the poem therefore appears to proceed till it ends as it should in ‘a fog of abstraction’, a Swarbrick description of the entire exercise. Larkin too appears at the same wave-length by then-

I don’t say, one bodies the other
One spiritual truth;
But I do say it’s hard to lose either,
When you have both. (CP.p.90)

However, the poem reasserts the blatant fact that one cannot ever choose, and has to work either out of inner compulsion or external pressure.

Larkin’s poems can hardly be understood severed from his personal experiences. Thus, when he shifted from the Pearson park-house to the Newland-Park accommodation, in June 1974, he was unsettled irrecoverably. Andrew Motion writes about it in Larkin’s biography for the poet found the new place quite uncomfortable for ‘a writer’s vocation’. But, Motion also maintains-

The misery of his move had in fact been
comparatively productive.5

Larkin’s Toads and Toads Revisited recall Yeats’ Byzantium and Sailing To Byzantium, for, though the themes are different, the effort at thinking and re-thinking a proposition is identical. Toads Revisited written in October 1962, more than eight years after Toads, is a more explicit acknowledgement of the value of work than a debate between hectic life and quiescence. In Toads, Larkin’s inner conflict, between right and wrong choices, is made manifest in a tone charged with desperation and even anger. But the speaker of this
monologue sounds rather subdued and self-pitying. In Toads Revisited, the speaker reconsiders previous conclusions and realizes that he cannot afford to be one of the work dodgers because such people are either 'stupid' or 'weak'.

The first two stanzas of the poem reveal a wry romanticism that Larkin maintains throughout his work. 'Walking around in the park', 'the lake, the sunshine shine/ The grass to lie on definitely allure him for, they are 'Not in a bad place to be' but he deliberately refuses to admit that it suits him, for there is the 'yet it doesn't me'. Not only is there the fascination for a landscape of 'Park, Lake, sunshine and grass', there is also a deep attraction for life itself in the 'Blurred play-ground noises, black-stockinged nurses'. All this could equally influence Larkin.

The two stanzas that follow sketch a grim and gloomy picture of old age. The horrible images, 'Palsied old step-takers', 'Hare-eyed clerks with the jitters./ waxed-fleshed out patients/ characters in long coats/ deep in the litter-baskets' suggest Larkin's fear of old-age as well as, the imminence of death. Larkin is quite afraid of 'being one of the men'. The idea of passing time leisurely is bogus, be it through 'Hearing the hours chime', or, 'watching the bread delivered' or, as 'the sun by clouds covered', or, as 'children going home'. Only weak and old people prefer this kind of life. This particular bent of mind exposes Larkin as he visualizes the old-age trauma and the fact of the approaching of death. To counter it, the speaker is made to develop a positive approach towards work and responsibility, which are put up against idleness and inactivity. The poem reveals that love for Nature might also be a defensive posture
against an acute sense of outright failure. While at it, the sense of deprivation plagues the speaker so much that he desperately seeks shelter in the commonplace routine of an ordinary living:

    No, give me my in-tray
    My loaf-haired secretary
    My shall-I-Keep-the call-in-Sir:... (CP.p.148)

Infact, it is felt that the time to discuss different alternatives that could alter the course of life is long past. Therefore, the speaker feels forced to remain occupied with old routine till life ceases:

    Give me your arm, old toad;
    Help me down Cemetry Road. (CP.p.148)

And so, the reality of death 'makes speculation about choice futile.' Taking stock of 'The men/you meet of an afternoon...', the speaker is inclined towards community, as he is frightened of being lonely and ignored;

    No where to go but indoors,
    No friends but empty chairs... (CP.p.147)

In this poem, Larkin shifts from his earlier stand on work and community, because by then the growing consciousness of death has become acute. Uncommunicativeness, in the last ten years of his life, conformed with this blatant reality of the fact of death.

    Ofcourse, all along, Larkin perfectly succeeds in portraying a person who is well at guard against all romantic indulgence. For, he cannot shut his eyes to the abject part of life, when, man becomes 'Palsied old step-takers'. In his own typical style, Larkin creates compound worded images
like ‘waxed-fleshed out patients’ that visualise old men in decay. And all this, when Larkin was beckoned by a life of glamour and ‘my-in-tray,/My loaf-haired secretary,/My shall-I-Keep-the-call-in-Sir,’ which does not only reveal Larkin’s interestingly minute observation of girls, but also, his allurement for glamour. The colloquial style and the dramatic presentation make the poem almost a performance piece.

In Dockery and Son, the speaker indulges in a comparative review of his own choice of bachelorhood, and, Dockery’s decision to get married. The reflections stem from the speaker’s visit to the Oxford College where he was a student some twenty years before. Andrew Motion records in Larkin’s biography that Larkin undertook this particular journey to attend a funeral. However, the event becomes a metaphor to portray his imaginative escape, and, simultaneously provides Larkin with an opportunity to assess the pros and cons of not only two alternatives but two sets of alternatives at a time: bachelorhood and married life on the one hand, and, isolation and community on the other.

Reaching College, the speaker is taken aback by the revelation that Dockery who shared accommodation with him, and, was junior to him in class, had now admitted his son into the same college! The unexpected intelligence prompts him into nostalgia. He re-collects and reviews the past, initiating a debate on earlier decisions that now haunt his own psyche.

The first stanza is a re-collection of his days at the University. The conversational tome makes it peculiarly assertive-

Dockery was junior to you,
Wasn’t he”.........

Further, the information that his ‘son is here now’ significantly registers the shock which the speaker receives at being told by the Dean that Dockery’s son was now studying there! With this, the speaker is held by an irrepressible sense of loss and he turns back the leaves of his days of yore at the College:

..................................Or remember how

Black-gowned, unbreakfasted, and still half-tight

we used to stand before the desk. (CP.p.152)

The expression ‘Death-suited visitant’ is very connotative being full of reverbrations of meaning. Thus, being a funeral, the mourners are in ‘black’ and ‘visiting’ too. Further, the occasion suits death whose own ‘visit’ had the black-suited mourners ‘visiting’. Also, not only is the speaker a mourner, suited in black, on visit to attend a funeral, but also, he is as close as can be to death, being as he is at a funeral. At death, all options close. There is no question then of altering the course of life. Now there can only be muted gestures like ‘I nod’, for, the speaker is dumbstruck and cannot defend his earlier mis-reckonings. The Dean also cannot be followed because the Dean’s is a choice the Dean definitely opted for. This is not so with the speaker, for whom, the human predicament leaves little to choose from. In anycase, the alternatives are many, and, this apart, they literally cancel each other out. And, therefore, caught as he is in a perpetual exist- tential predicament, the speaker tries the door where he used to live, but, as it turns out finds it locked. Indeed, the past is always lost and cannot ever be retrieved. Past mistakes too cannot ever be rectified!
However, ‘the lawn spreads dazzlingly wide’ in the second stanza, makes the visitor a stranger to the place which once was quite familiar to him. ‘A known bell chimes’, but it alarms him of the time-lapse that had left him ‘ignored’. But, the allitrative arrangement-

Canal and clouds and colleges subside
slowly from view. (CP.p.152)
suggests that the nostalgia gradually recedes. While travelling back, the speaker wonders at what age Dockery decided to marry and thinks that it was Dockery’s very definite commitment to a decision without being carried away by alternatives that made him do so!

The third stanza develops with fictional detail describing the type of boy Dockery was. The speaker is so engrossed in the thought that he continues to live with it even after he wakes up and takes another train for another station. His looking at ‘the ranged/joining and parting lines’ reassures him again of the various paths in life, but a hindered moon re-establishes the speaker’s own conviction that choices donot effect the ultimate at all. The moon is hindered, that is, or the personality is divided by unnatural inflictions. Therefore, what is natural for the speaker, choices being what they are, is to-

To have no son, no wife
No house or land. (CP. p.152)

Marriage, family, home, work, relations, faith are all infringements on individual freedom and therefore Larkin chafes at them all. The image of the moon could also suggest the loneliness and passivity engraved in Larkin’s
personality.

Justifying this foothold or toe-hold on life, the speaker attempts to get over the shock he registered in the beginning, rejecting it as a little attack of unconsciousness-

Only a numbness registered the shock. (CP.p.152)

The speaker at first does appreciate Dockery's prudence and capability to take the right step at the right time, but, the dialectic style employed writes everything off immediately, as it appears, in self defence-

...No, that's not the difference. (CP.p.153)

He insists that it is a matter of the perspective with which we look at things. Dockery must have believed that begetting children was an important step in life-

Why did he think adding meant increase? (CP.p.153)

For the speaker 'To me it was dilution'. Larkin's outburst against marriage reaffirms his iconoclasm of so-called inherited and dependable values, for which, his poetry is originally known. Cancelling out one view point of view by another, is a pattern the speaker adopts to disapprove the illusion of choice. and, in the process establish the play of an individual capability. He insists that out preferences come out of definite assumptions that we would get happiness in such and such conditions. But then, the question 'where do these innate assumptions come from'? cuts at the root of the proposition that assumptions are the determining factors in shaping our lives. Rather, Larkin proposes that it is only a matter of habit, hardening in due course of time into a style-

They are more a style. (CP.p.153)
These styles or habits determine definite choices and a life takes a shape accordingly—

They hardened into all we have got. (CP. p. 153)

It is only which we look back, makes our decisions appear taken together, and solidly concrete. However, they remain as vulnerable and impotent as "send-clouds" which by themselves cannot build the stature of life. Life takes its own course disregardful of our preferences as circumstances triumph over personal will.

The last stanza absolutely rejects Dockery, for, what more did marriage get for Dockery but 'a son's harsh patronage.' The image of 'harsh patronage' countermands the idea of happiness which upholds the institution of marriage. The speaker concludes the debate harping on the harsh reality of life:

Life is first boredom, then fear
Whether or not we use it, it goes. (p. 153)

Our choices come forth, from 'something hidden from us' and we meet our ultimate reality:

And age, and then the only end of age. (CP. p. 153)

The conclusion to the poem throws all arguments about choice to the wind, whereafter fatalism rules the roost. It is an impersonal fatalism as Swarbrick remarks—

...the ending remained a problem as Larkin worked towards an impersonal fatalism. 6

The conclusion, however, seems partial, since Dockery is now almost absent, for, his point of view though heard is not given the opportunity to argue, like
the speaker-personae who gets the chance to defend his stand. The poet rhetorically impresses upon the reader the need to assent to his view of life. In fact, this poem has more autobiographical overtones than any other poem of Larkin. Calling the poem 'a compressed autobiography' Andrew Motion notes:-

It encapsulates Larkin's view about the effect of his parents on his personality, it rejects spiritedly on his undergraduate career, it grimly sketches the attitudes which dominated his adult life.

This inference gets support from the fact that Larkin did not choose to marry and died a bachelor. The deleanation of the speaker-personae as 'death-suited' further strengthens the argument because the poem was written in 1963, when Larkin, at 41, was obsessed with the assumption that he too would die at the age at which his father had died, the age, that is, of 46 years.

Larkin's marked passivity towards life is all evident in his deliberate sketching negative images:

Black-gowned, unbreakfasted, and half-tight. (CP.p.152)

His positive images are limited to compulsive situations, and are either light-hearted, or toned down through the negative assertions that follow. Thus, the affirmative impact of "the lawn spreads dazzlingly wide" and 'a known bell chimes' is countered by 'ignored'.

