SOCIAL LANDSCAPES IN THE
POETRY OF PHILIP LARKIN

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Philip Larkin nurtures the persona of an isolate speaker to a position as the dominant voice in much of his poetry. In dialogues of opposing attitudes, this persona views himself and others in relation to rituals and institutions that make up our social landscapes. Larkin's collective personae most often find themselves at odds with social surroundings and absolutes, due largely to their own impulses toward pessimism, disbelief, and isolation.

In this thesis, I will examine the major social landscapes evoked by Larkin as subjects of his poetic scrutiny. The first chapter of the thesis will address Larkin's treatment of religion and work; the second chapter will explore his attitudes toward relationships and domesticity. Through explication of selected poems, and with support from appropriate critical texts, I will demonstrate Larkin's use of personae in advancing thematic dialogues and commentaries.
Though English and arguably insular, Larkin's landscapes and themes are universal in the sense that their variations mark all human lives. Moreover, the empiricism and stark realities of his work are modified by a startling colloquialism. Larkin is essentially a cordial poet who invites readers to take part in his intimate dialogues, and though often angry, he is never didactic. I would argue that Larkin is a rare, dark visionary who truly enlightens, and I hope this thesis reflects why I think so.

The form and content of this abstract are approved.
I recommend its publication.

Signed Peter L. Thorpe
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CHAPTER I

THE LIMITS OF FAITH: RELIGION AND WORK

In an essay, Philip Larkin once favorably characterized the themes of England's late Poet Laureate, John Betjeman, as "insular" and "regressive" (RW 206). Larkin did so with apparent pleasure because similar myopic labels were routinely applied to his own poetry by critics such as A. Alvarez and M. L. Rosenthal. In view of the "larger concerns" of Auden, for instance, a generic charge of "Little-Englandism" was levelled against Larkin and his work (Lucas 191). A different perspective is held by critic Janice Rossen, who writes:

Although Larkin is often seen as a poet who celebrates England and Englishness, he generally maintains a respectful distance from the countryside and from the people who inhabit it (50).

This clinical distancing is evident throughout Larkin's poetry, but his tonal responses are subjective and often severe, even in lyrical pieces which are staunchly "English" in diction and imagery.

Larkin's "topophil," to use a term of Auden's, is the England of his youth and of cultural traditions and social turmoil enlarged upon by the hardened observations
of his mature years. Emphatically grounded in his environment, Larkin explores the human predicament of entrapment-by-circumstance. His imagery, metaphors, and themes represent what Barbara Everett refers to as "that literalism or realism which [his] art evidently hungered for and respected," but also saw as transparent (249). The beings who populate Larkin's poetry live behind the transparent veils of social boundaries, sometimes by apparent choice as in the cases of his isolated personae. And Larkin is concerned with the arbitrariness and determinism of circumstance, character, and other realities which mark their lives.

His "Little-Englandism" is not, therefore, emblematic of any neo-romanticism, a trend he deplored in principle, nor of misapplied nationalism. The subjects of Larkin's empirical focus exist within the society he knew, but the "insularity" of his view ends at the societal frameworks. Social landscapes such as religion and work are "framing enclosures" of Larkin's greater concern, which is how individuals function within such enclosures (Everett 250).

The confines and dicta of Larkin's social landscapes do suggest, if not insist upon, a limiting determinism. This determinism has nothing to do with freedom in the
democratic sense or with free will as a
Christian/Miltonic precept. In his determinism, Larkin
deals solely with the strictures posed by time and the
bare bones of existence. This slant is evident in
"Days", a relatively early (1953) poem dealing explicitly
with the theme of religious faith. The poem takes an
unrhymed form of an abbreviated Petrachan sonnet, its
quandary and irresolution contained in a sestet and
quatrains:

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

Ah, solving that question
Brings the priest and the doctor
In their long coats
Running over the fields (CP 67).

The two interrogatory lines have the tone of a
schoolchild's rote recital in a religion class. They
parody the elementary questions and answers in a
catechetical text: "Who made you?" "God made me." "Why
did God make you?" "To show forth his goodness . . .," etc. Likewise, the response to "What are days for?" is
benign, deceptively simple rhetoric, and childishly
monosyllabic except for two words.
"They are to be happy in:" might have been endstopped with a period, but Larkin substituted a colon because the statement is too absurd to stand alone. Its absurdity is dogged at the heels by the Puckish and impertinent "Where can we live but days?" As there is no conceivable answer except for an inappropriate negative, an ironic, narrative voice interjects itself in the recitation. The question alone indicates spiritual and/or psychological malaise, bringing "the priest and the doctor" in a seriocomic flurry, "Running over the fields" to the metaphysically stricken.

Larkin's determinism resides in his conviction about the "limitations of the actual" (Morrison 214). And it is against the "actual" that religion must proselytize and prove itself. The erosion of faith is axiomatic in Larkin's work where doubt, rage, and rhetorical questions are often presented in equipoise to belief. Again, religion is viewed largely as an alluring deception, an anachronism comparable to a "vast moth-eaten musical brocade," as Larkin writes of it in "Aubade" (1977), arguably one of his angriest works (CP 208).

In Rossen's view, "Aubade" "insist[s] harshly on fear in the face of death," and in Larkin's universe, such fear is not deflected by any institutional deception.
Ironically, the title is no paean to a new day, but rather a predawn awakening clouded by melancholy and the residue of alcohol: "I work all day, and get half-drunk at night./ Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare" (CP 208). The "bachelor persona" of the poem is disengaging not from a lover in the tradition of an aubade, but from sleep as a short-term anesthetic (Falck 205).

The persona's "arid interrogation" into his own mortality advances toward an examination of conscience in the second stanza (CP 208). The caesuras give emphasis to his litany of negation: "... Not in remorse/ The good not done, the love not given, time/ Torn off unused..." even as he argues for "The sure extinction" which eclipses all else (CP 208). Here, as in many other poems, Larkin puts a high premium on the power of memory and again, of determinism linked to time: "An only life can take so long to climb/ Clear of its wrong beginnings, and may never;" (CP 208). Similarly, Larkin has written that memory and perspective "link us to our losses," and the Hardyesque sadness of his personae frequently offsets their bleak preoccupations, lending an empathy toward them and their various predicaments (CP 106). This is certainly one dimension of the "humane precision" with
which his personae confront their darkest realities
(Brownjohn 15).

The persona of "Aubade" inhabits an interior landscape
pursued by "Unresting death," similar to the relentless
death ship in the last stanza of an earlier Larkin poem
(1951) titled "Next, Please" (CP 208, 52). He rages not
only against the insufficiencies of religious bromides or
"trick[s]," but against the presumed superiority of
secular philosophy, of "... specious stuff that says no
rational being/ can fear a thing it will not feel,..."
(CP 208). Such a rationalistic vision misses the
inherent horror of its own logic:

That this is what we fear-no sight, no
sound [t/o]
No touch or taste or smell, nothing to
think with, [t/o]
Nothing to love or link with,
The anaesthetic from which none come round
(CP 208).

