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Different From Himself: Reading Philip

Larkin After Modernism

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ABSTRACT:

This thesis addresses the work of Philip Larkin in the light of critical positions, stemming from mainly modernist perspectives, which characterize it as the opposite of what counts as innovatory, experimental and progressive in twentieth-century poetry. It aims to critique this assumption without, however, trying to prove that Larkin's work is modernist or experimental. Rather, understanding 'form' in modernism as an entity that resists subjectivity and ostensibly includes otherness within its self-reflexive boundaries, it aims to offer readings of Larkin's work that do not begin from these parameters but from an understanding of otherness as relational. Additionally, it gives extended consideration to Larkin's prose with the aim of initiating a reconsideration of Larkin's contribution to literature in English from a perspective that includes the essays and the novels.

My introduction sets out the reasons and precedents for thinking about otherness in Larkin's work in a different way from that found in modernism-inclined literary criticism. I show that such criticism diagnoses an aesthetic regression in Larkin's poems on the basis that they rely on the projection of personality rather than the foregrounding of form. I argue that recent critical work on modernism privileges form because of its ostensible ability to present otherness in art, but that this critical heuristic is inadequate for dealing with Larkin's work. I then outline an alternative more suited to Larkin's work: a way of conceptualising otherness that locates it in the relation of the work to subjectivities external to it (such as readers'), which, I argue, is not susceptible of capture through what is designated as 'form'. The first chapter attends closely to the theme of failure to relate to otherness in Larkin's two novels; I argue that it is this failure that Larkin's fictions meditate on by creating fantasized love-objects that their protagonists desire and yet seek to arrest in non-response and self-identity. Building on this, the second chapter examines Larkin's polemical deployment of the idea of 'pleasure' as what the reader coming from a position of otherness to the art is entitled to seek in it. Comparing Larkin's position with Adorno's in *Aesthetic Theory*, a major twentieth-century work on aesthetics in the capitalist age, I try to locate Larkin's difference from Adorno and develop the perspective he offers in his essays and poems to show that it allows readers to approach literary writing without being constrained by formal prescriptions.

The last three chapters are studies of three themes that have been the focus of special attention in Larkin criticism: subjective voice, place and death. In the third chapter, I argue that Larkin's poetry makes use of (what I identify as) a 'Romantic' register that is undercut by a 'personal' one. I do this by examining how a Romantic voice – one that constructs the self and projects it into the world in symbolic and lyrical forms – is at odds with a personal voice which sees these forms as prisons. The result, I argue, is an art that explores the idea of being 'different from oneself'. Chapter four, on the significance of place in Larkin, argues that while he does subscribe to certain notions of belonging to England, and more importantly, to the idea of belonging as a poetic imperative, he also problematizes what belonging means, treating it not as identification with a place, but as an unsettled and sometimes defamiliarizing relation with it. The last chapter, on the theme of death in Larkin's work, shows that it uses 'death' not as a fixed point of annihilation, but one that moves backwards and forwards in life, informing its sense of possibility, and constituting an experience of something that is always present and yet always beyond experience.

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I verify that I composed this thesis which consists of my own work and has not been previously submitted for any other degree or qualification.

Sarah Humayun

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Introduction: Larkin after Modernism

Writing in 2002, the poet and critic Peter McDonald repeats and extends what is a recognisable gesture in discussions of British poetry that see its future ‘development’ as being tied to an advance on the ‘Movement style’ that Philip Larkin exemplifies. He offers a characterisation of Larkin’s poetry through a reading of ‘High Windows’. Designating Larkin’s work as an inheritance passed on to the ‘short lyric poem in Britain in contemporary writing’, he enumerates the items of the bequest as follows:

Such a poem will be in the first person (at least to begin with);... it will tell some sort of anecdote or story, and point out the irony of the situation it describes; finally, it will find an image or images that transcend the situation, and that constitute an unspecific, apparently secular, epiphany. The poem will cultivate a knowing irony in relation to everything but its own control of language. If such a poem succeeds, the reader will remember most of all the appeal of the personality projected there, and be able to identify with it, as with a character on stage or screen. The poem’s seriousness, as well as its humour, will relate finally to the ‘personality’; the poet will have put him- or herself into words, and the words will bring the poet vividly to life. We will be able to identify with this poetry, and see our life in its life. (9)

Against this, McDonald urges the claim of a poetry that calls on ‘form for authority’, and not personality, which brings him up against the question of who might be the acknowledger of form’s authority: ‘Who are “we”? ... When are “we”? (9-10) To place the different ‘us’ that he has in mind, he quotes at length from Geoffrey Hill¹

¹ From ‘Dividing Legacies’ 27-8.

complaining that he is 'effectively excluded' by this 'complacent locution' of common taste (10). Hill presupposes, McDonald explains, 'formal qualities in writing to which "the common reader" can indeed respond', and 'no intermediary agents of "opinion" through whom alone poems can communicate to the reader: poetry itself, in its own resources of form and expressive language, its 'intrinsic qualities', is capable of setting up the resonance with the reader on which all such art finally depends' (11).

Though generous to the common reader in investing in him or her the ability to respond to 'formal qualities', McDonald turns the guns sometimes reserved for him on the critics that create "the great consensus of opinion" and stigmatise poets that are 'less forthcoming, less complaisantly accommodating and pleasantly affirmative' than the 'widely read poets' (11). Someone, in short, is guilty of the opinion that good poetry allows 'ease with which readers [can] overlay it with transparencies of their own preference', although it is no longer certain who that 'someone' is, whether he can be confidently located within the academy or amongst the 'reading public'. This 'someone' is intent on enforcing the rules of good literary behaviour by calling poets to account for exhibiting too much learning and high culture, but cannot help showing his blindness to 'the uncontrollable difficulty and complexity of language' (14).

McDonald's position is a complex and not untenable one, and it will be one of my aims to show in this study that the 'question of Larkin' is an important one for poetry, particularly for British poetry, because it is both an example of and problem for the kind of charge that McDonald lays against it. That Larkin's poetry can be read in this way is evident in not only McDonald's treatment of him but also in others'; but to read

Larkin's poetry in just this way is also to place oneself in a position that misses the problem posed by that poetry, a problem that is misidentified in terms purely of verbal or formal properties. Accordingly, one of the principal aims of this dissertation will be to interrogate the *identification* of Philip Larkin's work as exemplary of the anti-modernist and anti-formalist current within British poetry. Doing this, I believe, allows me to examine in a different light some of the key assumptions that lie behind the counter-identification of modernism as providing a set of artistic choices which allows poetry to move forwards, to become the medium of possibility, the privileged mode of the unfolding of newness and otherness. The search for such a poetry has tended to cast Larkin's work as its opposite number.² My argument would be that not only does this strategy give rise in itself to monomaniacal readings that seek to reduce poetry to either progressive or non-progressive, serious or non-serious (or whatever other terms are being used to stage the conflict between regressive and forward-looking); but that it does not allow a properly reflective attention to Larkin's own work. In order to do this, I will offer readings of Larkin's novels, poems and prose that do not attempt to fit his work to