Similarly, "Convinced he was he should be added to!" (CP.p.152)
is immediately cancelled by "why did he think adding meant increase?". Larkin de-
liberately opts for a technique that portrays a positive image through negatives as the 'moon' is 'strong' but it is 'unhindered'. Also, discordant and eye-piercing concepts like 'Those warp tight-shut like doors' and 'a son's harsh patronage' show Larkin's aestheticism is made to acquire philistine overtones. In his typical style, Larkin philosophises and his rhetoric gives an epigrammatic colour to the poem:

Life is first boredom, then fear

Whether or not we use it, it goes.

....

And age, and then the only end of age.  

(CP.p.152)

The colloquial address, the dialectical development, the fictional detail, given with utmost brevity and syntactical compactness, marks the poem as typically Larkinian.

**Self's the Man** is another poem that falls in the category of **Dockery and Son**. Written in 1958, that is much earlier than **Dockery and Son**, **Self's the Man** is more profound in its thought and approach. Once again, in a monologic utterance, Larkin seems scrutinizing 'self' as counter to a fictional opposite. Rather differently from **Dockery and Son**, this poem explores the psychology behind each choice, for, that is always governed by the question of selfhood. The fact that Arnold has got married does not acquit him of the charge of being selfish. However, there is irony in the fact:

Oh, no one can deny

That Arnold is less selfish than I

He married a woman to stop her getting away

Now she's there all day.  

(CP.p.117)
But then, the speaker attributes his lonely life to an egoism where ‘self’ is centred to its own interests. Now, although there is hardly any metaphor in the poem for choice, yet, images built up in the process of argument contribute to the idea indirectly. Arnold is a middle class archetype whose hard earned money is wasted over his family. His wife vividly represents the typical middle class housewife who is quite indifferent to her husband’s concerns;

And the money he gets for wasting his life on work
She takes as her perks
To pay for the kiddies’ clobber and the drier
And the electric fire. (CP.p.117)

As a constant affliction, she deprives him of all leisure including a look at the evening paper. Still, despite self-effacing dedication to his wife and children he cannot claim that he has his self completely erased. Self-deprecatingly, the speaker-personae contemplates his celibacy as a reflection on his ‘selfhood’.

To compare his life and mine
Makes me feel a swine. (CP.p.117)

A sense of inferiority takes hold of the speaker-personae so firmly that he argues and even approves Arnold’s choice. Thus, the first five stanzas bloat in favour of Arnold’s decision to marry. But typically, and even very characteristically, in the last three stanzas, the poem recoils in Larkin-fashion and questions the very piety of selflessness:

But wait, not so fast;
Is there such a contrast?
He was out for his own ends
Not just pleasing his friends (CP.p.117)

The emotional impulse of the speaker-personae to remain a bachelor tends
to be-little him before the fictional-opposite, though the final conclusion is
that man is never selfless:

And it was such a mistake
He still did it for his own sake
Playing his own game
So he and I are the same. (CP.p.117)

Larkin’s polemic against orthodoxy and its tenets, was noticed as
early as 1954, with the appearance of The Less Deceived, when, he first
made his voice really felt. Poetry of Departures, written in 1954, was also
unusual in the sense that it did not attack the idea of society. Rather, it was
against a very popular and sanctimonious concept of abandoning home in
order to achieve excellence in a certain sphere of life. However, poetic
convention, and, facile and ritualized spiritual gratification are the two butts
of Larkin’s attack. Usually, Larkin targets all social anchoring, and prefers
estrangement, because of which alienation becomes the second largest
theme in his poetry. His notoriety, as a resigned, isolated soul, is justified
because throughout his life as well as his work it is a stark presence. There­
fore, his penchant for ‘home’ when contrasted with ‘flight’ in this particular
poem invites closer attention.

Infact, Poetry of Departures characterizes Larkin’s incessant struggle
against not only established conventions, but also, convictions rooted deep in
the social psyche of common man. As is evident in many of his later poems, if could ever choose it would always be isolation. For, what matters to him is the crass devoutness attached to the cliche and he wrote an epitaph:

As epitaph:

He chucked up everything. (CP.p.85)

In this intellectually argumentative poem, the stereotype is dramatised with petulance tinged with a comic undertone. The title hints at the facile trends in the poetry of easy escape into various worlds of imagination, a feature mainly associated with the romantics of the nineteenth century, and later, with slight variation, with the neo-romantics of the mid-twentieth century. Larkin seeks to discard this particular tendency, but first the speaker-personae is made to uphold the resolve to renounce the mundane:

This audacious, purifying

Elemental move. (CP.p.85)

But then, the mythological connotation 'fifth hand', already in the opening, neutralises the force of this statement. It turns out that the act was a kind of ceremonial event, socially approved-

And always the voice will sound

...............certain you approve: (CP.p.85)

The exaggerated delineation becomes comic in the last stanza when contrasted with -

‘If/It weren’t so artificial,

The shift from ‘you’ in the first stanza, to first person, ‘I’ and ‘we’.
in the second stanza, and, the endorsement of the generalization of the thought, also re-affirms the speaker-personae’s yearning for alienation from his surroundings- ‘I detest my room’. Also, the first person ‘we’ generalises the tendency to characterise the psychological phenomenon to disagree with the present arrangement of things into a ‘we all hate home.’ The speaker sounds dissatisfied with his kind of life and perceives the good books, the good bed’ as ‘specially-chosen junk which for many is supposed essential for a perfect life. The speaker is disillusioned that even ‘good books’ and ‘good beds’ do not help him achieve complete satisfaction from life. Therefore, the remark ‘And my life in perfect order’ is comically ironical. However, the not very unusual ‘He walked out on the whole crowd’ visualises a rebel who sounds bold and exciting to the speaker and as inviting as ‘then she undid her dress’, as also as challengingly hurting as ‘Take that you bastard’. When compared with a life at home, with books and bed, the alternative of renunciation no doubt seems to be quite daring. But then, the speaker wonders if he could accept the challenge, ‘Surely I can if he did’. It is indeed because of certain compulsions that a man cannot go out for a definite option though he could long for it very earnestly. Therefore, the idea of freedom of choice is questionable. This reflection keeps the speaker-personae at “Stay/sober and industrious”. But still, against all odds, he opts to experience abandonment:

But I’d go today

Yes, swagger the nut-strewn roads

Crouch in the fo’c’sle. (CP.p.85)
But then, this move could be as artificial and not make life perfect as 'Books, china' do. He thinks that it would be "such a deliberate step backwards/to evade an object", and also, would be against time as well as his own existential predicament.

Next, two modes of perfection are suggested: One is achieved by giving up everything for spiritual virtuosity, and, the other is marked by material affluence of 'the good books, the good bed' and 'china'. The question is which kind of perfection is to be chosen. The first option is portrayed as challenging as 'He walked out on the whole crowd', as well as timorous as 'crouch in the fo'c'sle'. But, on the contrary the life of 'books, bed, china' turns out 'a chosen junk' and 'Reprehensibly perfect'. The conclusion is that perfect life is something out of reach. Therefore, choices donot matter, however, prompt and appropriate they appear.

The poem is a complete metaphor, a metaphor portraying two different individuals living at two opposed poles of life. One has given up his material world to live an isolated life. His move is generally acclaimed a pious one. The other, has opted for a scholarly, sophisticated life. Both are compared and contrasted with each pros and con dialogically put out. The image 'the nut-strewn roads' visualises the primitive age when leaving home would be as difficult as to walk on the 'nut-strewn road'. But the verb 'swagger' suggests pretension, for, in the present context it has become as irrelevant as a 'crouch in the fo'c'le.' The idea is also ridiculed by 'stubby with goodness'. In his characteristic fashion, Larkin just throws up one of the two alternatives and lets it inflate as much as possible. Next, it is deflated as
quietly in the later stanzas as an apparent support to the other option. The climax comes when the concluding lines cancel both propositions and abruptly challenge the very integrity of choices as such. The speaker-personae in Poetry of Departures continues to support the option 'He chucked everything', until it is decided to rescue those who prefer to stay at home with their problems and prepositions:

If/It weren't so artificial. (CP.p.85)

The last two lines just cancel both options-

Books; chine, a life

Reprehensibly perfect. (CP.p.86)

Reasons for Attendance has earlier been analysed at length for the theme of Alienation, but it shall be discussed in this chapter on Choice also. In the tradition of Poetry of Departures, this poem reverbrates the difficulty of choice between artistic accomplishment and sexual satisfaction. Thus, passing by a dance hall the speaker-personae is attracted towards, 'the wonderful feel of girls', and, 'all under twenty five'. The pleasure of the words is in their sense, and immediacy. However, the speaker resists the temptation of imagined happiness in sexual communality, and opts for art, which however is formed rough-tongued.

What calls me is that lifted, rough-tongue bell. (CP.p.80)

The telling detail 'to watch the dancers' through 'the lighted glass' works through the subtlety of selection, for it is between the fleshy 'beat of happiness' in the dance hall, and, the play of the rough-tongued bell' of art. The choice is indeed difficult but the speaker-personae appears determined to stick to his decision-
It speaks, I hear; others may hear as well. (CP.p.80)

and therefore ‘I stay outside’. The speaker-personae is poised to counter the immediate physical sensuous pleasure with an impatient scepticism-

...Why out here?

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

Is sex?... (CP, p. 80)

Despite the tempting attractions of community living, the speaker prefers to stay solitary and lonesome for aesthetic reasons. However, the elaboration is diffused through the quick switch-ons and offs of the poem. These quick changes are registered expressions like ‘or so I fancy’, or, ‘as far as I’m concerned’, or, ‘if you like’. Twisting becomes unsettling when both preferences are equated and both are satisfied, and is further subverted in

If no one has misjudged himself. Or lied. (CP.p.80)

It is generally accepted that Larkin suffered from schizophrenia. This is quite evident from his work also, for, it appears the effort of a profoundly divided sensibility, rooted in deep contradiction. Places Loved Ones is one other manifestation of the conflict between a ‘formal and reserved posture’ and a ‘spontaneous’ response to his own perceptivity. This poem is apparently about how dissatisfied and disgruntled Larkin was with the places where he had lived, as well as the people (specially women) he had met till then. Larkin wrote this poem when he was at Queen’s University Library in Belfast, where he had recorded a successful resurgence of poetic activity. After leaving Belfast in 1955 he wrote to one of his colleagues:-

I’d only been at Queen’s for four and a half years
but it was extraordinary, how at home I left there
and how much I disliked leaving.\(^8\)

Perhaps, it is because of this that Andrew Motion comments:

If Larkin wrote anything which...? to his statement
(made before leaving Belfast in Places Loved Ones)
That I have never found the place where I could say
This is my proper ground/ Here I shall stay.\(^9\)

Infact, what the poem reflects is the other side of his personality, which was terribly lonely and disillusioned. Maeve Brenman, one time Larkin’s sweet heart says-

detest this division in the very look of him...
...understood that his humour was stretched over
a deep melancholy’...’he was often somewhat at a
loss’...............’at times lonely, not a great
socializer.\(^10\)

This explains the frequent use of dramatised personae as a mask to articulate a perpetual other-self. The personae or speaker in this poem attempts to clarify the miscalculation people around him might have made about an apparent satisfaction:

No, I have never found
The place where I could say
This is my proper ground
Here I shall stay. \(\text{(CP.p.99)}\)

Thus, it is Larkin’s sensibility which could not find proper ground. While at Belfast, vocational success apart, his literary achievements were also consider-
able, and yet his quest for ‘proper ground’ was forever unattainable. His bachelorhood also remained till the end, as incidental for this, as for many other poems. He developed intimacy with a number of women, but chose to marry none, perhaps because his demand was love-

Nor met that special one
who has an instant claim
on everything I own
down to my name...