Larkin highlights these four critical lines with
alliteration to emphasize the barrenness envisioned by
his persona. Five of the six stark negatives work as
sort of inverse modifiers of the senses and connections
which death will eradicate. The demise of the mind and
intellect--"nothing to think with,"--precludes the need
for beings, objects, or thoughts with which to "love or
link." These four lines might have served as a coda for.
the entire poem, but Larkin placed them almost literally at its epicenter. Preceded by the persona's placement, questioning, arguments, and rage, they are followed by two stanzas in which he gropes for perspective and for an abiding comfort through a psychic bonding with "people", "others", a collective "we" and "no one" (CP 209). The frequent use of the pronoun "we" by Larkin indicates a "lack of conscription" in his work according to Blake Morrison, displacing the "Little-Englandism" charge with the authority of a more universal voice (124).

The external absence of consciousness, or "The anaesthetic from which none come round," assigns a superfluous quality to the persona's concrete, familiar landscape, both devaluing and ironically enhancing its importance. Larkin characteristically focuses upon the mundane as providing lifelines, anticipating another day gearing up with its crouching "telephones," anticipatory "offices," and therapeutic "work" (CP 209). These comforting realities mitigate the dilemma of what "we can't escape,/ Yet can't accept" (CP 209). This stanza evokes a line from an earlier (1946), quasi-religious poem titled "Many famous feet have trod" where Larkin writes: "That's life; and, dealing in dichotomies" (CP 15). "Aubade" ends with the vision of a splendidly banal
utopia (utopian in its staving off of extinction), where "postmen" on their rounds act as surrogate "doctors", their presence as functionaries confirming a diversionary need for ritual (CP 209). This is Larkin-like use of familiar social terrain, where "theologies" are gleaned "from the ostensibly unpromising details of the ordinary urban world" (CP 81; Whalen 127).

The matter of mortality is a primary issue in Larkin's sphere as it was in Thomas Hardy's, whose Yell'ham-Wood (1902), as personified nature, first conjectures "... that Life would signify/ A thwarted purposing," finally resolving that "Life offers [only] to deny!" (Hardy, CP 280) As with Hardy, Larkin's essential lack of faith in any divine abstraction is apparent in his work, but religious ritual and conjecture is thematically admissible as a phenomenal landscape. Of "Faith Healing" (1960) and other poems, Blake Morrison asks "how... a poetry so concerned to unmask and deny [can] also be in some degree affirmative?" (224) Rossen suggests that Larkin can be seen in part as a Victorian at heart, someone who has lost his faith--a crisis that he considers was probably inevitable--yet he has lived on into the modern world with many of the sensibilities of a religious man and with the moral constraints which Christianity has imposed (41-2).
But Larkin also recognized the inclination toward religious belief to be a natural evolution of artifact into genuine, palpable necessity. At its core, "Faith Healing" documents a failure on the part of the "women" in the poem to recognize the true nature of their own desolate need (CP 126).

An evangelist, with his "deep American voice," is a catalytic presence who unwittingly asks the appropriate question: "Now, dear child, / What's wrong," (CP 126). The implications of the question clearly overreach his "professional" capacities. Larkin is not so much concerned with venal motives as he is with the misplaced palliative proffered by the evangelist. Morrison suggests that Larkin's persona "stands apart from and remains unimpressed by [the] religious ceremony," and the empirical distancing is evident in Larkin's recurring collective pronouns. The persona also scrutinizes the crowd with the eye of a behaviorist:

Like losing thoughts, they go in silence; some
Sheepishly stray, not back into their lives
Just yet; but some stay stiff, twitching and loud
With deep hoarse tears, as if a kind of dumb
And idiot child within them still survives
To re-awake at kindness, thinking a voice
At last calls them alone, that hands have come
To lift and lighten; and such joy arrives
Their thick tongues blort, their eyes squeeze grief, a crowd
[€/o]
Of huge unheard answers jam and rejoice--(CP 126)
"To re-awake at kindness" implies a need which has not been met, and each supplicant imagines that "... a voice/ At last calls them alone" in this orchestrated public ritual. The persona, Morrison's opinion notwithstanding, is impressed by the ceremony, but in the sense of bitter irony. As Rossen observes, the poem "parodies the sense of merging and connectedness which some people seem to achieve through religion," and the unleashing of estranged emotion through this tawdry ritual evokes both compassion and revulsion in the persona (41). There is also a strong, if controlled, tone of condescension in the second stanza. The persona observes that any pursuant joy on the part of the crowd is due to the kind of cathartic hysteria of such occasions, and the "huge unheard answers" are collective gibberish and little more.

The heightened emotion cannot sustain itself, and the puerile reactions of the women are dampened by "An immense slackening ache" (CP 12). Their sense of "connectedness" is illusory, as the broad context of love cannot be placed within a crowded and artificial agape; their needs remain unmet. "Dear Child" is now rhetorically meaningless, and it mocks the naive
assumption that we are entitled to love by virtue of our being.

Characters in Larkin's social landscapes often opt for illusion or "compensating make-believe" at the expense of self-knowledge, but the latter is hardly a "given" in every individual (CP 56). Larkin's hyperaware personae, unlike the women in "Faith Healing," recognize deceptions, and their own immunity is due to their capacity for critical thinking and the moral skepticism that frequently follows. But Brownjohn points out that "Larkin is careful never to suggest that happiness may be somehow arranged if only the proper steps could be taken" (16). As exemplified in "Faith Healing," his personae carry the burden of their own consciousness and that of the observed; the "everyone" in the last stanza is all-inclusive (CP 126). This dual vision is certainly one element of the affirmative "moral function" in Larkin's poetry, and it serves to spare the reader any sanctimonious aftertaste (Harvey 99).

The religious milieu in "Faith Healing" is a diminution of "establishment" religion both in its ostensibly non-church setting and its ersatz liturgy. Larkin's religious sensibilities are even better applied to the eloquent architectural landscape of "Church Going"
creates a modulation of tone and interplay between
two basic personality traits in the poet's work as a whole: the one comic or clever, the other more open and sensitive (Whalen 14).

The initial tone of the persona is one of irreverence as he treats the "brass and stuff" and other decorative and ritualistic minutiae as quaint museum pieces (CP 97). But then "Hatless," the speaker reflects, "I take off/ My cycle-clips in awkward reverence," and Terry Whalen notes that "It is from a recognition of what this gesture means that the poem develops" (CP 97: 15). With an odd self-consciousness, he pauses to further examine remnants from an age "Brewed God knows how long" of almost instinctive faith and devotion (CP 97). The speaker's informal tone endures through the second stanza as he looks over "a few/ Hectoring large-scale verses" on the lectern which bespeak an institution whose authority dwindles, its musty dogmas as irritating as a scolding, tiresome parent. He stops to "donate an Irish sixpence," which like the structure itself, may have little negotiable value (CP 97).