²Some writings stand out in the on-going critical project of carving out an antimodernist niche for the Movement and Larkin's work as a particular instance of it. One of the earliest is Charles Tomlinson's 'Rock Bottom' and 'The Middlebrow Muse', reviews of Robert Conquest's anthology *New Lines* in 1956. Hugh Kenner, influential writer of *Ulysses* and *The Pound Era*, took a dim view of the damage done by the Movement to vital modernist energies in *A Sinking Island: The Modern British Writers*. Peter Barry and Robert Hampson seek to extend the argument and the battlelines from Kenner's and Davie's "'moderate modernism'" to "'hard" modernism' (3, 4), which ups the level of difficulty even more and redistributes blame for neglect from the demand to the production side, to the business of publishing. They identify the obstacle as the Movement having become the 'official poetry' of the 50s by using influential social contacts. 'Where the modernist movement (and the British Poetry Revival later) forged its identity through "little magazines", "the Movement" concentrated on the weekly periodicals – the *Spectator*, the *Listener*, the *New Statesman* – which immediately gave access to a larger audience' (New British Poetries 6). In the same collection ('The British Poetry Revival') Eric Mottram extols the lesson of Ezra Pound as consisting of 'a variety of formal procedures released from inherited forms and their radical transformation' (23-4), and consistently enlists the Movement writers as the 'axis' and 'official poetry'.

literary classifications like Romanticism and modernism but to examine the work at an oblique and tensed angle to such classifications. So, for instance, it is not exactly whether or not Larkin's work is demonstrably anti-modernist that interests me but the use that has been made of modernist ideas to find the deprivation that his works signify. This procedure, I hope, clears the ground to some extent towards finding ways of reading the work that allow its singularity to emerge. One of my secondary aims is to distribute attention more evenly between the three genres to which he contributed, redressing an imbalance to be found in other critical work on Larkin.

Modernism in the sense that I am interested in presents itself in two key claims, though these should not be taken as exhaustive of the concept. It presents form, and the auto-instituting action of form, as the counterweight to subjectivity; and it presents form (in the sense it takes as relevant) as fragmented and discontinuous, first at the level of abstaining from the kind of unity that is usually taken to signify a central or unified consciousness articulating itself as a distinct person, and, second, abstaining from coherence and consequentiality taken to be definitive of the 'self'. Both these features are, in addition, often claimed to present otherness, externality or concreteness in the space of the poem. Their presence is a code for the non-subjective.

However, in positioning Larkin's work as the self-identified other of modernism, I do not wish to follow David Lodge in his use of the label 'antimodernism' to defend

the work of the Movement writers in *Modernism, Antimodernism and Postmodernism*³.

Antimodernist writing, he writes,

continues the tradition modernism reacted against. It believes that traditional realism, suitably modified to take account of changes in human knowledge and material circumstances, is still viable and valuable. Antimodernist art does not aspire to the condition of music; rather it aspires to the condition of history. Its prose does not approximate to poetry; rather its poetry approximates to prose. It regards literature as the communication of a reality that exists prior to and independent of the act of communication.(4)

While I find the description he offers is useful and illuminating, it has the demerit of defining the kind of writing Larkin practises as a neat reversal and seeming reaction to modernism. Modernism becomes indexical, while in itself it absorbs the ‘new’ in thought and art – for Lodge, writing in 1977, this is poststructuralist ideas of language, which he describes modernism to have chanced upon before its time, as it were (3).

Offering a justification for this procedure, he says:

Each mode [of writing] operates according to different and identifiable formal principles, and it is therefore pointless to judge one kind of writing by criteria derived from another. To make such distinctions clear, even if it does involve a certain amount of jargon, seems to me to be the proper aim of studying literature in an academic context, one that is ultimately of service to writers, inasmuch as it broadens the receptivity of readers. (13)

What obtrudes from beneath the effort to take account of the difference of antimodernism here is the professional imperative to find a rationale for a classificatory literary criticism which, by virtue of separating the ‘formal principles’ of different kinds of writing, provides a practical service to the reader in as much as it provides him or her

³See also Lodge’s ‘The Modern, the Contemporary and the Importance of Being Amis’ and ‘The Metonymic Muse’. Also see Keith Tuma and Nate Dorward’s “Modernism and anti-Modernism in British poetry”, which posits the same distinction on the basis of a more historicist analysis.

cues to response. (Interestingly, however, Lodge comments at the end of the lecture that his own fictional writing contains elements of all three formal principles.) As I shall discuss in chapter two, Larkin was well aware of the politics of ‘readers’ receptivity’, more accurately called judgement of readers, and the impact of a classificatory criticism which is harnessed to defining formal principles and movements. As pay-off it offers readers a method of progressing in, and through, their experience of art. As I will show, the attack Larkin mounts against this heuristic is ironic and provocative, and provides a counterpoint not only to the Leavisite-New Critical idiom of reader-judgement but also to more recent excoriation of the reader construed as a consumer.

Lodge’s approach is reflective of a broader problematic in literary critical writing which forces the re-theorisation of the same classificatory terms – postmodernism, postcolonialism, performance theory, etc – in the light of the latest intellectual and cultural investments. These terms, as I have said, are useful, but I believe that a more fruitful approach can be to map the relation of the work to the other that reveals its form – the reader, the critic – rather than provides a description of the work that locates its effectivity in form. In this study, then, I shall treat Larkin not as an antimodernist but what (some forms of) modernism treat as their other, and I shall take this identification and the ways in which Larkin’s work responds to it or evades it, as opening up possibilities of reading that can best be described as relational.

In the rest of this introduction, I first discuss the use that has been made of form as an antisubjective entity that institutes aesthetic response, for the reason that this conception of form is deployed to negatively identify ‘personality’ as a figure that codes

coherent self-limitation and self-mastery. I then consider further implications of looking to form for providing an opening to radical otherness, which, in this line of critique, Larkin's figure of 'personality' is similarly taken to forestall. I shall then suggest a different idea of relational form and argue for the formally unchartable effect of the presentation of self, which I consider to be a necessary prelude to my own readings of Larkin's work.

II

McDonald's advocacy of form does not take into account the possibility that the reader who is trusted to recognise the authority of form may respond to it in Larkin's poems as well. This is not simply an omission: McDonald suggests that we read Larkin for what is 'rather than words' ('High Windows', *Complete Poems* 80). Though this other-than-words is on the page in words, in Larkin's case verbal form does not nag on the reader's attention, though it is not absent; in fact it is good enough never to leave the reader unsure of what he is reading – a poem. But because Larkin's reader is free to not engage with form in the modernist sense I outline above, he is placed straightaway outside the power of words and within the power of persona, the power of the mask of the person. Form in Larkin cannot be elevated to a line of inquiry or deployed at a displaced angle to the poem, the sort of angle that creates the space between word and line on the one hand and a willed authorial presence on the other in which critical reading can launch itself. Robert Sheppard takes up a similar stance when he diagnoses the 'paradox: the Movement will towards transparent discourse [which he, too, takes to be epitomised by Larkin], of "backgrounded" form, suppresses the artifice of its construction, draws the

reader's attention away from form towards content, in this case the all-important speaking origin of the poem' (Sheppard 25). This connection between the invisibility of form enabling the visibility of the speaker echoes similar charges made by Anthony Easthope and Andrew Crozier.⁴

The assertion that form is backgrounded in this manner is in one way clearly refuted by the evidence offered by critical readings of Larkin's work, many of which attend to the complexity of his formal structures, for instance those by Christopher Ricks, Barbara Everett, Edna Longley, Seamus Heaney, Deborah Cameron, John Osborne and Mark Rowe, to name a few whose work I shall draw on in the chapters that follow. But still: the assertion that form is silent in Larkin's work while persona speaks far too much does capture an aspect of the poetry that, from a modernism-centred point of view, appears as a disability or a regression. Larkin's poetic forms, complicated in themselves as they are, do not operationalize form in the same way as does the modernist idea of form which provides the background music to McDonald's poetic commitments.