Or, did the speaker’s problem lie in the apprehension that a definite choice would label him committed, and this fear stuck as a perpetual threat through his life, a threat to his anonymity-

An instant claim/on everything
I own/ Down to my name.

His fear was that he would immediately be identified with a choice, rather named and labelled by it, as having taken because of it, a definite position, or in short, had become committed.

Larkin also creates a silent listener, the second person ‘you’, who listens to what the speaker wants to say. Larkin’s is a pose, the pose of not being able to, or, willing to choose, and, therefore feel both ‘relief and disappointment’ that his anonymity is kept anonymous by not ‘choosing’ to choose a home or family.

To find such seems to prove
You want no choice in where
To build, or whom to love;

(CP.p.99)
Once a decision is taken the door is closed to all other options. First, a choice foreclose all choices and next, there is the responsibility of having made the right or wrong choice! Therefore, it is much better not to choose at all-

So that it’s not your fault

Should the town turn dreary

The girl a doll. (CP.p.99)

The poet is so sceptical about the idea of a choice that in the last stanza he makes the speaker reverse all that the poem has said so far, and remarks that much more than an option or choice, it is a matter of facing a predicament! The human predicament itself leaves little room for a choice, rather, it positively forecloses all options-

Yet, having missed than, you’re

Bound, none the less, to act

As if what you settled for

Mashed you, in fact. (CP.p.99)

Therefore, choosing or refusing to choose is absolutely meaningless, because, we cannot even avoid the responsibility to have chosen or to have refused to do so. Celibacy or marriage are both choices which circumstances compel us to take a stand on in life, after having decided either way, for good, or bad. Thereafter, other options are closed. Thus, it is pretentious to think that “you still might trace/ uncalled for to this day/ your person your place.”

Arrivals, Departures implies the limitation of choice in the title itself. By refraining to use the conjunctions between two options, Larkins elimi-
nates the concept of preference. Here, the clear option is a coming, or, a going, which are not two alternatives, but life itself, and therefore, both are to be taken up as part of life. The poem has got the phenomenon of life crystalized into three phases; birth is one, and death is another; what lies in between is the trauma of existence. Existence is always a suspension between duality and dilemma. Larkin, accordingly, divides the poem into three stanzas.

The opening stanza introduces the traveller who lands with a load, which is ‘bag of sample knocking at his knees.’ His arrival, impregnated with many expectations, is proclaimed at day break:

His advent blurted to the morning shore. (CP.p.65)

Next, implying, the intervening period between a coming and a going, that is, birth and death, the second stanza has the speaker-personae encounter ‘horny dilemmas’ marked by a ‘come and choose wrong’. ‘Dilemmas’ are the very stuff of the human predicament, because, a choice has compulsorily to be wrong. Existential predicament is a veritable trap. Either choice ends in futility. Thus, choice itself is an illusion. In the circumstances, the call, ‘O not for long’, is quite unsettling, for, what of the future.’ However, a sense of insecurity and lack of knowledge about the future too causes discomfiture which is the central idea in the poem:-

We are nudged from comfort, never knowing
How safely we may disregard their blowing. (CP.p.65)

The first stanza is full of hope and aspirations. The middle stanza portrays the existential trauma when one is apparently faced with a gamut
of decisions. However, the right decision itself is the big question! In any case, a choice eliminates options. The future, too, is insecure and uncertain, though 'the blowing' cannot be disregarded for long.

The poem may also have the impermanence of happiness as a theme. Even Swarbrick explores the possibility of 'the anxieties of love' as the basic theme of the poem. He perceives a 'sexual pun' in the 'Horny dilemmas', for the traveller, as for the 'couple in bed', who are unsure of the permanence of happiness in that condition. Because, the call signifies a leaving, and, it is emphasised that happiness is transitory:

O not for long they cry, not for long... (CP.p.65)

What is ultimately emphasised is the fact that permanent happiness is something beyond human access.

Thus, the poem re-asserts a permanent feature of Larkin's poetry. It is the question of an identity. Identity determined by a choice, and integrity of choice itself is challenged by 'come and choose wrong'. Therefore, since choice is an illusion, so is identity. All in all, human predicament is an existential trap. The expressions 'boats come sidling', the traveller-like-seller with 'his bag of samples', and 'doleful distances', altogether build up the atmosphere of transitoriness, while 'Horny dilemmas' asserts the difficulty of choice as a sustaining force of life. The image 'boats come sidling' is a connotation for an intrinsically intriguing matter of expectations, for which, 'water lanes' appear 'tame', as if poised to bring them in ever so quietly. 'Bag of samples knocking at his knees' could be illusory promises making the poor man's knees knock 'waking up in, the morning
we come across arrivals of boat', but ‘leaving doleful distance’ counters the illusion. It is a mirage ultimately, though one fails to notice it and falls prey to ‘Horny dilemmas’. Provision of only two alternatives disintegrates the very notion of freedom of choice. In The Life with a Hole in it, written as late as August 1974 expresses the anger Larkin must have experienced with yet another counter-productive shift in the declining years of his life, and therefore, wrath fell on the issue of free choice.

The opening stanza of the poem comes as a response to those who hold Larkin responsible for his own predicament:-

When I throw back my head and howl
People (Women mostly) say
But you’ve always done what you want,
You always get your own way
- A perfectly vile and foul
Inversion of all that’s been.
What the old rat-bags mean
Is I’ve never done what I don’t.  (CP,p.202)

At one place Andrew Motion observes:

Larkin knew there was something ‘disproportionate’
in his ‘depression’ and said so whenever friends
(Larkin’s) like Monica,...,told him things were
not quite as bad as he made them out to be.¹¹

The misogynist in Larkin is also reflected in the licentious metaphor of ‘old rat bags’ he used for women and the poem at first appears to be a mockery of
The image of women is bitter and the opening line ‘when I throw back my head and howl’ reminds us of his indignation over his failures in achieving whatever it was that he always wanted.

The next stanza is about Larkin’s own disappointment at his lot. He has dreamt of being a novelist but he failed to become one. That is why resignation and fatalism is compounded with fury sounds in such lines-

So the shit in the shuttered chateau!

Who does his five hundred words. (CP.p.202)

The romantic ideal cherished in this dream-

Then parts out the rest of the day

Between bathing and booze and birds

Is far off as ever..................

did not, of course, materialise. The poet next visualizes other possible options. Characteristic as it is to his style, he perpetually counters one argument by another. Thus, he would not like to be a ‘spectacled school teaching sod’. This belligerence against the teaching profession as is obvious in this image, has also been explained earlier in the analysis of Toads. The bracketed ‘six kids and wife in pods/And her parents coming to stay’ has the school teacher much more disdainful. Next chosen for ridicule are the institutions of marriages and family. Disillusionment with both these ways of life is there in any case, but it also obliquely hints that he yearned for
both. However, he once again remains critical of both, as he realizes the inertia in them-

Life is an immobile, locked

Three handed struggle...!

(196.202)

Thus, all in all, man is trapped in “the unbeatable slow machine/ that brings what you’ll get”, and, this people call choice! The “three-handed struggle appears deceptive because ‘you want’ and ‘the world’s for you’ are oppressed by ‘the unbeatable slow machine’ of Time where there is no room for choice. Life is ‘a sollow stasis’ which cannot be altered. Hence, ‘Hole’ in ‘the life’ is the illusion of choice.

Unsophisticated imagery, and even crude language, together used to full artistic concentration in the poem, establish a relationship between art and ordinary life. James Booth aptly sums it up-

...this is brilliantly effective ‘bad’ writing.¹²

Larkin dramatises the trauma of his life, particularly vis-a-vis, the starkly barren illusion of a so-called choice. In a number of poems with unbridled freedom given to a counter option, he reviews his past decisions, which after all did mould his life. As is the characteristic feature of his poetic technique, he institutes in his poem a personae, who is often given a silent listener also, to make the poems alternatives have dialogic features. Use of colloquial language and style also gives to the poem its relentless counter-argument, and to the argument, an insistent immediacy. The personae is of course not one. Infact, there are many who carry the argument and its counter along. The dialectical technique reveals the theme of choice in its
various ramifications, till ultimately, it is cancelled out as a mere illusion.
For, the poems reflect a life style which is immediately countered to make
the choosing an illusion. Thus, part of human predicament which is little
else than an existential trap, with option or choice positively out of ques-
tion, deliberates on the problems of choosing between celibacy and mar-
riage. The argument and its counter are suffused with tell-tale imagery. The
poet castigates the pious institution of marriage as something forfeiting freedom
of choice. Vitality of character-sketches who appear living on contradictory
planes of life, transforms abstraction of choice into concrete realizations.
While portraying married individuals with discordant but concrete images,
the poet doesn’t forget to incorporate glimpses of character-representations
of wife and children. The argumentative technique of the poems gradually
concentrates on the nuptial tie. Self is the Man, illustrates married Mr.
Arnold, in contrast to, the celibate speaker-personae. Realistic representa-
tion of the hectic and exasperating life of Mr. Arnold is also authenticated
through the visual images of family-life. The speaker-personae as a proto-
type of the poet is worked out with least detail. In Dockery and Son
Dockery is featured as the father of a son, and becomes a shocking encoun-
ter for the personae in the poem, on a visit to his own alma mater, twenty
years later, for, it finds its college-mate’s son studying at the same college!
A sense of loss and lack of foresight is reinforced through impressionable
images of an irrecoverable past. Incorrigibility of foregone reckonings is
concretized in the form of hardened realities. Loneliness is crystalized as
a totality to counter the divisibility of matrimony.
Similarly, *Toads* and *Toads Revisited* employ the metaphor of work in opposition to idleness. Caricaturing some kinds of works contemptuously, Larkin asserts the inevitability of work. Larkin employs disdainful idiom for work, but the tenacity of work is also accentuated by the same imagery. *Toad* is a scornful creature in appearance but is also steadfast in its stance. *Toad Revisited* is a realization which recognizes the worth of work, and helps counter the curse of worthlessness and futility. Work also helps face the intimidation of the imminence of death that gripped the poet intensely. Further, the illusory nature of choice is communicated through nasty figures from other callings, when these professions are contrasted to the nature of the speaker's own work.

The theme of *Poetry of Departures*, and, *Reasons for Attendance* is the strained relationship between sex and art, as well as, between communality and alienation. The former places a metaphor of a recluse against the sophistication of materialistic world. Articulate because of its idiom of hermitism, the poem tends to doubt the efficacy of modern culture to provide completeness to life.

The thought of abandoning society and opting for an ascetic's way of light is energised in the poem with the help of visual and sensory images. The poet depicts materially accomplished life by employing precise but solid and tangible imagery. A compact idiom and condensed language portrays the two alternatives; appearance and reality. *Reasons for Attendance* has an arrangement of a dancehall, charged with excited moments. It is very alluring. Work is used as a metaphor for sexual indulgence and communality, as against, the pursuit of aesthetic integrity grounded on asceticism and alienation. The speaker-personae of the poem,
an accidental passerby, is subjected to the wavering between these two extremes. Vitality of images makes the experience almost seen, felt and heard.