The speaker admits to a "Church Going" habit in the third stanza, echoing his difficulty in assigning any meaning to the premises: "Someone would know: I don't" (CP 97). As in "Aubade," Larkin's long stanzas and his
use of iambic meter and alliteration channel the verse into an easy conversational mode. And significantly, the pronoun "I" is substituted with the inevitable "we":

Wondering what to look for; wondering, too,
When churches fall completely out of use
What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep
A few cathedrals chronically on show, (CP 97)

Andrew Motion argues that "Larkin's dilemma is not whether to believe in God but what to put in God's place," and in the third stanza the speaker characterizes the church's "Power" as a matter of "games," "riddles," and "superstition" which "like belief, must die" (60; CP 98). Even "disbelief" itself is a kind of passe dogma, and "what remains," he asks, when it too "has gone?" (CP 98) In the absence of disbelief, the meaning of the church is diminished further. It's no longer even an old fortress impervious to history, withstanding time, chaos, and secular dogmas. As a structure, its meaning cannot be conveyed through relics, and to place it in historical or cultural contexts is also inadequate. The speaker ponders "who/ Will be the last, the very last, to seek/
This place for what it was," assuming that time and lapsed faith will make its significance increasingly obscure and archaic. Its unnamed sanctity may also be violated by the speaker's satirical vision of
Some ruin-bibber, randy for antique,
Or Christmas-addict, counting on a whiff
Of gown-and-bands and organ pipes and myrrh?
(CP 98)

The church takes on a more temporal, genuine
significance in the sixth stanza where it is viewed as an
overseer of pivotal human events: "marriage, and birth,/And death..." (CP 98) It is a "special shell" and an
"accoutred frowsty barn" which has meaning only as it is
endowed and recognized by human invention and consent.
This is confirmed in the final stanza as the speaker
beholds the church in an ironically secular light:

A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognized, and robed as destinies (CP 98).

Mortality naturally triggers "someone['s]"--anyone's--
hunger in himself to be more serious," and the lesson of
mutability is manifested in "this ground,/ Which, he once
heard, was proper to grow wise in,/ If only that so many
dead lie around" (CP 98). To Rossen, nature and religion
"can tentatively merge, as in 'Church Going', but this
union provides little in the way of consolation, since
the poet must remain skeptical of faith" (47). And
typically, Larkin's aim is not so much toward resolution
as it is toward pinpointing human impulse and need and
identifying the elaborate structures we devise to
accommodate them.
"Church Going" brilliantly demonstrates the complex nature of the interdependence between impulse/need and structures, and Larkin's persona is compelled to find the lost thread between that "shell" and "someone." The link, of course, is death and how its contemplation can provoke us to be "serious" about our "destinies." For this persona and his "Church Going," the "hankerings after a substitute religion are lost in the search for a rationale which can respect religion without going to extremes of belief and disbelief" (Grubb 233). In Larkin's sphere, this balance surely helps to define his theology and to some extent, his humanism.

Larkin's humanism is emphatically literal in that it measures us against our barest existential circumstances. Part of his reductive vision disallows or argues against schemes and illusions which, in his view, diminish our essential worth by placing "salvation" outside of ourselves. The brevity and phenomenal singularity of a life comprise its fundamental value, and if his poetry's inhabitants or personae live socially circumscribed lives, that's because most people do. But his personae, unlike the characters they observe and comment on, attempt to "expunge romantic possibilities from their consciousness" in coming to terms with their social
landscapes (Pritchard 66). The critic Frederick Grubbs writes:

There is a rationale behind Larkin's provinciality which must be distinguished from the parochial. The parochial is the glorification of prudence, chosen through self-interest, mediocrity, or fear...the provincial is the trust in roots, the refusal to be gulled, the reservation of respect and enthusiasm before the glamorous and the seductive, which characterizes the man who is determined to start from the minimal, the known, the dependable in his own thought and experience (226-27).

Larkin's personae usually resist being "gulled," but it is apparent in a poem such as "Toads" (1954) that they occasionally act out of "self-interest, mediocrity, and fear." (It must be pointed out, however, that these are causes for anguish and in no way does Larkin glorify "prudence" with such attitudes; he may justify it at times.)

In "Toads," work is initially viewed as an inevitable oppressor which defines and circumscribes the life of the speaker. The speaker nevertheless alludes to a complicity in his own oppression:

Why should I let the toad work
Squat on my life?
Can't I use my wit as a pitchfork
And drive the brute off?

Six days of the week it soils
With its sickening poison--
Just for paying a few bills!
That's out of proportion.
Lots of folks live on their wits:
Lecturers, lispers,
Losels, loblolly-men, louts--
They don't end as paupers; (CP 89)

The speaker implies a moral inertia in his failure to use
his "wit" as a more freefalling laborer. He also thinks
in terms of the lives of others (as he imagines them), of
a possible release in what Donald Davie refers to as
"lowered sights and diminished expectations" (71):

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

Their nippers have got bare feet,
Their unspeakable wives
Are skinny as whippets--and yet
No one actually st*arves* (CP 89).

The speaker's monologue of blustery alliteration and off-
rhymes (wits/louts; lispers/paupers, etc.) has a comic
tone to it, but the serious inadequacy of his "lowered
sights" is starkly evident: "No one actually st*arves*,"
but neither is the speaker ready to embrace a marginal
existence. The poem's implications darken in the
"confessional" stanzas; in a manner typical of Larkin,
his persona unmask*es* himself:

Ah, were I courageous enough
To shout st*uff* your pension!
But I know, all too well, that's the st*uff*
That dreams are made on:
For something sufficiently toad-like
Squats in me, too;
Its hunkers are heavy as hard luck,
And cold as snow,
And will never allow me to blarney
My way to getting
The fame and the girl and the money
All at one sitting.

I don't say, one bodies the other
One's spiritual truth;
But I do say it's hard to lose either,
When you have both (CP 89-90).

Lacking the courage to escape or rebel, the speaker is embroiled in a dichotomy of "desire and necessity" (Rossen 133). A "pension" alone may not inspire abiding faith and sacrifice, but work complements the "something sufficiently toad-like" in himself. He embodies Blake Morrison's characterization of "new heroes" to the Movement: "awkward, vulnerable, conformist, even cowardly" but imbued with an "Orwellian decency," which in this case, may be deadly only to himself (171).

Again, there is no resolution beyond acquiescence; for the speaker/persona, work is but one attitude of determinism, and his inner and outer "toads" are a balanced dichotomy. In Larkin's landscapes, the discovery of "spiritual truth" is not necessarily liberating, although it works to dispel illusion for the persona of "Toads."
Larkin casts "Toads Revisited" (1962) with an aged persona stultified by a monomanic affinity for his work ritual: "No, give me my in-tray,/ My loaf-haired secretary" (CP 148). The speaker who nursed his dilemma in "Toads" is displaced in this sequel by himself-as-victim of the enervate, fearful decision to opt for a pension. (There is nothing innately wrong in this decision, but "Being 'one of the men'," that is, one of Larkin's isolate personae, he has presumably abjured all else [CP 147].) It is as if the "toad" dichotomies of the previous poem had merged to take full possession of the persona.

"Toads Revisited" is a lesser poem, but it confirms Grubbs' suggestion that the viable, prudent option can misfire:

Larkin starts from what we know, what we bank on (in more ways than one), and unmasks the utilitarian--let alone the Prudential--as the idiot barrier we erect against anxiety and fear. The more efficient the barrier, the worse the repression, the more vicious and uncaring the complacency (230).

The speaker of the poem is disingenuous from the start, with his hollow claim that "Walking around in the park/Should feel better than work;/ . . . Yet it doesn't suit me" (CP 147). He ultimately emerges as a "vicious" but petty figure of a Dickensian variety--mean-spirited,
soulless, gripped by a tunnel vision which exults in its own dark clairvoyance:

    What else can I answer,
    When the lights come on at four
    At the end of another year?
    Give me your arm, old toad;
    Help me down Cemetery Road (CP 148).

The poem retains the effective metric compression of "Toads", but the tone is passive, its inhabitants "Turning over their failures/ By some bed of lobelias," devoid of tension (CP 147). Prudence having taken its course, there is no argument; there is "Nothing to be said" (CP 138).