In seeking to understand the provenance of the modernist idea of form as autonomous and fragmentary, Peter Howarth has recently argued that the modernist conception of form derives from the Romantic notion of the fragment as developed in the work of Fredrich Schlegel:

As individual fragment, its fragmentation is permanent; that is, it is free from any possible subsumption by some exterior overarching philosophical system, making it merely a particular instance of a general law [...] As a fragment, it is

⁴ See Crozier 'Thrills and Frills: Poetry as Figures of Empirical Lyricism', and Easthope, *Poetry as Discourse*.

something incomplete, and yet its necessary incompleteness means exactly that nothing outside itself can subsume it, since that would be to complete it within a larger whole. The free incompleteness of the fragment, however, is also Schlegel's model for the free and open system of the perfect work of art[.] (448)

A poetics of fragments, of discontinuous form, claims to be one which excludes closure, which always keeps the possibility of the infinite and unpredictable open by never specifying the relation between one formal element and another, and letting no one dominate the other.⁵ However, in practice the fragment is not bound to support this pattern of relation because free incompleteness is difficult if not impossible to maintain. Elevated to a principle, it shifts a dynamic state to a fixed one; the *necessity* to maintain incompleteness arrests the mobility of relation between discrete elements. In practice, then, we are left with a pragmatic or ideological privileging of either completion or incompleteness to obtain something identifiable as 'the' form of the poem. Form then becomes the name not of the unpredictable and resonant mobility of meaning but the representation of the idea of such mobility through more or less predictable devices. Howarth's work underlines that this instability in the way fragmentary form operates is modernism's inheritance from Romanticism,⁶ and that the enlistment of the radical

⁵ See for an elaboration of this view, Simon Malpas's 'Form, Reflection, Disclosure: Literary Aesthetics and Contemporary Criticism'.

⁶ Noting Friedrich Schlegel's (author of *Fragments*, 1798) 'switch from radical democrat to craven pro-Hapsburg monarchist', Howarth asserts that the difficulty that we face reconciling the political significance of poetry with poetic practice derives from 'the way that the fragment-form has been recuperated for our own time as an aesthetico-political model of the truly open work. Its broken and suspended nature has become the antidote to the autotelic, self-completed poetics of the symbol, and a medium of resistance to any overriding or transcendental system. By being that which escapes completion, the fragment is never subject to the rule of any all-embracing unity; instead, its discontinuous collage expresses both the pathos of unredeemable trauma or exile, and the modern city's shocking, resistant, untotalisable freedom. Its theoretical-formal impact is widely evident in modern art, from conceptual installations to open form poetry, indeed in the very idea of valuing the 'experimental'[...] But exploring the volatile ethics and politics of Schlegel's original fragment-system

freedom of the individual form into a radical poetics can be seen as part of this legacy; it also opens up the question of whether the weight placed on untotalizable form always leads to a poetics of radically free meaning.

What relevance does this have to the kind of formal authority that McDonald sees undermined by the notion of personality? In claiming that in serious poetry it is form alone which is able to elicit a response McDonald is not apparently claiming that such poetry is an individual, perfect form; but he is saying that the formal principle, which is in abeyance in a poetry centred around a unified subject, speaks alone and with one voice -- with the voice of seriousness that commands assent -- and that this principle ought to be dominant in serious poetry 'now'. Furthermore, he claims that form, though possessing singular authority, is not -- or, in a good poem, should not be -- transparent, immediately given over to a singular meaning; nor should it be univocal, its meaning controlled by the figure of the autonomous person. Personality, in this account, is the formal manifestation of completion, while 'authority of form' represents the principle of free incompleteness -- but itself elevated to a singular principle governing response. The lack of seriousness of Larkin's poetry is evident in the way it uses a single voice and point of view to make the labour of identifying the work of form -- the meaning created by and subsisting in the inter-relation of units of meaning -- redundant.

goes some way to explaining ... why the poem's form provides such an unsafe ground for postmodern hopes of finding a radically democratic, open aesthetic in it ('Eliot in the underworld' 444).

Recent scholarship in modernist studies has only emphasised modernism's reliance on an idea of form derived from a Romantic aesthetics of individual form.⁷ It is the common thread running through the 'idiom both collective and capable of individuation: an identifiable, distinctive and serviceable language', as Lawrence Rainey has described modernist practice (*Revisiting the Waste Land* 80). Modernism, Rainey's work suggests, is an idiom that is not wedded to particular works or genres falling within a temporal continuum and can be used to characterise works that are not apparently united by any single stylistic feature. However, the use of the term itself creates a history for the new to position itself within, a link with the tradition of 'experiment' and history-making in the arts: 'A central aspect of Modernism was the way that singular works implied a lineage and a legacy, the way even a unique "experiment" suggested a common project' (Levenson 152). Indeed, this tradition has been invoked in relation to Larkin's own work as well, most notably by Barbara Everett ('Philip Larkin: After Symbolism') and by John Osborne. In *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence: A Case of Wrongful Conviction* the latter claims that 'Larkin is as much critiquing as assimilating Modernism, not least for backsliding from its own

⁷ The identification of the modernist 'new' in form in this manner, which can then be historicised or 'theorised', is an important strategy in modernist studies. To take two recent examples from many: Stephen Kern writes in *The Modernist Novel*, 'modernism is primarily a new way of seeing and interpreting the world, and narrative forms are the literary manifestations of those ways. This focus requires an analysis of literary form in contrast to literary content' (2). Peter Nicholls, whose treatment of modernism is complex and interesting, still finds that it is 'mystical indeterminacies' that 'propel us toward the larger matter of discontinuity as a founding principle of modernist poetics, for it is in this that the new decisively announces itself...Here most clearly the force of the new is to be felt not just in the content of the poem's materials but in the form itself, as a dislocation and disordering of syntax. This is what Eliot has in mind when he says that "poets in our civilization . . . must be difficult"' (58); '[T]he idea that the "new" is a form at once alien and destructive appears in other versions of modernist poetics which more deliberately divest themselves of any dependence on the traditional and the canonical' ('The Poetics of Modernism' 60). See also Marjorie Perloff's 'The Aura of Modernism', especially p.3.

revolutionary ideology' (24). In this strategy, the poet's own stance towards his work is set aside and the aesthetic significance of the work is located in form. Rita Felski makes this point about the enabling power of the modernist conception of form when she says:

[T]he plasticity of artistic form may allow it to resist [...] power, to set language askew or to estrange us from habitual schemas. Poststructuralist theories have helped breathe new life into the study of modernism, such that many of modernism's stylistic features (poetic language, narrative rupture, heightened ambiguity, non-linear syntax) have acquired a newly audacious sheen. Progressive critics who might once have lamented, the elitist, apolitical mindset of modernism are now more likely to argue that the politics of modernism lies precisely in the perverse detours and ellipses of its form. (Felski 510)

Readings of Larkin's work that have characterised him as the rear-guardist of British poetry have tended to assume that the modernist idea of form is the only tenable one. The location of radical form as the focus for what is absent from Larkin's poetry, and, by extension, from poetry that achieves success at the expense of formal experimentation, is consistent, pointed and self-confident. So is the castigation of Larkin's poetry for being, if not subjective, then subject-centred, as if the charge of drawing attention to self is one that is sure to attract priggish agreement. In 1989, Donald Davie pronounced in *Under Brigflatts* that Larkin's 'career, as distinct from the poetry (some of which will surely endure), calls out for searching and sensitive study' (220). Andrew Crozier similarly objects to the 'direct representation of the poet's controlling intelligence – or personality, or idiosyncrasy, obsession, whatever it may be' ('Resting of Laurels' 195); he argues that this is a feature of 'canonical poetry [...] designed to establish the reader's empathetic identification with the figure the poem gives of the poet' (196). By contrast, in non-canonical poetry 'the place of the subject was vacated in favour of an objectively grounded and embodied experience' (195). In

‘Donald Davie, *The Movement and Modernism*’, William Pritchard names this perception of the absence of the ‘non-human outside’ as being the driving force behind the charge of a subjective antimodernism.

The enduring qualities of Larkin’s poetry are nodded at in parenthesis: evidently it doesn’t demand – or Davie refuses in this history to give it – sensitive and searching study. Why this refusal to commemorate at least by singling out what in Larkin’s verse will endure? The answer is, I’m afraid, that Davie sees Larkin less as a poet than as a portent of the English reading public’s diminished expectations.... It seems that Larkin’s public had been seduced by ‘tone’, by a rhetoric which administers to admirers who were unable to appreciate (although Davie doesn’t say this explicitly) the more impersonal, sterner transactions between the poet and something outside him – the non-human. (245)⁸

Peter Nicholls has contended that ‘the poetries of modernism may be various, [but] they have at least one consistent strand in their use of the verbal medium to figure an “outside” to poetic invention, an otherness which might “resist the intelligence almost successfully” and in so doing bear authoritative witness to the new’ (*The Poetics of Modernism*’ 64). Strikingly, the non-human or otherness is here treated as something that the verbal medium itself presents or performs. Form figures or enacts otherness. The non-human is then received through the poem by paying attention to form, but *as if* we were setting the verbal medium free from both speaker and addressee to present its own otherness in words and through verbal devices. On this account, Larkin’s own poetic practice, comparatively silent on the valence of form, is not hard to present as closing the approach to otherness or externality/objectivity by allowing voice and image to ‘transcend’ the play of words.

⁸Also of interest in this regard is Davie’s *With the Grain: Essays on Thomas Hardy and Modern British Poetry*, where he responds to Larkin’s promotion of Hardy as an alternative to modernism. Also see ‘Hardy’s Indifference’ (147-181) in Howarth’s *British Poetry in the Age of Modernism*.

To begin to argue that the dominance of voice and image do not necessarily support this claim of eliminating otherness from poetry, I shall cite one further enlistment of Larkin's work as an instance of poetic self-enclosure which identifies otherness not only with the non-human and the objective but further identifies it as an ethical demand made by poetry's form on the reader. Robert Sheppard argues in *The Poetry of Saying* that Larkin's poetry is

an example of the will to invisible form, which foregrounded and yet controlled the speaking origin. Its metaphors were generally neither embellishments nor perceptual instruments, but figures which supported the attitudes (and, often, the morality) of the author-subject, and served to circumscribe him or her. The world was naturalised into discrete areas of experience, although the use of the first person plural suggests an ambiguous sense of community. Its discourses were carefully constructed in collusion from the saidness of language, and with a social naturalisation of content rather than of form. Variations of this mode constructed the poetic unconscious that permeated British poetry for the rest of the century. (27)

The 'said', the finished utterance of poetry that he finds in Larkin (as opposed to what Sheppard calls the transitive poem of 'saying') leaves no room for the reader to be responsible to the writing; 'writing', in this account, is the 'undeniable other' which can only approach once the reader's sense of self-identity is broken up (14); the reader (or *reading*, in Sheppard's locution, an activity that seems self-generated) is 'responsible to the writing to preserve reading as an act of saying'. Sheppard continues:

Reading participates in the text's structural indeterminacies, as it ruptures the said, interrupts by effects of defamiliarization, or suspends... good naturalization, through its textual opacities. These preserve the saying in the said, since they compel the reader to dwell on the devices of the utterance rather than reducing them, or closing them, to dead paraphraseable fixities. They preserve reading as an activity... This recognises that the text maintains its differences as

well as its proximity, through its technical devices, its social dialogism. Appropriation must be countered by distantiating. (15)

I would argue that the distinction between the 'saying' text and the 'saidness of language' rests not on a distinction between a determinate and an indeterminate use of language but between two forms of determination that signal what I have been tracing as the 'other-of-modernist' and the 'modernist' respectively: the determination of language by a supposedly self-identical, speaking voice; and the determination of indeterminacy through a form that remains closed to figural or rhetorical presentation of the 'person' and hence supposedly 'compels' the reader to remain open to the approach of the other.⁹ In keeping with the latter, Sheppard is able to merge his idea of the other with that of Levinas, who, he says, 'presents an immediate, non-negotiable, ethical demand, one that transforms an individual, as he or she is obliged to respond and answer' (10). The demand of the other makes an appearance in the text through the preservation of indeterminacy, rupture and opacity. Sheppard's contention is that being addressed by a 'someone' prevents the reader from actively being solicited by the 'opacities' to recognise the other in the work. To be addressed by an 'I' – a 'one' speaking to another

⁹ This should be set beside Crozier in 'Thrills and Frills', where he spells out in detail what the poem that does not use the self as a figural device is expected to accomplish: 'The self (the subject, the poet) does not stand at the centre of and mediate the reader's experience of the poem. That which in grammatical relationships is consigned to the role of the predicated, defined and subordinate, is afforded scope of its own resistance and counter-action. We might think of this as occurring in the space vacated by the figures of conventional rhetoric. (Hence, I believe, some of our experience of difficulty and obscurity when we read such poetry.) This theory does not, needless to say, suggest that such poems have written themselves, that they have no human author, but rather that the poet does not constitute at one and the same time the poem's protagonist and boundary. No surrogate entanglement of the poet's intelligence is provided as part of the poem's interior, and instead the poem claims to represent the whole person. Through such a mode the things referred to in the poem participate actively in what is imagined, they are not merely figurative devices, and the poet is acted upon as well as acting – an experiencing creature rather than mastering intellect' (228).