Still, on the theme of choice Places Loved Ones bespeaks non-fulfilment of desire, as well as, the insistence on the compulsion to choose. Refusal to choose also amounts to a kind of choice. The poem suggests that denying a woman the comfort of being a wife or a place, and, the worth of having a house too in place is also, in each case, an affirmation though, through negation. Therefore, altogether, the predicament is an existential trap. A choice is expressed even though you refuse to choose. The rhetorical mood of the poem dominates. The poem, as a whole, builds up the image of a person who declines to take any decision on his own, but still cannot escape responsibility of having shaped his life. The Life with a Hole in it is the poet's last word on the futility of choice. The word 'hole' is a conceit that visualizes life quite incomplete, potentially susceptible to all kinds of predicaments and possibilities, least secure at least at the level of fulfilment. Consequently, desire is reduced to a nullity, a thought to which the images of the poem give appropriate expression. Life indeed is a futility, because, when it began, there was 'hole' in it already.

So much for Choice. The next chapter which is the last chapter, works on three themes: the themes of Agnosticism; of Time and old Age; and of Incompleteness. It is to be seen how these three themes and the four already considered in the first chapters inter-relate. For this, let us turn to the fifth chapter.
CHAPTER V

OTHER RECURRENT THEMES

Loaded with the sum of all they saw
Larkin has repeatedly been attacked by critics for the narrow thematic range of his poetry. These critics, however, fail to notice that his work deals with universally fundamental issues like choice, time, old age, death, which further divide into sub-issues like love, sex, marriage. In any case, it is a self-imposed thematic limitation which strengthens rather than weakens Larkin's poetry and makes it surprisingly very profound. Also, that he was a meticulous artist can hardly be overlooked. The analysis of his poems in the foregoing chapters sufficiently illustrates this. These earlier chapters treat his major themes and show how imagery helps in the treatment of these themes. In the present chapter, only such themes and imagery are considered, which though not major, are yet often at the very hub of Larkin's thought.

Thus, agnosticism, though a blanket theme in the poetry, is also often very compelling in some of his poems. Church Going is an example. Though already analysed earlier in detail in the chapter of alienation, it remains a glaring example of a shorn, almost shattered theological psyche in post-war England. With an apparent cue from the lines "Hatless, I take off/My cycle-clips in awkward reverence." (CP, p.97) Alfred Alvarez comments:

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, unpaid, overtaxed, hopeless, bored, wry.¹

Strange as it might appear, the question of personal integrity also got stuck to agnosticism. For personal integrity was the issue, more fundamental than all other issues of life like love, sex, marriage, work, or death. The self had become important and so was its integrity. When this ‘self’ is challenged, it gives way to negation and nihilism. Alan Sinified foresaw the breakdown of personal integrity as a further deterioration of the post-war condition:

Distress at the fracturing of an older, stable social order which is felt to be necessary to civilization stimulates the move towards renunciation, transcending a world that seems now to offer so little.²

Stephen Regan measures the agnostic mood of Church Going in the social context and observes that attendance at religious congregations was declining fast. He quotes Arthur Marwick claiming that at the beginning of 1950s less than 10 percent of the population were church-goers. The church was marginalised, confined to the rituals of birth, death and marriage. Larkin’s faithlessness sometimes recalls contemporary political quietism. Thus, in Church Going the personae or persona as the prototype of Larkin mockingly asks a serious question, which turns out to be on the efficacy of religious congregations in church! Larkin does seem sure that churches would very soon cease to play a divine role in individual life, but, hopes it would endure as part of the tradition. The persona as a visitor in the church, appears to waver between faith and faithlessness. The poem con-
cludes that the state of faithlessness would not also stay very long. But then, even after total loss of faith in God and transcendental life, Larkin appears to prophesy, that these churches would play a role in providing emotional and spiritual edification. But why this? Is it out of nostalgia? or is it just a counter pointing?

Since *Church Going* has already been discussed at length in a previous chapter, it is thought advisable to study Larkin’s other poems to see how steadfast Larkin was in his agnostic attitude. Apart from the easy answer of a post-war condition, the engrained scepticism might be the upshot of his own disillusioned psyche. *Faith Healing*, for instance, with irony and pathos in its title is explicit with its reflection on the prevailing state of disbelief. But, between the lines, the credulous nature of women is mocked at. Such credulity, made mode manifest in females, is always prone to believe! The poem depicts an American Evangelist who pretends hypothetically to cure women of their maladies with his spiritual power. The women line up to seek his blessings which, in a peculiar way, relieve them of their emotional fixations. Stephen Regan, in his historicist approach to Larkin’s work, appears determined to signify the context more than the attitude of the poem. He observes:

> What is particular about the poem, then is its context and not just its outlook; it is not so much a poem about “the human condition” as about the nature of belief and disbelief in a ‘particular’ phase of twentieth century culture.
But a little indepth study of the poem shows that the particular mood of the poem is itself a part of human psychology. Disillusionment and disappointment in life may convert one into faithlessness any time. This difference of opinion with Regan’s point of view is based on the fact that the poem concentrates on the vulnerability of women’s faith rather than the impact of a culture in a particular period. Circumstances do, of course, affect human psychology, and therefore contribution of the post-war situation may not be ruled out altogether. However, the poet’s depiction of only women’s belief, as in this case is significant. Furthermore, identical irreligious outpourings may also be traced in any phase of history. Besides, other poets of Larkin’s period do not necessarily sound as agnostic in their work. Non-inclusion of male members in the congregation is deliberate and in this, there is a clear suggestion that gullibility in women is a human condition. The Evangelist in the poem identified as Billy Graham, who visited England frequently in the 1950s, is of course important for the context, yet, self-delusion in feminine nature is itself a predicament. Some critics think this to be a case of Larkin’s being vindictive against women. In fact, faith and faithlessness go hand in hand, in all ages and at all times with the difference that one often overrides the other at a particular point of time. The exaggerated emphasis on the feminine religiosity is also ironical, for male and female can both be credulous. Men as well as women can cherish the illusion of faith even in the worst of conditions, both of which for Larkin would in any case delusions. In Church Going also, the last believers in the church are the “dubious women.”
However, promtions for the poem is said to have come from a real situation,

Or, after dark, will dubious women come
To make their children touch a particular stone; (CR, p. 97)

The illustration becomes symbolic with its powerfully characteristic image of the preacher:

Upright in rimless glasses, silver hair,
Dark suit, white collar. (CP, p. 126)

The women are made into submissively passive subjects:

Slowly the women file to where he stands. (CP, p. 126)

The stature of the healer becomes lucidly vivid:

Within whose warm spring rain of loving care,
Each dwells some twenty seconds. (CP, p. 126)

Larkin's disenchantment of religion is ample in his ridicule of the illusion of faith in God:

And, scarcely pausing, goes into a prayer
Directing God about this eye, that knee. (CP, p. 126)

the second stanza is made to reveal the psychological effect of such pseudo-religious healings. Pathos in the description of women goes against them. The delusion of faith is the direct consequence of the failure of will-power. Women are chosen to depict this feeble will power in both man and woman. Sheer sympathetic listening helps the priest arouse the emotions. Kind and affectionate words in return help give the seeker solace. The poem exploits psychological moorings of faith. Pretentious depiction of the Evangelist is
intended to strike at the divine charisma of his personality. With this, Larkin's iconoclasm which makes him debunk all absolutes, is reaffirmed. Larkin offends the Wordsworthian image of childhood by calling the human latent religious impulse as that of “a kind of dumb/ And idiot child.”(CP., p.126) Thus parallelism is psychological as well, because a child is made to cry by showing love and affection towards him at a crucial juncture. The figurative presentation of the women after their meeting with the healer, echoes with the poet's disillusionment:
...
...then, exiled
Like losing thoughts, they go in silence... (CP., p.126)

Larkin concretises such loss of thought by juxtaposing it to the forceful image in ‘exiled’. With extremely compressed image and metaphor Larkin is able to crystalize his hypothesis to make it a live experience. It is not only women’s credulity and through it, human credulity as well, that Larkin despises, he also visualises them, and through them portrays the general human predicament as despicable.

...Moustached in flowered frocks they shake. (CP., p.126)

Faith Healing is different from Church Going in as much as none, that is, in Faith Healing the church has ceased to function as a religious place, though the poem is remarkable for its religious ritual. However, in both poems, women are made stuck to their old, defunct idea of religion. Faith Healing is, of course, rather offensive with its animal imagery for women “sheepishly stray”, “stay stiff”, “twitching and loud/with deep hoarse tears” and, as caressed by emotionally charged idiom “Warm spring rain of lov-
ing care.” The occasion is made casual with its deviation extending only to ‘some twenty seconds.’ Nevertheless this short encounter with the Evangelist proves psychologically powerful so that “thawing, the rigid landscape weeps,” The emotional release from tension becomes tangible through ludicrous depiction.

...and such a joy arrives

Their thick tongues blort, their eyes squeeze grief, a crowd

Of huge unheard answers jam and rejoice— (CP., p.126)

In the final stanza Larkin argues 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...

(CP., p.126)

So, love could be a substitute of religion, and may be instrumental in drawing the spirit out into a blessed union with something outside of itself! However, for the sceptical Larkin, the experience of love could also come off as futile drama, which further ushers in more disillusionment.

But Larkin was not altogether an atheist. He recognised the psychological exigency of some sort of faith for the sake of emotional security. Thus, Water is a poem written a little earlier than Church Going, and is one more manifestation of Larkin’s hunger for some substitute of religion. In fact, he was sceptical about dogmatic religion and the nature of belief associated with it. He wanted to secularize
the system of faith. In *Water*, he employs the conceit of “water” with profound connotations. In the Christian context, water is generally a cleansing element washing away sin. It is believed to purge a person of all the faults inherited from the person’s ancestors whereafter the person is supposed reborn. *Water* is a short poem, of only four stanzas in which the Water-metaphor is introduced in the first stanza, and develops through the poem till it is concentrated in the final stanza. Usually, in Larkin’s poems, the argument is subverted in the closing lines, but this time the image of ‘non-chalance’ is established in the very opening:

> If I were called in
> To construct a religion
> I should make use of water. (CP, p.93)

The visualization of water as compounded of light in an earthly glass, suggests that the persona proposes for his new religion some kind of transparency against the mystifications characteristically inherent in a ‘transcendental’ of church religion. Through ‘Any-angled light’, he eliminates all differences begot by orthodoxy in order that he himself may beget something secular. The difference with *Church Going* is that *Water* is exceptionally cleansed of attachment to both people and narrative Swarbrick comments:

> It is tempting to see ‘Water’ as an almost ‘voiceless’ poem in which ‘attention is so absorbed in the object that identity is neutralised into a kind of impersonality.’

Andrew Motion thinks the glass of water has been treated as a symbol “transformed into an imaginative apprehension of endlessness, in which all knowledge of time
and its constraints and of self and its shortcomings, is set aside.”