In "Livings I" (1971), Larkin takes an uncomic, subdued perspective in sketching a life which is virtually defined by vocation. The businessman persona (circa 1929) delivers a straightforward monologue on his work, dense with ritual, objects, and commodities:

    I deal with farmers, things like dips and feed.
    Every third month I book myself in at
    The ----- Hotel in ----ton for three days.
    The boots carries my lean old leather case
    Up to a single, where I hang my hat.
    One beer and the 'the dinner', at which I read
    The -----shire Times from soup to stewed pears.
    Births, deaths. For sale. Police court. Motor
    spares (CP 186). [t/o]

Larkin's characteristic enjambment does not ease the vague exasperation in the speaker's declarative statements about his work habits. The rhyme scheme of
the first two stanzas: a b c c b a followed by a rhyming couplet also emphasize the repetitious, cyclic pattern of his life. Although he is a "traveling" businessman and presumably extroverted, "I book myself in . . . Up to a single" underline his sense of confinement and solitude, even in the social landscape of the nameless hotel. The poem evokes the intense loneliness of Larkin's "Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel" (1966), when "... all the salesmen have gone back to Leeds;/ Leaving full ashtrays in the Conference Room" (CP 163).

In "Livings I" there is postprandial camaraderie with the speaker's peers—all male ambience, impersonal and pragmatic:

Afterwards, whiskey in the Smoke Room: Clough, Margetts, the Captain, Dr. Watterson; Who makes ends meet, who's taking the knock, Government tariffs, wages, price of stock. Smoke hangs under the light. The pictures on The walls are comic—hunting, the trenches, stuff Nobody minds or notices. A sound Of dominoes from the Bar. I stand around (CP 186)

There is a sense of artificiality and duty that is oblivious to non-mercantile concerns: "hunting, the trenches, stuff," and the speaker further dulls his languor with drink in a play on words: "I stand a round." Time, in the guise of "a big sky" "Drains down the estuary like the bed/ Of a gold river," and in a
"drowse," the speaker wonders "... why/ I think it's worth coming" (CP 186). In the wake of his father's death, he asserts that the "business now is mine," but it has seemingly commandeered him, not vice versa (CP 186). On the eve of a Depression--history's, and possibly his own--"It's time for change, in nineteen twenty-nine" (CP 186).

The poem's tonal restraint enhances the speaker's quiet perception that this recurring pantomime is the sum of his life. Everett posits that the speaker is himself "... an occasion of fidelity, of faithfulness in a calling. ... an image of rectitude" (257). There is no indication, however, that the speaker identifies himself with these rather abstract, high-flown qualities, and if he did, this consciousness would not necessarily preclude his sense of doubt. Similarly, in "Church Going" the verities that the speaker uncovers do not make a convert out of him. For Larkin, the "places where our lives are lived matter intensely," and the impulse to question our confines is in part a critical measure of vitality.

In Alan Brownjohn's view, "Larkin acutely senses ... a dilemma of choice between a life of risk and adventure and the steady rituals of secure employment" (10). In dealing topically with work as both an obligation and a
ritual, Larkin employs a simple but effective dialectic. In solitary debates, his personae confront their impulses and desires, judiciously measuring these against their own essential characters, beliefs, and capabilities.

"Poetry of Departures" (1954) is a hypothetical account of someone who abandons an apparently fixed, static life:

"He chucked up everything/ And just cleared off" (CP 85).

The speaker/persona declares that to most people "This audacious, purifying,/ Elemental move" is laudable, and in Larkin's landscapes such a rare, actively defiant being is an anomaly. For the speaker, this legend triggers fantasies of rebellion that echo pulsating cliches from books and movies:

So to hear it said

He walked out on the whole crowd
Leaves me flushed and stirred,
Like Then she undid her dress
Or Take that you bastard; (CP 85)

He addresses himself with satirical precision as a rebel-on-the-lam, at turns a gypsy-scholar or perhaps a stowaway on a nineteenth-century whaler:

But I'd go today,

Yes, swagger the nut-strewn roads,
Crouch in the fo'c'sle
Stubbly with goodness, if
It weren't so artificial
Such a deliberate step backwards
To create an object:
Books; china; a life
Reprehensibly perfect (CP 86).
In a "world where all the nonsense is annulled," the most to hope for is a life of reprehensible perfection (CP 122).

To Rossen, Larkin's poetry

...tends to veer back and forth between resignation and defiance--and this produces a continual juxtaposition of emotional extremes in many of his poems, particularly those which complain against limitations (132).

As in "Poetry of Departures" and "Toads", illusions and grandiose schemes of the imagination are debunked and deflated. Larkin appears to view the dissipating of illusion as necessary to our task of discovering and developing vital internal resources. Grubbs agrees that the "typical" Larkin persona is

...a citizen whose roots are adaptable, practicable anywhere, because he accepts the responsibility which follows the loss of busy idealism and exaggerated expectations (232).

Larkin at times views this "citizen" with comic affection as an Everyman or Everywoman "... attic'd with all-too-familiar/ Tea-chests of truth-sodden grief" (CP 216). As in "Faith Healing", illusion and reality consistently undercut each other, and the result is a robust tension, if not exactly a neo-Augustan balance in Larkin's poetry as a whole.
His personae grapple with "helpless rage" in ways that suggest survival through knowing compromise (Rossen 103). This cannot be achieved without faith in "The daily things we do" despite the fact that we "Spend all our lives on imprecisions" because we "know nothing" and are "never . . . sure" (CP 213, 107). Donald Davie once judged that a poet (Charles Tomlinson), shrilly critical of Larkin and other Movement figures, had finally "settled [though with unabated anger and contempt] for Larkin's world as indeed politically the only one that we dare conceive of for ourselves" (76; emphasis added). This would also describe, I think, the embattled progression of Larkin and the voices in his poetry.
CHAPTER II

LIFE WITH A HOLE IN IT: RELATIONSHIPS AND DOMESTICITY

After publication of *The North Ship* collection in 1945, the content of Larkin's poetry shifted, enhanced by a strong emphasis on "human nature in its social relations" (Bateson 79). Thomas Hardy is cited as a liberating influence enabling Larkin to see that poetry didn't require adherence to "a concept . . . that lay outside [one's] own life" (Whalen 4). This view would develop into a more or less collective Movement stance against the tendencies of modernists such as Pound, Yeats, and Eliot to subsume "reality" in favor of myth and "private revelations of the supra-rational sort" (Davie 43).

About this "modernist" predilection versus Hardy's approach, Davie elaborates:

> In their poems . . . quotidian reality is transformed, displaced, supplanted; the alternative reality which their poems create is offered to us as a superior reality, by which the reality of every day is to be judged and governed . . . [Hardy's] poems, instead of transforming and displacing quantifiable reality or the reality of common sense, are on the contrary just so many glosses on that reality, which is conceived of as unchallengeably 'given' and final (61 - 2).

As Yeats' influence over his work diminished (though it would not be eradicated), Larkin's empirical focus on
human relationships expanded. Possibly nowhere else is this more apparent than in his singular treatment of romantic love in adult lives. And whether or not his cogent "glosses" on this social landscape made him "the saddest heart in the post-war supermarket" is a matter of individual critical perspective (Motion 59).