– forecloses the approach of ‘the other’ that compels recognition of itself and, in the process, transforms the individual. On this account there would be no speaking or listening *to anyone* in a reading open to the ethical demand of otherness, but surrender to a poem as the other, which would be achieved only after a struggle – the struggle to become a ‘hostage’, in the Levinasian vocabulary.¹⁰ The stakes of not recognising this other are ethically high. They amount to a participation in processes of social suppression and even of elimination by virtue of adhering to a model of reading. This revised formalism, tied to an ethic of responsibility, can be seen as an intensification of the aesthetic strategies of modernism.

I would argue that ‘reading for otherness’ does not necessarily involve this aesthetic strategy, which I can now sum up as having the following attributes: it aims to rhetorically identify itself with the non-human (or at least not to centre itself in human subjectivity as it is filtered through post-structuralism); it is accessible only through the differentiation-in-language that activates a response designated as ‘response to form’

¹⁰One strong criticism of the Levinasian view of the other that Sheppard is following is especially pertinent here. Luce Irigaray writes: ‘for Levinas [the caress] consists... not in approaching the other in its most vital dimension, the touch, but in the reduction of that vital dimension of the other’s body to an elaboration of a future for himself. ... In this transformation of the flesh of the other into his own temporality, it is clear that the masculine subject loses the feminine as other’ (*The Irigaray Reader* 179-80). The unknowability of the other metaphorised as caress, tropes the unknowability of the future. Irigaray contrasts this unknowability with a different meaning of touch: one that mutually creates time by not insisting on ‘a future without a future event, a future where no day is named for the encounter with the other in an embodied love’ (179-180). Touch that touches an other does not pose a radically unknowable futurity, but one in which attentiveness to the other through the creation of pleasure, the ‘work of the flesh’ (181) as Irigaray puts it, becomes more important. Levinasian moral discourse forbids the other who has something, a particular thing of its own, to say because such an other limits the unfolding of the future without event. The other that retains its radical alterity can never speak on its own behalf, only have its demand recognised. But this, Irigaray’s criticism highlights, occurs in the time of the one whose intentionality makes use of the other as the bearer of irrefutable demand and unspecifiable future. It should be noted that here Irigaray touches upon a feature of modernist discourse, namely, its portrayal of speech and intentional response as antithetical to the presentation of otherness, betokening instead self-identity and the closure of the future.

and not to speaker or content; it relies on a rhetoric of form that invests in disjuncture, discontinuity, opacity and indeterminacy; and it is presented not primarily as a possibility for reading or a technique of reading but as an ethical or political demand that the non-poetic world makes on poetry.

The polemic against personality, influenced if not required by modernism, thus rules out in advance the sort of poetry that Larkin claimed to like and write, the kind of poetry he provocatively pitted against this polemic when he said: 'Form holds little interest for me. Content is everything' (Timms 62). In what follows I shall advance an idea of form more suited to the reading of Larkin's poetry, and more generally a mode of reading that can be placed beside, not necessarily in opposition to, the modernist technique of reading for form. My approach to form differs from that which Derek Attridge (who has done much to reconcile a broadly modernist way of reading with the insights afforded by Derrida's work) advances when he asserts that the approach to the 'other' can be made by responding to a text's 'unique and iterable structure' through 'an equally unique and iterable response to validate it, to allow it to speak its "own" name' (*Reading and Responsibility* 27). The problem lies in the symmetry Attridge posits between structure and response: he limits 'uniqueness' and iterability' in response to a validation of 'uniqueness' and 'iterability' of structure, leaving no room for the possibility that uniqueness in response can be morphologically dissimilar to literary

form. Jacques Rancière observes (in connection with what he calls ‘the modernist paradigm’s second major form’¹¹) that the modernist paradigm relies on

the identification of forms from the aesthetic regime of the arts with forms that accomplish a task or fulfil a destiny specific to modernity. At the root of this identification there is a specific interpretation of the structural and generative contradiction of aesthetic ‘form’. It is, in this case, the determination of art qua form and self-formation of life that is valorized ... [It is] this notion which defined a neutral state, a state of dual cancellation, where the activity of thought and sensible receptivity became a single reality. (26-7)¹²

What needs to be done to work at an angle to modernism, as I wish to do, is to pose a separation, at least a pause, between form as enacting thought, on the one hand, and form’s efficacy in determining the receptivity it needs to be perceived as such by a receiver, on the other. This should be seen as an alternative to the gap (implicit to modernism) between form as both the encoder of action and response, and the receiver (the reader or audience or auditor) of form whose designated function is to recreate the moves that the form already specifies. This entails a shift from seeing art as its own self and other, to a situation where the reader – any reader – is the other of poetry. This does

¹¹The first paradigm, according to Rancière, being “an anti-mimetic” revolution in art identical with the conquest of the pure form of art finally laid bare’ (*The Politics of Aesthetics* 26).

¹²Rancière adds that this unity of activity and receptivity is the ‘specific mode of living in the material world that must be developed by “aesthetic education” in order to train men susceptible to live in the political community. The idea of modernity as a time devoted to the material realization of humanity still latent in mankind was constructed on this foundation. It can be said... that the “aesthetic revolution” produced a new idea of political revolution: the material realization of a common humanity still only existing as an idea. This is how Schiller’s “aesthetic state” became the “aesthetic programme” of German Romanticism’ (27). Rancière wants us to see, I think, that the failure of revolution is inscribed into the Romantic/modernist idea that the aesthetic is a mode of human transformation. The idea of aesthetic form unites active, resistant thinking with unresistant receptivity to the sensory world configured by that thinking. Its uniting of *knowing, doing and perceiving* in form that anticipates the mode of being of an emancipatory future community is a *response* to the failure of revolutionary transformation that was the formative experience of German Romanticism. It continues to inform modernism by inflecting the versions of the emancipatory forms that it continues to propose.

not mean that the reader's response –or demand – can be made the index of the text's effectivity, but rather that the poem is seen as practising an agnosticism with regard to its possible reception by the other – it can only *speak to* or speak towards this other, not speak intransitively. Recognising and exploring this model of reading unbinds the critical constraint to use texts as vehicles that help readers reproduce or internalise or identify with the rhetorical structure of the address, and frees the reader to respond with what he hears. Further, it allows us to recognise that verbal structures cannot always be translated into transformational structures through the shorthand of formal reading. My suggestion is intended to complicate the familiar sequence of moves that literary criticism sometimes offers to explain poetry's connection with social change: one in which poems, especially those vacated by the figure of the human speaker, offer rhetorical spaces where formal devices exercise an agency dissonant with society; or dissonant with themselves *as if* with society, in a by-now classic troping of resistance through literature. Rather than indeterminacy of meaning that is recuperated in the formal determination of radical freedom of meaning, we can then think about form as the structure revealed by a text's relation to another who receives it as an address. This opens up the possibility that there may not be *evidence* of form's reception in the reader's (appropriate) response. Because nothing in the text's structure need encode or anticipate or stage such a response in the reader, and because its expression may reveal something in the text that is not captured by its 'unique or iterable structure', this response can be designated as enigmatic. Enigmatic here does not mean difficult, but rather, as Jean Laplanche says, an utterance that leads back to the 'otherness of the other... that is to say, to his otherness to himself' (*Essays on Otherness* 255). For