The glass of water raised high is imparted with a religiously pious attribute. The speaker wishes the light to congregate endlessly in the water which, he suggests, may substitute the religion of the religious congregation in the church. The reverence paid to the elemental presence of both water and light appears to momentarily fill the empty space created by the extinction of the institution of the church. This new religion, the persona feels gives special significance to water and light in an earthly glass which is likely to offer a detached, unemotional view of religion as an idealised state of faith. However, the paradox is that Larkin counters a ritual with another ritual. He rejects the formalized, even ritualized Christianity, which he has long thought dry of the spirit, therefore hard and harsh:

Going to church
would entail a fording
to dry, different clothes:     (CP., p.93)

and proffers:

My liturgy would employ
Images of sousing
A furious devout drench,     (CP., p.93)

Water if taken as a symbol of re-birth may also imply revival of faith which Larkin somewhat anticipates in Church Going:

And that much never can be obsolete,
Since someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious
And gravitating with it to this ground..... (CP., p.98)

In his characteristic style, a note of affirmation often undermines the sceptical reasoning of all the preceding stanzas in such poems. Therefore, ambiguity about religious faith is apparent because complete affirmation or negation is absent. In Church Going the church has lost its validity as a place of worship. Still, it continues to function for some positive purpose; either it perpetuates a tradition, or, it helps provide some kind of solace to some grieved believer or the other. The evangelical preacher in Faith Healing is though a mockery of faith, proves quite a psychoanalyst, for all said and done he is able to reach out to the intrinsic love impulse in man and even provides an outlet to evil emotions. The suggestion that what is needed is a new religion in Water, is infact, an affirmation disguised as negation. Grave and sombre, as well as, ludicrous imagery mark these poems and remarkably concretize seen and felt experience of abstract ideas: “A serious house on serious earth”, ”Bored, uninformed”, “accoutred frowsty barn”, in Church Going: ‘Upright in rimless glasses, silver hair/ dark suit white collar/ Directing God”, in Faith Healing and in Water ‘a fording/ To dry, different clothes’, ‘Images of sousing/ A furious devout drench’ all of which mock at faith very seriously.

That was Larkin’s poetry showing him deeply longing for some kind of spiritual solace because dogmatic religion failed to satisfy. This much, then he was religious, and for some reasons agnostic.

Now, Time and Old Age, also, are together such fixations for Larkin that he is unable to relieve himself of the obsession even in his last poems.
Of course, the ideas were there earlier too. Thus, in *The Less Deceived* this theme has been dealt with some urgency and, is a muted preoccupation in *The Whitsun Weddings* also, but it becomes blatantly explicit in *High Windows*. Lonely, and often almost desperate, Larkin was forever awfully sensitive to passing time which became starkly terrible when he was abandoned by Winifred with whom he had developed intimacy during his stay at Belfast. Andrew Motion maintains that he wrote eight poems in three months time after her departure. In most of them he emphasised the sharp division between past, present and future. Since the fear of death had ever been phenomenal to Larkin, he almost felt its approach through the passage of time. He has dealt with the enigma of time in a number of poems. Nearly all of them stress that death helps appreciate 'Time. And, for Larkin, Time is not simply a movement of the clock advancing meaninglessly. Rather, existence is to be understood in the context of its temporality, that is, in relation to a past, present and future. As a matter of fact all our idiosyncracies, our concerns and anxieties, are bound up with Time. What Larkin wants to say in his poems is that human finitude is ascertained by the negativity of time, because past is a 'no-longer' and future is 'a not-yet', and, the present is itself perpetual transition. Therefore, in his Time poems the main thrust is the inaccessibility and impenetrability of Time!

Thus, *Triple Time* as the title suggests, dramatizes what Larkin thinks are the clear manifest phases of time. Each phase of Time is treated separately in a whole stanza, getting visual images to portray it. Thus, the first stanza imagines the present with:
This empty street, this sky to blandness scoured,
This air, a little indistinct with autumn.  (CP., p.73)

The present is dull, empty, bland, and uninspiring. The present is 'Like a reflection of the past with 'an air lambent with adult enterprise.' Thus, this very present was once 'the future furthest childgood saw.' The present is forever lapsing itself into the past. It has past in it too and so is 'traditionally soured,' often appearing 'unrecommended by event.' And soon this present becomes the past, "A valley of cropped by fat neglected chances' to be remembered with regret because the past too is lamented for present misfortunes:

On this we blame our last
Threadbare perspectives, seasonal decrease.  (CP., p.73)

This sense of remorse becomes much more intense in old age which is one of seasonal decrease.'

Finally, the poem argues that we are perpetual victims of Time's illusion, for, the present only exists in relation to its past and future. The present is a transition between the promises of future and disillusionment of the past. The present is illusory because it is not supported by the expectations of future. However, it is regretted, when past, for its wrong perceptions.

In Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album Larkin is original enough to use a photograph's album to concretize a dark and bleak vision of Time. The album helped the poet contextualise Time, which is otherwise an ungraspable phenomenon. What seems to be in monologue, turns itself into an emotional dialogue between the persona and an erstwhile lady-love, Winifred; the intimacy
is now preserved in photographs taken at different stages of Winifred’s life. The past did somewhat haunt Larkin, for, looking at photographs appears with him a persistent habit.

Now, the album does recover and recall earlier life-stations only as ‘sighted-articulations’, and help initiate a dialogue which turn out to be quite self-revealing for the speaker-persona. The album also helps achieve a contemporaneity with Winifred’s past, as well as with her future. Furthermore, captured poses make the age-factor at various life-milestones prominent:

- In pigtails, clutching a reluctant cat;
- Or furred yourself, a sweet girl-graduate;
- Or lifting a heavy-headed rose
- Beneath a trellis, or in a trilby hat.  

(CP., p.71)

Against either of these disjunctions, or telescoped reconstructions, stands a solitary speaker-persona, Larkin himself:

- (Faintly disturbing, that, in several ways)-
- From every side you strike at my control... (CP., p.71)

Past, present and future are thus counterpointed to help the speaker-persona recall and recover a past and lost time and play with notions of memory, age and nostalgia. Through conjunctions, disjunctions and telescoping, the poet gets distance, contemporaneity and even simultaneity. Yet this exercise was indeed futile because the past can hardly ever be reclaimed, photograph-albums notwithstanding. Regret and disappointment are the only result:

- In short, a past that no one now can share...  

(CP., p.72)
The lady in the photograph seen ‘a real girl in real place’ is no longer real. Her past is dead for ever. The woman in the poem is symbolic for an irrecoverable past. Apart from all other dimensions of the poem, it embodies all those things which ‘lacerate/simply by being over’ and lead the speaker to say ‘You/ contract my heart by looking out of date.’ It is a kind of a resigned and quietest acceptance of the present. We have no way to recover the past and we are left only with the freedom to cry:

It leaves us free to cry. (CP., p.72)

Our grief lies in ‘The gap from eye to page’, a gap which cannot be filled but only mourned, and, that too, without a chance of consequence. The past too appears ‘like a heaven’ where

...You lie Unvariably lovely there,

Smaller and clearer as the year’s go by. (CP., p.71)

Regretfully that past cannot be recovered and can only help make the present more miserable. Overtly these poems may have biographical overtones but they do poemize the phenomenon of Time with profound pathos.

Having done with a photograph album, Larkin in Reference Back uses the device of a jazz record to recall and recover the past. It is one of those poems his mother may have inspired. About his mother Andrew Motion writes:

Difficult and limiting as she was, his mother produced the mental weather in which his poems prospered, and many of his best were either triggered by her or actually, about her.6

The poem deals with the all too familiar sense of helplessness, with which
the poet seemed quite fixated also. He felt lonely and helpless. The speaker-persona plays a jazz-record repeatedly. It relates his past to the present. The poem presents the wry and disgruntled persona who appears reminded of his mother’s unwarranted behaviour through those particular record-replays. It actually preserved the charged moment of disappointment between the speaker persona and his mother:

That was a pretty one, I heard you call
From the unsatisfactory hall
To the unsatisfactory room where I
Played record after record, idly,
Wasting my time at home, that you
Looked so much forward to. (CP, p.106)

The rift between the speaker-persona and his mother was thirty years old. But, the record replays his past, present and future loom large superimposing into each other when his ‘unsatisfactory prime’ and his mother’s ‘unsatisfactory age’ inordinately clash. Personal limitation aside, the poet, by replacing ‘I’ and ‘You’ with ‘We’ in the final stanza gives the lines universal appeal:

Truly, Though our element is time,
We are not suited to the long perspectives
Open at each instant of our lives
They link us to our losses; worse,
They show us what we have as it once was,
Blindingly undiminished, just as though
By acting differently we could have kept it so. (CP, p.106)
Send No Money actually caricatures Time—"The fobbed/Impendent belly of Time'. In a conversational tone and with almost a performance potential the poem dramatizes the fatalistic and deterministic dimensions of life. The persona-speaker stands pigmied before the giant of Time and looks comic asking Time some Truths about how the things which ultimately shape life happened to happen. The answer sounds likes from an affectionate elderly figure:

Sit here, and watch the hail
Of occurrence clobber life out
To a shape no one sees-   \(\text{(CP., p.146)}\)

To the pigmy-persona that proved hardly anything:

What does it prove? Sod all
In this way I spent youth. \(\text{(CP., p.146)}\)

This is a poetic version of what Larkin expressed in a letter he wrote on his fortieth birthday:

Looking back on my first 40 years, I think what strikes me most is that hardly any of the things that are supposed to happen or be so do in fact happen or are so. What little happens or is so isn’t at all expected or agreeable. And I don’t feel that everything could have been different if only I’d acted differently- to have acted differently I should have needed to have felt differently, to have been different, which means going back years and years, out of my life time.  

Now, fear of death was a common feature of the Post War psyche. Its up-
shot was growing disbelief in ideas of an Eternity and Immortality. All was thought to end with death. Indifference of the new generation towards the old made old age itself a big horror. Larkin’s *The Old Fools* expresses his anger ‘at the humiliation of age’ as well as at the old for reminding us of age.

As is always characteristic of this poet, he is forever forthcoming with a counter point. However, the earlier stance of ‘argumentative ventriloquism’ changes and this poem opens with blatantly declarative directness asking questions:

> What do they think has happened, the old fools,
> To make them like this? Do they somehow suppose
> It’s more grown-up when your mouth hangs open and drools,
> And you keep on pissing yourself and can’t remember
> Who called this morning?... (CR, p.196)

In this telling detail on senility Larkin makes the reader almost see, hear and smell old age. What is worse is, and the poet mourns at it, is old age loosing all sense of time to ‘alternate things back’ ‘if they only chose’. Worse still the terror of death becomes outrageous in old age:

> Why aren’t they scream? (CP., p.196)

The poem imagines what it feels like to be old and ‘it describes something so purely ‘over’ that there is an overpowering sense of being asphyxiated. *The Old Fools* depicts Larkin’s fear of death and disgust at old age, with some frankness. This time he does not attitudenise his proposition. There is no compassion or pathos in the language. The opening questions are venomously directed at senile decay. Swarbrick thinks:

> This loud aggression is self-defensive: it loathes old
people because they remind the speaker of his own old age and death.  

That death is an event outside the Self was a conviction that made the trauma of old age more terrible. This attitude is evident in the plain description of the human anatomy:

At death, you break up: the bits that were you
Start speeding away from each other forever
With no one to see.  

(CP., p.196)

Solitariness becomes too tragic to bear in the old age. The poem seems to suggest that old age is death in stages and the forms of dying are graduated:

...And these are the first signs:
Not knowing how, not hearing who, the power
Of choosing gone.  

(CP., p.196)

The loss of the illusory power of decision makes the nearness to death most urgent, for, the power of choosing illusory though it later proves, is quite a possibility. Old age as second childhood submerges into oblivion and is not acceptable because what follows childhood is in any case, a power of choosing, however illusory, whereas old age has no such illusion left:

.............................It’s only oblivion, true:
We had it before, but then it was going to end...  

(CP., p.196)

Also, childhood -

...was all the time merging with a unique end
To bring to bloom the million-petalled flower
Of being here.  