In his examinations of these relationships and their domestic corollaries, Larkin's speakers-as-isolate-personae are preeminent. Furthermore, a comprehensive reading of these topical poems in particular demands that we collaborate with these personae. Suffused with desolation though they often are, their viewpoints are critical dynamics in Larkin's arguments and debates. Terry Whalen suggests:

What we, as readers, see is the product of the engagement of an empirical intelligence and a flexible poetic personality with the face of reality. We are involved in the process by proxy, join the perceptual journey in so far as we are willing to respond to the substance and suggestiveness of the world as [Larkin] presents it. The reader does not venture far in Larkin's world unless he participates in the speaker's curious glance (97; emphasis added).

Through this participatory process, Larkin elicits reader responses to the dilemmas experienced by his personae. In no way, however, is Larkin seeking our affirmation of his views, and the speakers themselves consistently
undercut their own positions with abrupt qualifying statements.

It could be argued that given Larkin's repeated evocations of societal traditions and rituals, conventional affirmation of these "antidotes" as elements of the social order is already provided. Larkin's personae, of course, are always on guard against noxious romantic impulses which infiltrate our cherished traditions and rituals. Rossen observes, however, that:

. . . although Larkin rigorously rejects fantasies, he nonetheless must ponder and describe them in the process of correcting his impulses toward them. It is an instance of having things both ways: protesting yet momentarily embracing objects of desire (135).

Larkin's personae react against blind faith and illusion, however, both their own and others'. In the process, they challenge our grip on romance and delusions as well as our panicked insistence on straining and overinflating the bounds of love, marriage, and even parenthood.

Written in 1946, "Waiting for breakfast, while she brushed her hair" was added to the 1966 reissue of The North Ship, and it diverges thematically from the lyrical, Yeatsian spirit of the original collection. The poem is tentative in comparison with later works, but it indicates Larkin's nascent preoccupation with relationships involving couples. In it, the solitary
speaker/persona reflects upon his growing conflicts as a party to this romantic phenomenon. He looks upon a courtyard from the window of a hotel room on a wet morning with its "loaded sky," his partner absorbed in appearances as she brushes her hair (CP 20). "I thought," he observes, "Featureless morning, featureless night," though his reading of his placid surroundings proves premature (CP 20). He subsequently perceives this benign view as "misjudgement" while his former, solitary state eases itself upon his consciousness (CP 20):

The colourless vial of day painlessly spilled
My world back after a year, my lost lost world
Like a cropping deer strayed near my path again (CP 20)

The woman, whom he defiantly kisses "Easily for sheer joy tipping the balance to love," is suddenly an alien presence, a threat to the binary opposites of his isolate self and a creative force or muse that is alluded to in the last stanza (CP 20). (This allusion to "the harsh bell of Art," as Rossen terms it, paraphrasing a line in the poem "Reasons for Attendance," is rare in Larkin's poetry though evocative here of Yeats [29].) These opposites are portrayed at once as a jealous and demanding mistress/taskmaster who views love as an interloper:
But, tender visiting,
Fallow as a deer or an unforced field,
How would you have me? Towards your grace
My promises meet and lock and race like rivers,
But only when you choose. Are you jealous of her?
Will you refuse to come till I have sent
Her terribly away, importantly live
Part invalid, part baby, and part saint? (CP 20)

Demonstrably, Larkin's solitary persona is conflicted,
and plagued as well by a sense of enclosure and avenues
of escape, with images of "drainpipes," "roofs," "fire-
escapes," and a "path" (CP 20). And he appears unable,
in this and future poems, to incorporate his loving,
emotionally needy self with his isolate strain, let alone
with his creative side as it clamors for reassertion.
This isolate, the speaker acknowledges, is composed of
"invalid," "baby," and "saint," and is nervously
autonomous but also self-loathing. He appears to favor
neither love nor solitude, though in kissing the woman,
he "[tips] the balance" for "shear joy," yet hardly makes
a choice. However, in the last stanza his
isolate/creative self is still formidably "tender,"
"fallow," imbued with "grace"—actually "your grace"—a
play on words indicating either self as an imperial
presence to whom he is still held in thrall. The
prognosis for the relationship is grim, and as Motion
notes of Larkin's poems in general: "the thwarting
[implicitly] negative side of the argument emerges as the strongest" (82).

Negation is unquestionably Larkin's primary idiom, and though this position is crucial to his dialectic it is seldom proffered as necessarily wise, correct, or desirable. Furthermore, through self-mocking humor and the voltage of his irony, Larkin mostly avoids what John Lucas terms the "pulpit tones" that mar some of Auden's works (161). This negative idiom infects a poem such as "Reasons for Attendance" (1953), inflating then exposing the rationalizations of its isolate speaker.

The poem's landscape is a gathering of people for the express purpose of social intercourse--a familiar landscape in Larkin's cosmos, and one rife with implications. In this case, and even at a distance, the scenario is unbearably artificial and discomfiting to the speaker who again materializes as a "bachelor persona."

The first stanza comprises a single, ominous sentence:

The trumpet's voice, loud and authoritative,
Draws me a moment to the lighted glass
To watch the dancers--all under twenty-five--
Shifting intently, face to flushed face,
Solemnly on the beat of happiness (CP 80).

The speaker is ostensibly drawn to observe the scene by the siren of a "trumpet's voice," rather than by any natural inclination on his part. There is an incongruous
solemnity about the occasion, but this, like the
pronouncement on happiness, may be subject to the
speaker's tainted impression. The speaker only assumes
the happiness of the dancers as a social imperative, and
the second and third stanzas expose conflict,
ambivalence, and transparent rationalizations:

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

Inaccuracy, as far as I'm concerned.
What calls me is that lifted, rough-tongued bell
(Art, if you like) whose individual sound
Insists I too am individual.
It speaks; I hear; others may hear as well,
(CP 80)

"The wonderful feel of girls" is a genuine, unaffected
phrase, and it undermines the interrogatory evasions that
aim to define sex as an abstraction, thereby dimming its
allure. That "couples" in their phenomenal alliances
discover the "lion's share/ Of happiness" is not so much
untrue, from the speaker's viewpoint, as it is an
"Inaccuracy." But this "Inaccuracy" could also describe
the speaker's vaunted quest for a higher calling—"(Art,
if you like)"—a parenthetical aside that betrays the
speaker's distrust of himself as well as his desperation
at labeling his lofty, obscure, alternative pursuit.
Rossen suggests:

In terms of culture, as in relation to other people, Larkin's poet figure remains separated between the poles of popular art and high art. . . he stands watching through the window with his nose pressed against the glass (104-5).

This less obvious (to my mind) nightclub/high Art dichotomy may well evoke the barriers that inevitably separate Larkin's isolate personae from the very rituals established to dispel such barriers. And within his social landscapes, Larkin stages dialogues "between opposing attitudes: sociability and singleness, work and idleness, resolution and despair," though in the last stanza of "Reasons for Attendance," Larkin's speaker appears to have a handle on the problem (Motion 82). In this rationalization, happiness has many mansions:

. . . Therefore I stay outside.
Believing this; and they maul to and fro,
Believing that; and both are satisfied,
If no one has misjudged himself. Or lied (CP 80).

Respective beliefs alone do not delineate the gulf that separates the speaker from the crowd. The only collective consciousness we can judiciously assign to the crowd is the fact of their sociability, but we can intuit much more about the speaker's motives and complexities based upon what he has revealed to us. Of course, "Both" [the speaker and the crowd] "are satisfied,/ If no one has misjudged himself. Or lied." And these closing
qualifiers overturn our assumptions about any summary statement or "last word" on the part of the speaker. At the end of the debate, he manages to reassert himself while remounting the prosaic fence.