Laplanche, the other does not affix a point of alterity only to our discourse or to our being,¹³ but also is someone who has internalised the enigmatic messages of other human beings prior to the formation of a sense of self, and therefore cannot furnish a fixed point of alterity. Alterity is dynamic, appearing and changing its manifestation in response to others. Others are, as Laplanche says, also invaded by the enigmatic messages of other others (Caruth 27; Laplanche identifies this internal and enigmatic other with the unconscious). This form of non-identity with self is different from self-fragmentation: it envisages an otherness which appears in ‘the frame of the address of the other, which remains enigmatic’ (136).¹⁴ Crucially, reading alterity in this way means that we do not necessarily need to find adequate and unique forms to represent the other – as if otherness always and only brings forth some mutation of the cognitive and mimetic impulses – but that we can see the other as not knowing in advance what *in himself* will respond to a poem or a piece of writing (among other things).¹⁵ The

¹³ Laplanche says in an interview with Cathy Caruth: ‘My problem is not the old epistemological, philosophical problem of the reality of the external world... And there is no problem for me of rebuilding the external world, starting from something internal. I think that any living being is so open to the *Umwelt* that there is no problem of rebuilding the reality of reference starting from representations. The problem of representation and reference for me is completely wiped out by phenomenology... It’s not a problem of the other world, the other thing, which is taken care of by phenomenology, and it is also not an analytic problem ... The problem [of otherness], on our human level, is that the other does not have to be reconstructed. The other is prior to the subject... So you don’t have to construct it, it first comes to you, as an enigma’ (123-4).

¹⁴ Monique David-Ménard puts the same thought more succinctly when she says: ‘[U]nknown aspects constitute us but we have no direct access to them. We only discover them as ours – often in situations of revolt and contestation – because it is this particular “object” and not another which arouses our passion. The effect of contingency turns here upon the way that a certain revelation of yourself can only come from the other, the other who crystallises that aspect of yourself that eludes you’ (145).

¹⁵ On Laplanche’s at once simple and complex revisions of philosophical and psychoanalytic ideas of otherness see Judith Butler’s *Giving an Account of Oneself*, pp. 70-78. She writes: ‘Laplanche thus posits a foreign desire as a precondition of “one’s own” desire. Who desires when “I” desire? There seems to be another at work in my desire, and this *étrangèreté* disrupts any effort to make sense of myself as a bounded and separate being. I may try to tell the story of myself, but another story is already at work in

response of a reader conceived as other in this way does not lend itself to being classified as adequate or inadequate because its manifestation would not be taken as the *criterion* of the correct re-enactment of formal codes. In short, the poem would not be able to speak for *what* in the other it appeals to; it would only be able to speak to another, and his or her response would reveal, each time, a particular relation and a particular moment of self which are perhaps best characterised as neither radically knowable or unknowable, but in a relation to knowledge that is only partly determinable and always incalculable, and whose temporality remains open in the direction of past or future. Response, then, stands open to further response, uttered or un-uttered, acted or merely dreamt of. And even, it can be allowed, undreamt of. Form, accordingly, becomes the structure or shape or meaning or pattern – there can be many ways of characterising this – illuminated by the response of the poem's other in the poem, and not the subjectivity *of* a poem (whether or not this is rhetorically coded as non-human or objective) that acts as a standard for necessary and correct response.

Besides Laplanche, other writers too have moved in the direction of a conceptualisation of form as the mappable contour of a transitional relation between poems and an unknown (but not necessarily unknowable) other. Most notably, Jacques Derrida, who gives unsurpassed attention to alterity in both his literary and philosophical writings, has asked in 'Passions: An Oblique Offering' if 'it is possible to make a decision on the subject of "responding" and of "responsiveness"?' (13). Derrida asserts that literature has 'an absolute right to non-response' which is 'more original and more

me, and there is no way to distinguish between the "I" who has emerged from this infantile condition and the "you" – the set of "you's" – who inhabits and dispossesses my desire from the outset' (74).

secret than the modalities of power and duty because it is fundamentally heterogeneous to them'; this is the complement to the 'right to say anything' that also belongs to literature (23). He differentiates literature from discourses where the right to non-response is conditional and which therefore have not 'secrets' but 'problems' ('Passions' 21). That Derrida's objections are specifically to the strategic deployment of performativity to secure a certain desideratum, and therefore to the formalist bent of literary studies that invests in the category of response, is clear when he talks about

substituting for an inadequate response... an interminable discourse. Such a response would pretend to provide, instead of a response or non-response, a performative (more or less *performante* [*literally: performing, also dynamic, effective*] and more or less metalinguistic) for all these questions, non-questions, or non-responses. Such an operation would be open to the most justified critiques, it would offer its own body, it would surrender, as if in sacrifice, the most vulnerable body to the most just blows. Because it would suffer from a double failure, it would combine two apparently contradictory faults: firstly the claim to a mastery or to an overview [*Survol*] (be it meta-linguistic, meta-logical, meta-metaphysical, etc.) and secondly the becoming-work of art (literary performance or performative, fiction, work), the aestheticising play of a discourse from which one expects a serious, thoughtful or philosophical response. (18-19)

'Nothing would be worse', Derrida says, than to substitute this masterly, performative, interminable discourse, to an 'inadequate response, but one still giving evidence of a sincere, modest, resigned effort' (19). What he prefers, however, is the right to non-response, which menaces, he says, 'philosophical sociality in so far as it presupposes the order (preferably circular) of the appeal [or the call; *appel*, Tr.] of the question and the response' (19). In the face of this menace, the community of critics functions by turning non-response into the limit of its discourse: 'The limit furnishes positively the condition

of his intelligence, his readings, his intelligence. But what would be the condition of this condition? The fact that the *critical reader* [English in original, Tr.] is a priori and necessarily exposed to a *critical reading* [English in original, Tr.] (19) – which Derrida intriguingly calls a ‘sacrificial verification’, perhaps because it must give up one of them to the other (20)— give up the either the critical reading or the critical reader.

Derrida speaks, then, not of the performativity of response encoded in text, as form or as the act of performance that stages form, but rather of performative experience or tracing that is *not* an answer to a demand for response. I would argue that Derrida’s work offers a way of thinking about a literature *prepared* for non-response, which makes it impossible to know through response whether or not something is self-evidently literary. It is this impossibility that is the ‘call... which points back to the other or to something else... keeps our passion aroused, and holds us to the other...even if it does not exist’ (24). Instead of responsibility, then, when it comes to literature Derrida would substitute passion for that which may or may not answer, as the relation that connects us with the other.