(CP., p.196)
To the contrary, in old age:

...Their looks show that they’re for it

Ash hair, toad hands, prune face dried into lines—How can they ignore it? (CP., p.196)

Living with the faint images of the past they forget the present, their past is not recovered. They lose their present and they cannot alter their future:

...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. (CP., p.196)

But the excruciating phenomenon of passing time that is of a past, present and future cannot ever be transcended. “For the rooms grow farther’ leaving/incompetent cold.” The final image of an ‘Extinction’s alp’ is insight yet ‘what keeps them quiet’ is its uncertainty of the time of its approach. Childhood gives way to youth, but ‘inverted childhood’ is the final end. The poet feels like screaming at the cruelty of senility along with the unresolved mystery of extinction but is able somehow to reach restraint. ‘Well, We shall find out.’

The poet has carefully graded old age with images that gradually move forward. In the first stanza the initial stage is communicated through ‘mouth hangs open and drools’ feeling ‘crippled or tight’ indulging in ‘thin continuous dreaming/watching light move’ and also keeping “on pissing yourself” and loosing memory for they ‘can’t remember/who called this
morning?' Then comes on oblivion, a second childhood, when all power of choice is completely lost, not that it was quite there earlier in life, and, senses become too weak to respond. The vision of this time station is that of 'Ash hair, toad hands prune face dried into lines.' The extreme is at a 'baffled absence,' and, 'the constant wear and tear/of taken breath, and them crouching below.'

Uncertain reigns supreme for now the ground slips beneath the feet. To this portrayal, Larkin’s earlier attempts on the subject of old age appear comparatively lighter. They are poorer in imagery and superficial in thought. Age written in 1954 is an example:

O’ you tall game I tired myself with joining!

Now I wade through you like knee-level weeds (C.P.p.95)

And it ends saying:

...By now so much has flown

From the nest here of my head that I needs must turn

To know what prints I leave, whether of feet,

Or spoor of pads, or a bird’s adept splay. (CP., p.95)

Also, Long Sight in Age too is immature and inconvincing:

They say eyes clear with age;

and-

The many-levelled trees,

The long soft tides of grass

Wrinkling away the gold

Wind-ridden waves- all these,
They say, come back to focus
As we grow old. (CP., p.105)

However, these two poems, lesser in intensity and experience, nevertheless show Larkin's bemoaning advancing years quite early in life.

Inconclusiveness, seemingly a poetic technique of deviousness, also turns out to be an important theme in Larkin's hand. In the discussion of The Dance, Andrew Motion gives a cue:

It's five printed pages in the Collected Poems are a fascinating ruin, their fragmentariness powerfully reinforcing the poem's theme of incompleteness.¹

The Dance is not the only poem which articulates Larkin's inarticulacy. Very often his poems stand sheer incomplete statements. However, they are usually rich with the wealth of detail and, also develop well through argumentative rhetoric. Still, something is importantly left unsaid, for which, the reader feels impatiently inquisitive. Shyness and scorn, the two mutually destructive elements in his personality patterned this fragmentariness in his verse. His experience of life, lacking in many many ways, as he confesses also in The Dance:

...It's pathetic how
So much most people half my age have learned
Consumes me... (CP., p.156)

This is conveyed through his art as a yearning for something 'out of each'. In his poetry, as a result, death remains the unsolved mystery, and its experience only half-done; choice is futile phenomenon; alienation partial;
happiness transitory; love and sex unsatiable; marriage an imperfect bond; religiosity an inadequate edification; and culture incompatible. Historically also, post-war English poetry was chiefly characterised by extra-ordinary scepticism. The Movement group, of which Larkin was, for sometime, the leading poet, felt an urgent need of some kind of inhibition to curb all romantic excess. This exercise of check and restraint, in Larkin's case, is often seen as 'sad-eyed reaction.' However, the characteristic wariness of his poetry may also be understood in terms of a vigilant readjustment process, necessary for an unsettled post-war England. The general atmosphere of uncertainty in the generation of this period made the writers opt for a 'desired neutrality'. Therefore, they tried to achieve the poetical ideal of 'a moderate writer'. Robert Conquest assumed that poetry could maintain a 'free and neutral stance'. In the Introduction to New Lines, Conquest encouraged restraint against the excesses of romanticism, as part of the general intellectual ambience of the time. Thus, the technique of non-commitment, or, the theme of incompleteness, in Larkin's poetry is part-personal and part-cultural or part-contemporary.

Most of his poems are marked by an ambivalence in attitude and approach, and therefore, do not concretize any definite stance, on an otherwise thoroughly discussed issue. Love, for instance, never achieves complete fruition in his poems: even those in which one may claim that it is near to success. Therefore, they are weakened in their power somehow. Thus Wedding Wind, a poem of excitement and fulfilment, loses its very spirit of happiness with a number of queries that are nevertheless incorporated in the poem:
Can it be borne, this bodying-forth by wind
Of joy my actions turn on, like a thread
Carrying beads? Shall I be left to sleep
Now this perpetual morning shares my bed?  (CP., p.11)

The speaker-persona appears sad because other people and animals are deprived of that kind of contentment.

...and I was sad
That any man or beast that night should lack
The happiness I had.  (CP., p.11)

Yet another example is An Arundel Tomb. This poem too registers identical anxieties in its approach to the subject of love. The poet carefully weighs losses and gains in the domain of love. And finally, the poem comes to quite a contradictory conclusion. It is that love is merely a theoretical possibility! The crucial hinge is only a possibility that it might succeed:

Time has transfigured them into
Untruth. The stone fidelity
They hardly meant has come to be
Their final blazon, and to prove
Our almost-instinct almost true:
What will survive of us is love.  (CP., p. 111)

Talking in Bed depicts two loving souls lying together in bed. This must be a very happy moment, but the excitement suffers when honesty in love itself is questioned with ‘The wind’s incomplete unrest’ which the couple hear as ‘more and more time passes silently.’ The ceaselessly changing wind the lovers hear conveys the
unsettled incompleteness of the couple’s feelings for each other. They are lying together, but the silence achingly brewing between them is quite tormenting so that there is hesitation to commit! And, for Larkin, commitment itself poses a threat to personal identity. It also once again confirms that he relishes a love inaccessible and unrequited rather than a love fulfilled. Infact, the theme of incompleteness also reinforces taciturnity as another significant aspect of Larkin’s poetry:

It becomes more difficult to find
Words at once true and kind,
Or not untrue and not unkind. (CP., p.129)

This phenomenon of the failure of language is clearly noticeable in many a poem of Larkin. We see that unfinished state of The Dance is caused due:

To something snapped off short, and localized
Half-way between the gullet and the tongue. (CP., p.156)

The turbulent stasis of speechlessness is created in Larkin’s poems when they show how they aspire to things ‘out of reach’. Andrew Swarbrick significantly says:

In Larkin’s case, this meant a yearning for metaphysical absolutes, for states of being imagines, as it were, beyond the reach of language.¹⁰

Swarbrick further writes:

His poems are attempts to occupy the imaginative space of ‘Somewhere you’re not’.¹¹

In an interview Larkin himself once said:

One longs for infinity and absence, the beauty of
Again, Reasons for Attendance promises the tension between art and sex. The speaker weighs communal activities of couples in the dance hall against the artistic endeavour of the isolated speaker. Apparently, the poem prefers solitariness to achieve his artistic purpose, but the syntactical structure of the poem makes it embarrassingly ambiguous with its use of so many conditionals, ‘or so I fancy,’ ‘as far as I’m concerned’- ‘if you like’ renders the ending provisional: ‘and both are satisfied/
If no one has misjudged himself or lied.

Next, in Self’s the Man compared the lifestyles of a married man and a bachelor. A thorough discussion reveals contradistinction between the two, but in the last lines the speaker-persona sounds sceptical about his own assumption and therefore avoids a final judgement:

Only I’m a better hand
At knowing what I can stand
Without them sending them a van-
Or I suppose I can. (CP, p.118)

In almost similar fashion, Dockery and Son reflects on the critical issue of paternity: to become a father or remaining unmarried and childless:

...To have no son, no wife;

No house or land still seemed quite natural. (CP, p.152)

After all the arguments and counter arguments the words in the last stanza like ‘Nothing’ and ‘something’ help the poem remain uncommitted to either side of the argument:

For Dockery a son, for me nothing.
Nothing with all a son's harsh patronage. (CP., p.153)

but then 'Something hidden from us chose' quiten down the clinching tone.

Even Unfinished Poem which prepares a much elaborate ground for death to approach with its last moment experience, is left with experience unaccomplished because:

Nothing like death stepped, nothing like death paused,

Nothing like death has such hair, arms so raised. (CP., p.61)

Identical conclusions about death echo in Many Famous Feet have trod:

Nothing's to reach, but something's to become. (CP., p.18)

Further, in Traumerei the trauma of mortality is dramatised peculiarly, with its alphabets emerging gradually, but before the word is finally pronounced:

I have woken again before the word was spelt. (CP., p.12)

Earlier Toads had discarded work as something despicable against the pleasure of no-work, or, in favour of something 'something sufficiently toad-like/Squates in me too.' However the final verdict is:

But I do say it's hard to loose either... (CP., p.90)

In Church Going Edwin Morgan diagnoses a characteristic 'distancing and disolving of conflict...a fear of statement and commitment.' The poet stresses that 'belief must die' and yet the church should continue as tradition! In Mr Bleaney, identification of the speaker-persona with the poet himself is so ambiguous that the poem ultimately ends with:

He warranted no better, I don't know. (CP., p.103)

However, this pose of neutrality could not last later than The Whitsun Wedding. High Windows is a complete shift where his personal tensions force him to become
lyrical and the strategy of detachment begins to look increasingly defensive and withdrawn. Stephen Regan comments:

The fastidious restraint of *The Less Deceived* gradually
gave way to a much more confrontational and openly
polemical writing, especially in *High Windows*.13

Andrew Swarbrick also sums up Larkin’s Collection as showing ‘bare feeling of fury and rancour’ expressed vehemently reinforcing his social and ideological commitment so far rarely struck in his work. Stephan Regan diagnosis this development in Larkin’s poetry as a loss of consensus. Poems in *High Windows* seem more daring, and, therefore lyrical in moralising more explicitly. *The Old Fools* also exemplifies a far more militant and assertive stance ever adopted by Larkin:

...If they don’t (and they can’t), it’s strange Why
aren’t they screaming? (CP., p.196)

It was an acute sense of desperation in old age that made Larkin speak with authoritative and unequivocal dissent.

...Their looks show that they’re for it:
Ash hair, toad hands, prune face dried into lines
How can they ignore it? (CP.,p. 196)

Thus, ‘inconclusiveness’ seems to be ‘concluded’ as Swarbrick notes:

High Windows can be read as the sometimes
despairing conclusion to Larkin’s life long
quarrel with himself about his own identity and
the value of Art. (14)

Larkin sacrificed his earlier masks and adopted bluntly declarative directness.
**Homage to a Government** is offensively satirical. It bitterly reacts against the general idleness and greed that caused an economic crisis in England in the decades of sixties and seventies. A desperate finality can also be noticed in the very tone of the poem:

Next year we shall be living in a country
That brought its soldiers home for lack of money.