The "beliefs" that set Larkin's speaker/persona apart from any crowd are grounded in his isolate nature. He is incapable rather than unwilling to surmount internal barriers whose origins appear to be somehow genetic, though Larkin can trace no salient cause for this effect. Death may be Larkin's "ultimate subject," but it, too, is only one dimension of his isolate vision (Pritchard 76).

As Donald Davie observes:

[Larkin] is so ready to lower his sights—to a point where artistic monuments go out of focus, no less than elemental presences and sanctities—that we begin to think he does so under pressure not from the 'age,' but only from some compulsion within himself (80; emphasis added).

This "compulsion" is effectively portrayed in "If, My Darling" (1950), whose speaker views his participation in a relationship as mired in deception. This persona brutally scrutinizes his darling's naive and woefully superficial perceptions of himself:

If my darling were once to decide
Not to stop at my eyes,
But to jump, like Alice, with floating skirt into my head,
She would find no tables and chairs,
No mahogany claw-footed sideboards,
No undisturbed embers
...

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

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

In the narrator's mental staging of events, his "darling" would be as guileless and bewildered as Carroll's Alice, descending into the nightmarish wonderland of his "head" or isolate underside. Apparently "darling" does not discern this aspect of himself, so fraught with deception is their relationship. Nor does her frame of reference compute a mind of his description, replete with "Delusions that shrink to the size of a woman's glove,
Then sicken inclusively outwards" (CP 41). His delusions enable him to enact this pantomime or coupling, to participate in cultural rituals while employing her as a kind of facade.

His participation in conventions serves to obfuscate, for her benefit, his "monkey-brown," "fish-grey" core; it does not, of course, work the same magic upon his own consciousness. And in a projected scenario, he speculates upon their relationship infected by the effluvial menace of his own soul:
She'd be stopping her ears against the incessant recital
Intoned by reality, larded with technical terms
Each one double-yolked with meaning and meaning's rebuttal:
For the skirl of that bulletin unpicks the world like a knot,
And to hear how the past is past and the future neuter
Might knock my darling off her unpriceable pivot (CP 41).

There would be no respite, in fact, from his "larded," "double-yolked" realities and his endless scrutiny of the world "unpick[ed]. . . like a knot" through a misanthropic prism. Darling's position upon her pivot is clearly "unpriceable", Larkin viewing uncomplicated ordinariness not as a fool's paradise, but as a position of enviable privilege—what he refers to in "Born Yesterday" (1954) as an "unemphasized, enthralled/catching of happiness" (CP 54).

In "If, My Darling" this early portrait of an isolate persona meditating upon his play-acting while aware of his "compulsion" previews a presence that's genetically Larkin. It is a presence which, in fact, practices deception but does not allow deception to pass without remark or to triumph, as demonstrated in "Reasons for Attendance." Deception and delusion, of course, figure prominently in romantic love, and disillusionment can signal love's demise or, at the very least, its cooling.
Larkin does not devalue love per se, and as David Timms observes of this theme: "The disappointment almost inevitably attendant upon love is caused not by anything inherent in love itself, but by our beliefs about it" (110).

In "Next, Please" (1951), Larkin cites "bad habits of expectancy" that so often undermine the future we await with an eagerness that's bound to be disappointed (CP 52). Similarly, romantic love is endowed with more than it can possibly deliver. The disappointed speaker of "Sad Steps" (1968) views the moon as a stark, natural phenomenon, "High and preposterous and separate--,

"preposterous" in its symbolic role as a designated prop in our cultivation of illusion: "Lozenge of love! Medallion of art!" (CP 169). Larkin's protest is reminiscent of Hardy's plea to "Shut out that stealing moon" whose seductive "guise" blinds lovers to mutability (Hardy, CP 201).

Though Larkin, like Hardy, is inclined toward ". . . bring[ing] the blinds firmly down on the pathetic fallacies of romantic moonlight and dark, Keatsean scents," he knows that such severe positivism is no solution (Paulin 92). At the end of "Sad Steps," Larkin merges the moon's illusory, romantic symbolism with its
purely scientific context, conceding that the moon:

Is a reminder of the strength and pain
Of being young; that it can't come again,
But is for others undiminished somewhere (CP 169).

This modulated closure supports Grubb's observation that
"[Larkin's] structures . . . convict through intonation
and bearing rather than explain themselves through
repetition" (233). The speaker here acknowledges that
illusion is an integral part of the life cycle, and if
his clarity of vision has occluded his own potential,
"it" awaits "others undiminished somewhere." In Larkin's
sphere, illusion gives hostages to fortune.

Larkin's wariness of illusion is not so much a trait of
misanthropic vision as it is the result of a battle-
scarred humanism. As Whalen argues:

Being disillusioned, as the lives of Larkin's
skeptical speakers clearly demonstrate, is not a
guarantee of happiness; . . . it is the view of
Johnson in 'The Vanity of Human Wishes' and
Larkin. . . that while illusions are sometimes
comforting, they also have a tendency to compound
misery and increase the spiritual squalor of life.
. . . Illusions can as readily create human
suffering and unbridled desires as they can create
warm dreams. A source of surplus human
unhappiness, they need to be diminished (40).

Larkin's sometimes brutal insistence upon dispelling
illusion is therefore grounded in an oblique but valid
compassion. In their soliloquies, his personae attempt
pre-emptive strikes against loss and disillusionment,
though avoidance is more often their last option. Nevertheless, Larkin's poems generally employ an emphatic vitality rather than tones of sterile or morose surrender. The novelist Martin Amis writes: "The clinching paradox may be . . . that Larkin will survive as a romantic poet, an exponent of the ironic romance of exclusion or inversion" (48).

One vivid example of this inverse romanticism is "High Windows" (1967), in which Larkin's persona views contemporary sexual mores from the perspective of a dislocated observer debating a personal paradox:

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

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

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

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

Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:
[t/o]
The sun-comprehending glass,
And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows
Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless (CP 165).
The profane colloquialism of the first stanza is countered by the speaker's solemn reflections on a devalued past of "Bonds and gestures pushed to one side."
The illusory paradise of sexual license is affirmed by the speaker's recalling that his own generation, liberated from comparatively quaint religious conventions, were also viewed as undeservedly fortunate: "Like free bloody birds."

The successive, generational dreams or illusions cancel each other out. The facile prognosis for either group, that "That'll be the life" omits mention of the inevitable hardships that disqualify any single life from the utopian. In "High Windows," the pivotal issue of sex as boding a one-dimensional paradise is naturally dismissed by Larkin, who views it as perhaps the most seductive, barren illusion of all. As Blake Morrison observes: "Larkin is not priggish about sex... nor does he present sex as a pleasure, swelling instead on post-coital disillusion" (181). In "Dry Point" (1950), Larkin supplants the afterglow of sex with "sad scapes we cannot turn from then: / What ashen hills, what salted, shrunken lakes!" (CP 37). In "Deceptions" (1950), sex is characterized as "fulfillment's desolate attic," indicating a longing on the part of Larkin's isolate
personae that both eludes fulfillment and ironically regards sex as significantly more (or less) than a loving, mutual exchange.