One effect of the absorption of Derrida’s work through modernist protocols in literary studies has been to neutralise his connection of reading with non-response, which is potentially capable of disrupting the core method of reading-for-form. This is especially apparent when we see the use made of Derrida’s work by Derek Attridge, who is one of his more committed and intrepid readers. However, Attridge relies on Derrida’s work to bring up to date a practical criticism (especially in *The Singularity of Literature* and *In Reading and Responsibility*), which (in the manner of I. A. Richards

and F. R. Leavis) ties the recognition of the 'literary' to a particular response: '[T]he literary work is fully constituted as literary only in the response to it which confirms its literariness' (*Singularity* 110). Response validates, in Attridge's word, that the text has a unique and iterable structure which is 'literary', and it does this with the knowledge that its validation is a contribution to the struggle for an undetermined future and transformational possibilities. '[W]hat signals that it is literature? ... [W]e find that it is nothing but form; the traced record of producing a certain visible shape in space... it is as a written form, which is to say as the encrypted image of an act-event of invention, waiting to be re-enacted in reading – that it identifies itself as literature, and as this unique (but always recognisable) work of literature' (*Singularity* 111). This mode or the form of response to form – re-enaction – is dispiritingly familiar: 'The formal sequence ... functions as a staging of meaning and feeling: a staging that is realised in what I have called performative reading' (109). The only caveat that Attridge adds to move beyond a modernist (new/practical) criticism is that form is 'a performed mobility, a performance of reading answering to a performance of writing' (111).

In saying this, I am aware that the target that Attridge wants to hit is not entirely dissimilar to mine.

The responsibility involved in such an event of response is a responsibility to the other... and at the same time a responsibility to the future, since it involves a struggle to create openings within which the other can appear beyond the scope of our programmes and predictions, can come to transform what we know or think we know' (*Reading* 27-8).

The coupling of responsibility and response, however, is, I think, what Derrida wants to question when it comes to literature, and it seems to me important to do this to open up possibilities of reading in dis-alignment with modernism. In following Attridge on his significantly different path, we would not only have to agree that reading is responsible to a literary entity that is not empirical but comes to exist only by virtue of a certain response; but, also and more worryingly, that we may generalise this pattern of responding to the 'work' to ground a receptivity of the human to others. No doubt sensitive to the difficulties of furnishing objective grounds for responding to others in properly responsible ways, Attridge is offering response-to-the-literary as an alternate paradigm. But for this he pays the price of making form and response circularly affirming, which also makes a performative reading of this type a reiteration of the modernist paradigm. The reader, once again, bears the burden of necessarily performing a specified response if the other – which is the literary in this case – is to appear as singular bearer of form. The reader must produce a body of literature that can be offered at the ritual sacrifice.

Judith Butler's recent study *Giving an Account of Oneself*, in which she outlines the role of *address* in accounting for the self, provides further suggestions that can be used to think about the difference between 'address' and 'responsible response'. 'Address', as Butler describes it, is a dimension of the text that sets up a relational nexus between the 'I' of narrative writing and its receiver which is not programmed by the structure of the narrative itself. Butler writes that it does not constitute but rather interrupts narrative:

[T]he structure of address is not a feature of narrative, one of its many and variable attributes, but an interruption of narrative. The moment the story is addressed to someone, it assumes a rhetorical dimension that is not reducible to a narrative function. It presumes that someone, and it seeks to recruit and act upon that someone. Something is being done with language when the account that I give begins: it is invariably interlocutory, ghosted, laden, persuasive, and tactical. It may well seek to communicate a truth, but it can do this, if it can, only by exercising a relational dimension of language. (*Giving an Account of Oneself* 63)

The relationality makes the ‘I’ opaque because ‘[o]ne enters into a communicative environment as an infant and child who is addressed and who learns certain ways of addressing in return. The default patterns of this relationality emerge as the opacity within any account of oneself’ (62-63).

The most significant consideration that Butler’s remarks propose for literary studies could be that address, made enigmatic by relationality, presents a different kind of difficulty in reading than does ‘formal autonomy’. It opens up a third dimension – the ‘rhetorical’¹⁶ – whenever a narrative unfolds because an (unspoken or acknowledged) relation to the reader intersects at all points with what the narrative communicates, and dis-aligns its force field from its apparent pole. Butler’s argument makes it possible to approach the gulf between using form to achieve narrative effect, and seeing in form an address that reveals a relation to a third term – the receiver – that cannot be captured by form. It is in this sense I understand Butler’s reminder that ‘the means by which subject constitution occurs is not the same as the narrative form the reconstruction of that constitution attempts to provide’ (69).

¹⁶ Steven Connor’s category of ‘addressivity’ is intended to perform a similar function. See *The English Novel in History: 1950-1955*, 10-12.

If I am trying to give an account of myself, it is always to someone, to one whom I presume to receive my words in some way, although I do not and cannot know always in what way. In fact, the one who is positioned as the receiver may not be receiving at all, may be engaged in something that cannot under any circumstances be called 'receiving', doing nothing more for me than establishing a certain site, a position, a structural place where the relation to a possible reception is articulated. So whether or not there is an other who actually receives is beside the point, since the point will be that there is a site where the relation to a possible reception takes form. (*Giving an Account* 67)

The other as a site of reception, Butler's text emphasises, is 'unknown in large part; one who receives becomes, in a certain way, an allegory for reception itself, for the phantasmatic relation to receiving that is articulated to, or at least in the presence of, an other. But if this is an allegory, it is not reducible to a structure of reception that would apply equally well to everyone' (69). Relationality, which is never purely verbal and needs a fluidity of attention to the possibly completely dissimilar things or persons *in* relation, makes the 'I' opaque because and not in spite of its achievement of a coherent presentation; and this consideration is important in all attempts to link response to reading. Recognition of this description of relationality may predispose one to hold in suspension the claims of the modernist paradigm of form.

In Butler's remarks we can discern a reason why the coherence of the address to another does nothing to change the opacity of the 'I': the enigma of what the narrative 'I' reveals depends not on the form of its self-presentation, but on the relation that form takes in the encounter with another who ostensibly receives it. This situation – in which the receiving other is under no obligation to understand or respond to the text's address, and where criteria for correct transmission are obscure -- can appear as an impasse for

formalist literary criticism. A relational perspective in criticism, however, may not be similarly constrained, for it acknowledges that anyone can have a relation with a text that is unique, and begins with the problem of this uniqueness and its possible otherness to the text firmly in view. In treating form as intrinsically incomplete, an idea that never occurs singly on its own terms, and is effectively mute without the partnering term which makes it intelligible, Michael Wood seems to getting at just such a perspective.