(CP., p. 171)

Or,

Our children will not know it’s a different country
All we can hope to leave them now is money. (CP., p. 171)

**Going, Going**, also from **High Windows**, is another example of a socially and politically committed Larkin who seems very much concerned about growing modernisation and rampant commercialization which profoundly threatened the environment of the country. The poem mourns a regressive pastrolism:

And that will be England gone,
The shadows, the meadows, the lanes,
The guildhalls, the carved choirs.
There’ll be books; it will linger on
In galleries, but all that remains
For us will be concrete and tyres. (CP., p. 190)

Of course, some examples from his poems could be exceptions. However, ultimately Larkin concluded at what he had always aspired to achieve. It was a sense of exclusion, and also a sense of failure, which had
permanently irked him that had also finally overwhelmed him as a poet where after he could not restrain himself within a persona any longer and became very lyrical.
CONCLUSION

A poem is always an integer, its theme and imagery being indivisible. What the poet aims at is the total fusion of imagery into the desired theme leading to a consistency of impression. Though driven from a specific single idea of experience, it gathers imagery from the total life experience of the poet, encompassing the contemporary situation, as well as, his private perceptions. This, image-pattern gives us an insight into the poet's mental state in the very act of creation. As vehicle, imagery helps vivifying the theme and communicates emotions strongly felt by the poet. An image, with its novel diction, tends to evoke imagination for a meaning so far not perceived by us. A symbol, metaphor, or, poetic idiom is influenced by the contemporary ethos, but the poet employs each in the way he perceives and the way he expresses. Often, only mechanical appropriation of metre helps shape an image. A poem as a whole, however, may emerge as an image out of the collective impression of the image-cluster employed in it. Use of metaphor, simile and phrase, apart, very often simple description in a poem builds up a mental picture carved out of the external reality of the poem. With the passage of time the subject matter of poetry also changes, and, with that poetic diction too alters, as does the metrical trend. What is more, metaphors also register a shift in implication. The poet who acquires dexterity in the use of metaphors distinguishes himself thus from other poets. Therefore, the image clusters are to be 'cracked' if the theme is to be approached for a deeper understanding and better re-
response to the farthest implication in the poem.

✓ Larkin’s attempts on a particular theme are many, and each attempt is a new start, as if, the earlier attempts were a failure. And, each time, he grows, as it were, and, has better words, phrases, epithets, and image-patterns. He often appears even to contradict himself because the next experience could be contradicting the earlier one, or, deductions differ for that matter. Larkin like all poets creates his own universe in which he is always busy instituting laws, but often rejecting, amending, modifying and sometime contradicting them. Images varyingly appeal to our senses, but, Larkin employs images which engage our sight and audibility simultaneously. The images are so concentrated and so closely threaded within the subject theme centre, that they can hardly be plucked out. Rather, they become part of the themes growth. His conventional images too have a unique flavour. Larkin’s poems are different, because the imagery is intensely personal. This may appear quite unusual but the technique fits his themes wherein his private image collage suits more than the conventional ones.

Death, traditionally a mysterious phenomenon marked by inevitability and impenetrability, becomes in Larkin, an occurrence or event which is internalised as an intimate personal encounter. Probing into its recesses, Larkin rediscovers its meaning without relapsing into the erstwhile easy-solution of immortality. Instead, the permanence and perpetuity of spirit is challenged dialectically and dialogically and portrayed as a ceasing in order that the variety and sanctity of life be appreciated the more. The concept of mortality is thus released from its manifestations, including the one
at which, or, after which a void ensues. The death-group of poems in Larkin are apparently fear-obsessed, but, probe deeper into the nature of death helps demystify the trauma, providing simpler meanings to the mysterious and disturbing phenomenon. Thus, even the image clusters are quite unusual in connotation. Larkin perceived the phenomenon of death as quite palpable, and therefore, seen and recognizable. Approach and occurrence of death is made a felt, heard, an seen experience. He begins with traditional negative images of darkness and of a paralysis-numb and imprisoning. Going as the introductory poem of his Collected Poems contains an image-cluster associated with evening that defines death that engulfs life. The experience of the senses benumbed is conveyed through 'it is drawn up over the knees and breast', a feeling that 'brings no comfort'. This is followed by the image of paralysing weighs, 'what loads my hands down?', a something he 'cannot feel?' That image was in the interrogative and asked a question, an, the remaining poems in this group concentrate on the answer to this question. The traditional connotation of 'the tree gone, that locked Earth to the sky?' is counterbalanced by the peculiar contrast 'Silken it seems at a distance'. The evening image is painful, as a nearing-the-end, but life in the poem is made quite an alluring experience from a distance. The gloom of old age and death is rendered, seen and felt by making the 'evening coming in'. as, 'never seen before' for the knees and breast, and hand's felt the 'load'. The cessation of movement concretized in the still, motionless wave-image, further defines death in imperical terms in And The Wave Sings Because it is Moving. Mechanical sustenance and termi-
nation of life is built up with the image of waves ‘rising and falling in the
sea’, ‘the harrow of death/Deepens’, and, ‘there are thrown up waves’. The
ungraspability and impenetrability of the death-phenomenon is appropriately
portrayed in the cloud-image which although clearly visible, yet ‘There is
nothing to grasp, nothing to catch or claim’. The weakening life-thread has
the wave ‘falter’ and ‘drown’. The usual reactions to death are ‘Laments,
tears, wreath, rocks’ but Larkin diffuses the shock by simplifying it as ‘the
shout of the heart continually at work’.

Then, there the wall-image in Traumerei portrayed as being ‘an im­
prisoning’ rather than ‘a protecting’. The wall-image is built up with the
gradual appearance of alphabets in ‘D-E-A-T-’. This is almost a figurative
spelling-out itself and makes death infinitely more intelligible. Many Fa­
mous Feet Have Trod suggests a constant flux in the meaning and defini­
tion of death, as a result of which, there is a failure to comprehend the
extant and non-extant through their elemental essences. Larkin is distinct
with unique juxta-position of images ‘of being wafer, stone, and flower in
turn’ connotating subtility, solidity and susceptiblity of life. The image of
the ‘old discoloured copper coin’ is cogently descriptive of human mortal­
ity which is undecipherable. Thus, each poem in this group registers
progress in not only deciphering the mystery of this inexplicable phenom­
enon but also in portraying it with a new vocabulary, which in its of im­
ages is fascinating, enabling a new perspective for an age-old repetition.
Thus, The Unfinished Poem metaphorically answers the question, raised in
Going. That, approached from whatever angle no single definition could
spell out the mystery of death. What the poet achieves finally is a triumph over his own dread of death. Ambulances registers in fast moving sequential image patterns (the reputed ambulance-images) automatic associations with a difference, as he places emphasis on nothingness after death, instead of on a nullity of existence, which is stressed by other poets. Through audio-visual imagery, a formless and imperceptible concept like death is given a perceptible frame. It has 'the shape of his head', 'restless mind', 'unfailing memory', 'bare feet'. However, Larkin fails to give any conclusive definition of the final extinction, yet his knowledge, regarding it graduates from the inquisitive. 'What is under my hands/That I cannot feel?' in Going written in 1946 to an 'unfocussed blur, a standing chill' in Aubade written in 1977. Apart from this, the group of poems referred to entail many more image-clusters which directly or indirectly help the death-theme concretize variously. Thus, there is 'soundless dark', 'unresting death', 'the dread of dying', 'mind blanks', 'total emptiness', 'sure extinction', 'Not to be anywhere', 'vast-moth-eaten musical brocade', 'furnace fear', 'Postmen like doctors go from house to house', 'closed like confessionals', 'the solving emptiness', 'unreachable inside a room', 'dulls to distance', 'sparrow-trap sky', 'Blue fug in the room', 'air should stick in....nose like bread'. 'The light swell up and turn black', 'still as a stuck pig', 'the famous eclipse', 'one long plunge', 'breathing tightened into a shroud', 'light cringed', 'the door swung inwards', 'A silent crowd walking under a wall', and 'a concrete passage'. These unconventional though tangible images make death a phenomenon which could sit, stand, feel and move.
The next major subject of Larkin’s poetry is Alienation. Analysis of poems belonging to this category indicate that both external and internal constraints contributed significantly to fashion the withdrawal psyche conspicuous in Larkin’s work. Historicist critics may not agree but his shredded personality had a lot to do with his withdrawal. The distancing was a personal factor. Wifeless, childless, and homeless Larkin felt singled out for an excruciating loneliness. It was the factor of a disjuncted personal life that is more conspicuous in his poetry than the over emphasised contemporary shattered social and political ambience. External factors did encourage Larkin to articulate his feeling of estrangement quite honestly, and latent scepticism and a sharp wariness alienated him for all absolutes, all dogmas and rituals. This very private perception incited him to instruct both negative, as well as, positive emotions and feelings of desire. Consequently, Larkin very clearly emerged as a sceptical agnostic empiricist, quite estranged from religious belief, social and traditional institutions, and moral absolutes. It was an incompatibility, and, a deliberate distancing, which enclosed him within his own psyche. The speaker-persona helped him successfully devise a stance of neutrality and indifference. Larkin thus remains in self-opted exclusion, away from all kinds of trappings often surreptitiously abetted by this multi-vocal personae. The dialectical and dialogic, almost colloquial technique of his group of poems help make his concealment-tactic very dependable. These poems throw a spanner over all illusions of permanent happiness, or, fruitful relationships, or, fulfilled desires, and, even the so-called perennial emotional security guaranteed by tradition. The
consequence was an experience of a vacuity which is central to this group of poems as any expression of a poet, alien to his own self, as well as, his surroundings.

The horse-images in At Grass typify the 'distanced-individual' who is free of the all-alluring shackles of society and its glamour, and the images in support are 'stands anonymous', 'faint afternoons', and 'littered grass'. It is the non-participation-after-participation-in-the-race experience, which makes the horses appear at a level of existence communicated very strongly through images like 'the long cry, hanging unhushed', and, 'Memories plague their ears like flies', as also in 'all stole away', and 'Dusk brims the shadows'. These images render the social estrangement of the horses at graze very pronounced, in fact, almost tangible in its profundity, not only visible but quite audible also. In Church Going Larkin also juxtaposes the images of inclusion and exclusion, of acceptance and rejection, for, while still in the church, the speaker-persona tries to keep aloof, irreverent towards its sanctity. But then, he does not forget to donate the Irish six pence. However, the whole poem appears a metaphor of alienation from the established absolute of a religious faith, and the images like 'letting the door thud shut'; 'a tense musty unignorable silence'; 'awkward reverence': 'bored uninformed, the ghostly silt'; 'accoutred frosty barn'; pleases me to stand in silence here'; and, 'A serious house on serious earth' together help build the theme emphatically. Similarly, Mr. Bleaney is as a poem an image of a rootless wanderer, bereft of social moorings, sceptical of religious values and human relationships. The poem concentrates on the split-person-
ality of the speaker, assimilating and diversifying with its prototype. Mr. Bleaney. The lone individual is shown to be wry and disgruntled. The resulting image-pattern, ‘stuffing my ears with cotton-wool’; ‘the frigid wind/ Tousling the clouds’: ‘the fusty bed’: and ‘one hired box’ successfully captured varying moods, gestures, and habits.