The final stanza of "High Windows" seems attenuated in a radical linguistic departure from the rest of the poem. It is in a sense a conscious diverging from the temporal landscape portrayed in the first four stanzas. To Barbara Everett, the closing lines betray a Symbolist influence that Larkin (nominally, at least) had taken pains to avoid in his work. She argues that Larkin's "deep blue air" evokes "l'azur" as

\[\ldots\text{Mallarme's most consistent and philosophical symbol, delineating both the necessity and the absence of the ideal, an ideal which we imprint on the void sky by the intensity of our longing (239).}\]

Larkin's speaker acknowledges that "thought" replaces "words," which fail to adequately depict human longing. In affixing this nameless "ideal" to the "deep blue air," Larkin further implies that this longing is infinite, inexpressible, and perhaps eternally elusive as well: "Nothing," "nowhere," and "endless." This hybrid of the colloquial and the transcendent also demonstrates "how peculiarly explicit and secret at once Larkin's art is" (Everett 252).
In their tendencies toward withdrawal, and their distrust of the most elemental human relationships, Larkin's personae achieve a kind of exalted status. Their flights from pain, and their waiving of involvement in the messier aspects of human interaction bespeak a profound denial of life. They have little recourse but to transform themselves into citadels impervious to the sustaining illusions of others. But as Motion observes, there lurks the "...unavoidable danger that the stronghold of the self will become walled with egoism as it battles to survive" (63). This egoism also permeates Larkin's view of domesticity, even in his more lyrical evocations of the rituals attending marriage and the family--sacrosanct fixtures in the social landscape.

In "Dockery and Son" (1963), Larkin synergizes an isolate speaker with the issue of parentage. In this treatment, the "stronghold self" confronts its apparently mutant nature, resulting in a helpless rage. The poem opens with a blandly casual tone, the speaker discussing his former college days with a Dean, who mentions that a contemporary of the speaker's ("Dockery was junior to you, wasn't he?") currently has a son attending the college (CP 152). The "Death suited, visitant" speaker barely responds to this unsolicited information,
recalling instead his own participation in innocuous college pranks, or "incidents" (CP 152). The poem's tone shifts notably in the second stanza, however, when the speaker finds his former lodgings firmly "Locked," his past negotiable and forever fixed.

On the train ride home, as "Canal and clouds and colleges subside/ Slowly from view. . ." the speaker focuses upon the obscured image of " . . . Dockery, good Lord," (CP 152). Dockery's forgettable, undergrad presence ("Was he that withdrawn/ High collared public-schoolboy?") did not imply posterity, legacy, or the audacious groping at mortality embodied by the fact of his son (CP 152). The speaker dozes off, waking to change trains at industrial Sheffield where he eats an "awful pie" (CP 152). Clearly attuned to detail in this interim pause at a train station, his thoughts coalesce to draw a comparison between his own life and Dockery's as he walks along.

. . .

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

Unhindered moon. To have no son, no wife,
No house or land seemed quite natural.
Only a numbness registered the shock
Of finding out how much had gone of life,
How widely from the others. Dockery, now:
Only nineteen, he must have taken stock
Of what he wanted, and been capable
Of. . . No, that's not the difference: rather,
Convinced he was he should be added to!
Why did he think adding meant increase?
To me it was dilution. Where do these
Innate assumptions come from? Not from what
We think truest, or most want to do:
Those warp tight-shut, like doors. They're more a
style
Our lives bring with them: habit for a while,
Suddenly, they harden into all we've got
And how we got it; looked back on, they rear
Like sand-clouds, thick and close, embodying
For Dockery a son, for me nothing
Nothing with all a son's harsh patronage.
Life is first boredom, then fear.
Whether or not we use it, it goes,
And leaves what something hidden from us chose,
And age, and then the only end of age (CP 152-3).

The speaker's realization of the "parting lines" between
himself and Dockery, of the unrenewable nature of time,
of what "had gone from life," inspires his meditation
upon the unknowable factors that govern a life. There is
less a sense of grief in his having "no son, no wife"
than there is a sense of exasperated ignorance about what
is choice and what is pre-determined. The speaker
rejects the concept of a nineteen-year-old Dockery having
"taken stock/ Of what he wanted, and been capable of . . ."
and the egoism of the isolate speaker reacts
violently to Dockery's supposed conviction that "he
[Dockery] should be added to!" In the speaker's eyes,
paternity looms as a "dilution" of the stronghold that is
his own persona; at the same time, he views Dockery's
reproductive adventure as reprehensible egoism, an outrageous kind of "innate assumption."

Rossen argues that "The basic opposition which Larkin creates is between the individual self and marriage and domestic life," and "Dockery and Son" specifically examines the inability of this "individual self" (i.e., isolate persona) to partake in yet another elemental union. For want of more appropriate terms, the speaker characterizes our "innate assumptions" as matters of "style" and "habit" which "harden into all we've got."
The sources of these predilections are inchoate, however: "they harden," "they rear," "embodying/ For Dockery, a son," for the speaker, "nothing" (emphasis added).

In "The Life with a Hole in It" (1974) the speaker ponders accusations of selfishness ("But you've always done what you want,/ You always get your own way") as the governing factor in his isolate life (CP 202). In his mental debate, the unnameable determinism of "Dockery and Son" resurfaces here, also:

Life is an immobile, locked,
Three-handed struggle between
Your wants, the world's for you, and (worse)
The unbeatable slow machine
That brings what you'll get . . . (CP 202)

The "unbeatable slow machine" evokes Cocteau's universe of the "Machine Infernale" as portending death, but it
also parallels the "something hidden" that agonizes the speaker of "Dockery and Son." In "The View" (1972), written some ten years after "Dockery and Son," yet another speaker comments on his apartness, his "Unchilded and unwifed" state (CP 195), supporting Rossen's observation:

> The extraordinary vividness of the anger which drives many of Larkin's poems suggests not only energy but ingenuity; he seems able to keep his anger alive and vibrant for several decades, and to make it yield poetry (140).

Anger is an energizing feature of Larkin's worldview, but its focus is the random injustice of a dystopian universe. The speaker of "Dockery and Son" verges on animosity toward Dockery, but he judiciously aims his wrath elsewhere, away from "victimized ordinary humanity" (Whalen 80). At the same time, Larkin recognizes social constructs as existing in order to contain or deflect universal chaos, but he is also aware of the exclusionary dimensions of a construct such as marriage.

In "To My Wife" (1951) Larkin views matrimony as an incomprehensibly reckless casting of lots—"Another way of suffering, a risk, / A heavier-than-air hypostasis" (CP 54). The wary (and in this case, retrospective) egoism of Larkin's persona also argues that the choosing of a partner "shuts up that peacock-fan/ The future was" (CP 46).
54). It is an infantile consciousness, however, that argues against commitment, defining the future as "unlimited/ Only so long as I elected nothing" (CP 54). There is an acknowledgment on the part of the speaker that he has somehow compromised his partner, that the "boredom" and "failure" that he might have courted elsewhere are now personified in his wife (CP 54).