The title poem in *The Whitsun Weddings* also builds up the image of an alienated individual, despising the institution of marriage, and reflecting upon the merits and demerits of sociability. Ignoring the sanctified and sacrificing aspect of marriage, Larkin builds up a miserable picture of married people in images like, ‘The fathers with broad belts under their suits/ And seamy, foreheads’, and ‘mothers loud and fat’. The ironical description of marriage as ‘religious wounding’ and ‘a happy funeral’ becomes further gloomy with the added association of corresponding doleful imagery. Thus there is: ‘tall heat that slept/ For miles around inland’, and, ‘a smell of grass/ Displaced the reek of buttoned, carriage cloth’, and, ‘long cool platforms whoops and skirls’, as also, ‘Children frowned/ At something dull’, and ‘shuffling gouts of steam’, and, ‘a cooling tower’, with, ‘walls of blackened moss’. *Vers de Societe* exudes Larkin’s innate fear of society, visualized as a lot of ‘craps’. The fictional ‘Warlock Williams’ is ‘genteel’ society, and therefore, a compulsive infringement on individual freedom. This poem grows with images, which make the alienation unbearable. Thus, there is ‘Funny how hard it is to be alone’, and ‘straight into nothingness’, as also, ‘forks and faces’, and ‘the moon thinned’, and, ‘an air-sharpened blade’, and, ‘A life—sternly instilled’. However, the final reali-
zation comes with, 'All solitude selfish', and 'hermit with gown and dish', and, 'virtue is social', 'Too subtle', 'Too decent, too', and, 'only the young can be alone', 'sitting by a lamp', 'Not peace', 'stand failure and remorse'. Now, all these images of sound, sight, touch and perception, together appear a poem by themselves. For a break, Deceptions sympathises with the rapist and counters its guilt associations. larkin employs an image-pattern which is live and tangible, and strikes our imagination directly. Thus, there is 'taste the grief/ Bitter and sharp', and 'light, unanswerable and tall and wide', and, 'mind lay-open like a drawer of knives'. The fictional detail 'stumbling up the breathless stair' is compounded with the conceptual image 'To burst into fulfilment's desolate attic'.

Through its heterogenous image-patterns and its dialectic of negation, this group of poems appears to aspire to a place beyond and 'out of reach' because, Larkin, qua his Self, and his surroundings felt existence quite 'under-written'.

Chapter IV concentrates on yet another persistent theme in Larkin's poetry: this is the theme of Choice. Larkin maintained that freedom to prefer or choose is quite illusive because a man is a trapped-victim of events rather than or personal decisions. Many of Larkin's poems, though apparently dealing with other issues, are, significantly rooted in the subject of Choice. The dramatic presentation and dialectical treatment lend them a stamp of illusion. These poems are dramatic monologues, and Larkin employs the speaker-personae to help cancel the available alternatives, so that, what finally emerges is what has been coined by Andrew Swarbrick a
'negative sublimity', in all that is left of existence. The desires and expectations with which the individual identifies himself remains unfulfilled. Ironically, happiness of either a right or wrong choice enhances the illusion further, setting into motion an endless chain of illusive choices. Poems in this category strive for the 'negative sublime' which the dialetic and analogic technique in each case, helps the poet almost achieve. What such poems assert has been recognized as a kind of 'affirmation through negation'. The unavoidable reality of a particular situation is dramatised in the individual psyche highlighting the thorny dilemma between two alternatives. To create the necessary amount of tension in each poem, the persona is dialogically involved in arguments and counter-arguments. The poems, under the theme of choice, therefore, persist with perpetual tensions. Thus, Toads and Toads Revisited are profound reflections on the value of work. Analogising work with a loathed creature, Toads collects images despicable in connotation to help cancel out the choice of choosing his own kind of work, as because there are images like 'the brute', and appellations like 'lispers, losels', 'loblolly-men', and 'louts', and their 'unspeakable wives' who are 'skinny as whippets', and, 'their nippers bare feet?'. The forced choice is represented by the toad with its 'hunkers heavy as hard luck' and 'cold as snow'. There is an abortive attempt to 'drive the brute off', which 'soils' with its sickening poison. There are despairing sketches of 'black-stockinged nurses', 'Palsied old step-takers', 'Hare-eyed clerks with the jitters', 'waxed-fleshed out-patients', and 'characters in long coats', and 'All dodging the toad work'. However, Toad Revisited is a des-
perate pleading for work as a process to help sustain life because there is
‘Nowhere to go but indoors’, and ‘No friends, but empty chairs’, and, therefore, a longing for ‘My in-tray, My loaf-haired secretary’, and ‘My shall-I-Keep-the-Call-in-Sir’.

Again, Dockery and Son and Self’s the Man are quite involved deliberations, debating marriage and celibacy as alternatives. Dockery and Son concentrates on the futility of marriage as the unmarried is represented as ‘a strong unhindered moon’ ‘To have no son, so wife/ No house, no land’, but only ‘a numbness registered the shock’. Choice is concretized as ‘warp tight-shut, like doors’, like ‘sand-clouds, thick and close’. But in opposition to this is “harsh patronage” only. Self’s the Man debates the notions of selflessness and selfishness as two different modes which also represent two attitudes to love. Argumentative to their core, these poems rarely employ images directly affecting the theme. The two types of existence sketched as comparisons comprise the bachelor-speaker a permanent-presence, and, his antagonist who is an implied presence not often seen or heard. Finally, choices cancel each other out and a counterpoise emerges between both kinds of lives:

So he and I are the same
because:

For Dockery a son, for me nothing,

In almost a similar vein, the perplexity of choice between perfection-in-art, and, perfection-in-life is debated in Reasons For Attendance and Poetry of Departures. The poems end, either equating the two preferences,
or, subverting both. The image of 'the wonderful feel of girls' is contrasted
against the powerful call of 'that lifted, rough-tongued bell' of art. Finally,
both options get eliminated because they lack permanent happiness. Places,
Loved Ones infers that desires are never fulfilled as the achievement never
ever matches the expectations. It reinforces the idea that freedom of choice
is a mere delusion, because, perfect bliss in either eventuality is an illusion.
The analogies of Arrivals, Departures reveal that the entire idea of choice
is a mockery, because, compulsions exist to force contrary choices making
the dilemma more traumatic, reducing the issue to a mere myth. The strik­
ing image is of a the advent and departure of both love as well as life; for
between birth and death, is forever suspended the tension of an illusory
choice. Life with a Hole in it is an unsophisticated version of the illusion
of choice and imagines 'Life... an immobile, locked... unbeatable slow
machine'. This poem offers the final verdict on the prolonged debate on the
integrity of choice. Concrete imagery each time helps crystalize a situation
of choice, its futility, illusiveness, and deceptive tension between two avail­
able choices.

Along with the aforesaid themes that dominate, Larkin also treats
themes which though not as pronounced, are treated with no less serious­
ness, for, his other pre-occupations are, Love, Sex, Change, Time, Old Age,
Incompleteness and Faithlessness. Among these, Agnosticism, Time and
Old-Age and Incompleteness are more prominent. Poems analysed under
the theme of Agnosticism deduced that Larkin’s ruthlessness was largely
a part of self-disillusionment rather than an expression of the much touted
post-War scepticism. In fact, faithlessness as guarantee of personal integ­rity had long become an integral part of Larkin’s psyche.

The Self in Larkin is jealously guarded against all challenges to its integrity. Larkin was not altogether irreligious. He felt rather a dire need of a secular faith which he expresses in *Water*. However, the concept of spiritual edification or eternal bliss pleaded by religion was not approved by his muse. Yet, church as a part of a cultural tradition was desired to be continued as in *Church Going*. Faith, recognised as psychological exigency for emotional purgation was also accepted in *Faith Healing*. Though Larkin manoeuvres to show how the credulity of women is exposed to exploitation, he also lays bare his own male irreligious penchant. Mockery of Faith sometimes vehement, becomes quite a conspicuous feature of his poems. Images of ‘dubious women’, ‘sheepishly stray’, that ‘stay stiff’, or, ‘twitch­ing and loud with deep hoarse tears’, and ‘a kind of dumb/ and idiot child’ exist along side with the speaker-persona wandering in the church scepti­cal and irreverent, or, the Evangelist ‘upright in rimless glasses’, ‘direct­ing God about this eye, that knee’. Together they leave the cumulative ef­fect of a poet who is quite irreligious. Yet, all this is finely counter-bal­anced in *Water* which appears a metaphor for purity, with transparency and catholicity becoming the poet’s substitutes for a church religion ‘where any­angled light/ would congregate endlessly’.

Poems catagorised under the Time-theme emphatically note that ex­istence could only be understood in terms of the lapse, or, temporality of time, that is, against a negativity, as against an eternity. Past, Present and
Future counter-act against each other and establish the temporality of Time and its negativity. Therefore, the Time-theme poems conclude that Time-as-eternity, or, Immortality has little meaning. Rather, Time is in grasppable and, Past, Present and Future for a human being cannot exist all at once and together. Larkin tried to achieve victory over Time using a photograph album as in Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album, or, in a tape recorder, playing a jazz record as in Reference Back. The giant-image of Time in Send No Money dwarfs the speaker persona. The delusiveness of Time in Present, Past and Future categorised in three stanzas in Triple Time is crystallised in image-patterns like ‘empty street’, ‘sky to blandness scoured’, ‘A time traditionally soured’ unrecommended by event’, ‘An air lambent with adult enterprise’, ‘A valley cropped by fat neglected chances’. ‘Thread bare perspectives’, and ‘seasonal decrease’. In Reference back the cruelty of Time too is conveyed through ‘the unsatisfactory prime’. Send No Money concretizes Time with ‘the fobbed impendent belly of Time’. ‘the hail of occurrence-clobber’, and ‘the trite untransferable’.

The theme of Old-Age too is full of all its horrors. The Old Fools exposed Larkin furious at the loss of sensibility that would follow final decay. Direct and declarative, the poem is replete with horrifying images, like ‘mouth hangs open and drools’, ‘crippled or tight’, ‘on pissing yourself’. ‘Ash hair’, ‘toad hands, prune face dried into lines’, ‘the constant wear and tear’. a ‘crouching below’. Many more poems though dealing with other subjects, end at the thought of old age and death. Finally, there is the theme of Incompletion as pointed out by Andrew Motion that conclude all
other themes of Larkin’s poetry. Death, Alienation, Time, Old-Age and an illusive Choice make the poet also think of Incompleteness. Poems worked out in this context specify that Larkin remains inconclusive about his themes in all poems prior to the the appearance of High Windows. For example, in Church Going the persona does not meet a full-blooded agnostic; in Dockery and Son and Self’s The Man it could not pursue to remain an alienated bachelor; in Traumerei it does not release ‘H’ to complete ‘DEAT’- into death; and, in Unfinished Poem it is frustrated in its realization that ‘Nothing like death stepped.’ Even in the most love-excited moments in Wedding Wind and Talking in Bed the personae’s experience remains unfulfilled. And most symptomatically of all, persona is almost choked in The Dance with ‘something’, that is ‘half-way between the gullet and the tongue.’ In High Windows only Larkin emerges direct and declarative, harsh and conclusively polemical, for, here he finally bursts out, breaking all constraint and restraint, into unabashed lyricism. About many poems in this volume, it has and can be justifiably said that they desperately conclude Larkin's persistent conflict between the identity of the ‘Self’ and the perception of an aesthete. Effacing ‘Self’, these poems long ‘for infinity and absence’, the beauty of ‘somewhere you’re not.’ Poems in the last collection once again witness Larkin’s lyricism, where as those of The North Ship had appeared evidently threatened by a ‘mocking philistinism’; the anti-poetic stance intended to break away from the traditional mode of poetry. Infact, what should be emphasised is that this very philistinism which refuses ‘to accept’ art as ‘theology’ seems in practice to guarantee
Larkin's poetic integrity. Thus, whereas *The North Ship* had Larkin just a lyricist, *The Less Deceived* and *Whitsun Weddings* find him a self-deprecating ventriloquist. However, in *High Windows* he appears to posture as a philistine lyricist. This entire development, the First Chapter has already noticed in detail, and, the chapters that follow explore how this is done by the poet through his characteristic imagery.
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