In "Marriages" (1951), Larkin vilifies those who insist upon marriage regardless of their own self-absorption or of other, more outrageous defects as "Frog-marched by old need/ They chaffer for a partner" (CP 63). Such ill-suited couples "Strike strange bargains" (CP 63), and Larkin portrays a gallery of marital misfits:

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Adder-faced singularity
Espouses a nailed-up childhood,
Skin-disease pardons
Soft horror of living,
A gabble is forgiven
By chronic solitude (CP 63).
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Such ruthless caricatures also betray the speaker's acute awareness of his own flaws. At the poem's close, the speaker perceives a kind of pitiable equity about the process, noting that each couple, engaged in their grotesque folie a deux, has stumbled upon a proper niche: "So they are gathered in;/ So they are not wasted" (CP 64). Such individuals would be wasted in solitude,
lacking as they do the speaker's "intelligent rancour" and "integrity of self-hatred"—resources essential toward fulfillment of his singular, isolate destiny (CP 64). For Larkin's persona, the "dichotomy between union and individuation" is a no-win contest between desire and inclination (Rossen 93).

On the surface, Larkin credits his isolates with far more savvy—"Thinking in terms of one/... Makes perfect sense"—than he grants his wedded figures (CP 108). This is evident in his portrayals of domesticity as a mire or clutter of trappings, a compulsion toward trivial, material diversions: of "kiddies' clobber and the drier/And the electric fire," of "cluttered-up houses" harboring "thick lives" (CP 51, 117). In "Here" (1961), Larkin records a litany of objects meant to depict domestic acquisitiveness: "Cheap suits, red kitchen-ware, sharp shoes, iced lollies,/Electric mixers, toasters, washers, driers—/A cut-price crowd" (CP 136). Such associations correctly place marriage in an economic context, and the "cut-price" crowd suggests class boundaries as well. But there are no organic distinctions between Larkin's personae and such a "crowd." Even in their reductionism, his isolates are not devoid of tokens, possessions, or symbols which
comfort and insulate. In "Poetry of Departures" the narrator gripes:

I detest my room,
Its specially-chosen junk,
The good books, the good bed,
And my life, in perfect order. . . (CP 85)

And the isolate voice in "Counting" (1955) remarks on the tedium of a solitude bulwarked by "One room, one bed, one chair, / One person there. . ." (CP 108).

Despite their egoism, Larkin's isolates occupy no high moral ground, nor are their domestic circumstances necessarily the equivalent of a monk's cell. But attached to his domestic themes, Larkin's commercial imagery underlines materialism as a meretricious pursuit. Furthermore, the insularity of any domestic milieu cannot forestall the "coming dark," and recalling the infinite "deep blue air" of "High Windows," Larkin's isolate personae crave an "unfenced existence:/ Facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach" (CP 193, 137).

In "The Whitsun Weddings" (1958) Larkin's speaker gradually achieves a delicate union with the players who inhabit the poem's social landscape. As in "Dockery and Son" the train/depot settings evoke interjecting lives and transitory visions that address communal bonds. Throughout the poem, Larking modulates the train's speed in accordance with the actions taking place, lending
subtle rhythms to his spacious stanzas. As the speaker boards on a "sunlit Saturday," for instance, he loses all "sense/ Of being in a hurry" as the train begins its course (CP 114). Larkin's lyricism is not exclusionary, admitting as it does his visions of the picturesque and the squalid: "Wide farms went by, short-shadowed cattle, and/ Canals with floatings of industrial froth" (CP 114). Donald Davie argues that Larkin displays a "... level-toned acceptance of [this] England as the only one we have, violated and subtopianized and poisoned as it is" (66). This representational view reinforces the impression that Larkin's foremost concern is people in relation to their surroundings. In "The Whitsun Weddings," "natural" imagery is consequently a part of the "framing" process surrounding the poem's central stanzas with their focus on human concerns.

At first, Larkin's observer is typically unmindful of the presence of the wedding parties, mistaking celebratory "whoops and skirls" on the depot's platforms "for porters larking with the mails" as he continues his solitary "reading" (CP 114). To Everett, the speaker's "perception is indissociable from the understanding of human loneliness," even though he sporadically uses the first person plural "we" in associating himself with
other passengers (253). Recognizing one wedding party's
"grinning and pomaded" men, along with "girls/ In
parodies of fashion, heels and veils," he is "struck" by
the phenomenon (CP 115). Seeing "it all again in
different terms" at the next station, he observes:

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

Marked off the girls unreally from the rest

Larkin's punning on "broad belts" and "seamy foreheads"
implies a sordid, artificial hilarity; he also perceives
the "girls" as rather dehumanized by their synthetic
embellishments, the "perms," "jewellery substitutes," and
"nylon gloves" recalling the "cut-price crowd" of the
poem "Here." The girls' characterizations in terms of
"things" and frou-frou also echo Larkin's habitual
listings of domestic clutter.

The speaker's critical, satirical eye is modified as he
notes that others react as well to the world and its
events:

... as we moved, 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;
While girls, gripping their handbags tighter, stared 

At a religious wounding... (CP 115)

"Reactions" are hardly the same as "perceptions," and the speaker is clearly more attuned than the "children," "fathers," or "women," but he approaches "an appreciation of the interrelatedness" of himself with "common humanity" (Whalen 80). The speaker cannot resist sly analogies, however. In comparing the weddings with a "happy funeral" and a "religious wounding," he implies both the replacement of generations and religion's overt sanctioning of the surrender of self.

In the following lines, the speaker draws a distinction between himself and the boarding couples: "Free at last,/ And loaded with the sum of all they saw,/ We hurried towards London..." (CP 115) Ostensibly, the speaker's experience, history, and values do not parallel those of the couples or "they," nor has any bond with them occurred until this coincidental journey--"this frail,/ Travelling coincidence"--toward their mutually exclusive lives (CP 116).

Unlike this speaker and the lamenting speaker/husband of "To My Wife," the flushed couples in "The Whitsun Weddings" are not presently distracted by "Thought of the others they would never meet/ Or how their lives would
all contain this hour" (CP 116). But typically for Larkin, these incidents, these "dozen marriages" are ripe with implications, results, and all manners of consequences: "ready to be loosed with all the power/ That being changed can give" (CP 116). The speaker's "sense of falling, like an arrow shower" evokes a wary feel for destiny, for separation, and for lives diverging "out of sight" (CP 116). The transmutation of the arrows into a lilting "rain" implies both fertility and ruin, with each marital union positing a risky, pivotal circumstance (CP 116).

In Whalen's view, "The Whitsun Weddings" demonstrates Larkin's "ability not only imaginatively to participate in the unity, but also to praise the beauty of the commonplace in spite of concerns about its frailty. . ." (90-1) Matters of illusion and deception are present in the poem, though they do not obviate events as they do in other works. But even though the tone of the speaker is conciliatory and even reverent, such affirmative flashes, as Motion points out, do not make Larkin a "covertly optimistic poet" (72). His poems depend upon the unifying consciousness of their speakers, and to whatever extent their complexities and moods might dominate.
The participation of these personae in the institutional rituals that comprise social landscapes (with the possible exception of work) is always qualified and usually achieved through a combination of intellect and the imagination. Larkin's essentially tragic view, therefore, is that of one who insists on participating in spite of what he knows about the world and himself. Of T. E. Hulme, whose philosophy influenced the course of the Movement, critic Michael Roberts writes:

The tragic view recognizes from the beginning all those facts that lead to disappointment and bitterness, and therefore it leaves room for a gaiety that is not at the mercy of circumstances (231).

Despite his tragic vision, Larkin's poetic dialogues do not exclude the heroic or the comic; he does not deny us our "threadbare perspectives" (CP 73).
WORKS CITED