Wood writes in *Yeats and Violence* that it is

a truism about form [...] that in entertaining its various relations with what is not form – relations of counterpoint, confirmation, complication, contradiction, expansion and so on – form shifts the location of the poem from the page (or the place where the poet's voice is literally sounding) to the pulses and minds of its readers, turns it into something that is already happening whether we know it or not, a drama of which whatever overt meaning we take away is only a part. (126-7)

Similarly, Angela Leighton, examining form under both a telescope and microscope in her remarkably rich study *On Form*, notes that 'the "form and" construction appears in a multitude of book and essay titles: form and feeling, form and intent, form and authority, form and contentment, form and meaning, form and time, form and format, form and poetry. It is as if there were something unfinished, even unformed, about form. It hangs on its other half, needing that support or relief' (2). For Leighton, the independence of form is asserted not primarily against content or authorial presence, but against its own unformed-ness. This way of thinking about form allows us to see form as a wish for shape or order which takes its meaning from a dramatic exchange and a mobile interdependence on whatever is its own particular other, its opposing and

proposing partner, or simply the pressure against which it takes shape, without restricting this to any one configuration like ‘personality’. Both Wood and Leighton are interested in what reading for form means in practice, or, to put it in a different idiom, in the language game being played with form in particular works. Their remarks enable us to see how literary criticism has always taken it for granted that, while the reader perceives form as self-activating, what is located on the page takes its meaning from a drama being played out between text and reader: it is an image of his or her own activity *as if* it were the action of the work in question, an other that is not controlled by the reading mind. It is as a reader’s self-projection that form becomes a kind of action, one, furthermore, that is perceived by the reader as if it (form) were acting freely in itself:

Like the imagination, form is shaping activity rather than a visual shape, and this leads to the curious self-involvement of what it does. It acts on itself, sees itself, is its own ‘agency’. It cannot therefore be described in simile or metaphor, in a likeness to some other object, but only in a kind of grammatical tautology: ‘self-witnessing, and self-effected’. (7)¹⁷

¹⁷Leighton’s historically-informed close readings, too, remind us that current conceptions of form are not just a modernist legacy but have an anterior parentage in Romanticism. Like Ranciere, she looks to Schiller’s work for elucidation of modern form’s genealogy: ‘In a truly successful work of art the content should effect nothing, the form everything... Subject-matter, then, however sublime and all-effacing it may be, always has a limiting effect upon the spirit, and it is only from form that true aesthetic freedom can be looked from. Herein, then, resides the real secret of the master in any art: that he can make his form consume his material’ (155-157). It is not surprising, then, that ideas of form should open up lines of historical investigation, and that Larkin’s work be singled out for its alleged anti-modernist indifference to form. Randall Stevenson has argued in a recent historical survey that ‘English Literature was never more static than under the influence of the Movement. If the later twentieth century proved a difficult period for poetry, it was in large measure because it took so long to realise this, and move on’ (*The Last of England?* 270). Unsurprisingly, this did not pass without dispute: ‘For Stevenson, to be formally innovative is to be politically innovative’, wrote James Wood in the *London Review of Books* (‘The Slightest Sardine’). Wood’s attack characterises (perhaps inadvertently) the political case built on formal innovation as driven by a different anti-formalist agenda. ‘[Stevenson] rarely treats poems and novels as if they have any aesthetic autonomy, as if they might be charged formal spaces within which a high degree of intentionality and detail superbly exist. Instead, he is an epigraphist, content to read works for their historical content’. Instead of formalism for the sake of political emancipation, then, Wood flies the flag for formalism for the sake of the work itself, which is, of course, not a move without

In the light of Leighton's and Wood's remarks, 'form' appears an incomplete and unstable idea that wishes to appear static, as a drama that has a compulsion to act as if it were an image.¹⁸ This, I think, captures the difference from a modernist paradigm of reading that I am arguing does more justice to Larkin's work, and goes some way towards acknowledging what Andrew Bennett has called 'the response of irresponsibility, of nescience', which he argues 'has an incisive political charge' (233). 'Nescience' only works with an 'idea of the poet as "wholly ignorant" of what a reader might properly make of the poem' (*Ignorance* 227).¹⁹

A relational mode of criticism is not, in practice, a radical departure for literary critics; it even undergirds the writings of avowedly formalist critics intermittently (as Daiches, quoted above, points out) but it is still important to recognise the difference it can make to our view of texts and readers, and to the work of writers like Larkin, whose

its own political implications. Clearly, there are different prices to be paid by treating form as a conceptual shape to be filled out by historical interpretation and treating form as bracketing history by delineating a space which excludes or severely moderates relation with what is not itself. My own approach is not to use form as a validator of historical claims, even literary-historical claims, but treating it as sometimes affording insights that, in a different discourse, may become historical.

¹⁸ Peter Howarth has identified a similar working-out of form in Frank Kermode's *Romantic Image*, which he dusts-up for current circulation as follows: 'By arguing that the apparently irreconcilable critical difference between internal artistic symbol and external critical discourse is already present in the difference between the image the poem is talking about and the way it is talking, [Kermode] suggests another role for form than merely resistance. Form becomes a version of all the other contextual frames, the theatre without which there would be no audience to gasp at the dance, or the concepts without which the critic is unable to recognise the poem and its resistance to concepts. Holding words in acoustic frameworks of sound and silence makes those musical relations more continuous with the "external" frameworks of public expectation and social setting in which the poem has place, not less. And modernist form makes this interplay more obvious, for so many of the manoeuvres which boldly declare its difference from ordinary life simultaneously make it more directly continuous with other aspects of that nonpoetic life into which it must emerge. Fragmented forms proclaim their artistic and cultural isolation, but they also resemble the ad-poster, designed to catch the reader's attention at speed [...] (Howarth 'Autonomous and Heteronomous in Modernist Form' 78)

¹⁹ Bennett also rightly warns that it is desirable to avoid 'any idea of the text as constituted by a joint endeavour of poet and reader in, say, the reader response theories of Wolfgang Iser or Hans-Robert Jauss, where reading is presented as a kind of synthetic understanding, just as much as it obviously disturbs any idea of authorial intentionality' (*Ignorance* 227).

work seems to have not enough to say to the academy because it asks for a certain disinvestment of power from the formal properties of the text. The reception of Larkin's work by critics seeking to build upon the aesthetics of form reveals something important about readings travelling the path of modernism: that their formal claims depend on specifying or enacting the reader's response in advance. The reader that fails to 'respond' to form seriously deprives the text of power. Removing the constraint of form presents, however, not a solution but a realignment of focus on relational fields that give meaning to critical writing. It should be recognised, too, that a response undetermined with respect to form takes the risk of never being able to verbalise itself, or guarantee that it will *not* treat the thing that provokes response as 'some conceptual substance for my further use or entertainment' (Attridge, *Singularity* 111). It is neither empirically nor non-empirically tied to the object as literary. Form in this manner takes the risk of giving no assurance to the validity of performance, but only ever appearing in relation to another whose stance is itself formative of the shape that emerges as the figure of the poem. Performativity, in other words, can be heterogenous to form and still be revelatory of *something* that we can (perhaps) call form.

III

'In both his prose and his poetry, Larkin continually returns to what we might call the challenge of otherness. He is continually imagining other attitudes to life' (Gibson 17). A common theme recurring through pages that follow will be a reckoning with Larkin's

awareness of the ability to be different from himself that he seeks through art.

Recognising the tension in Larkin's work between what art claims to be in itself and what it becomes when a relation with another is proposed to it or imposed on it, will help me access the 'self-difference' that Larkin searches for, and both desires and undermines.

I begin with the novels because a close engagement with them shows Larkin specifically addressing the question of whether and how he can write about 'others as others'. The first chapter attends closely to the theme of failure to relate to otherness in Larkin's two novels; I argue that it is this failure that Larkin's fictions meditate on by creating fantasized love-objects that their protagonists desire and yet seek to arrest in non-response and self-identity. I show that Larkin is here exploring the idea of the 'other's otherness', and that his protagonists choose possession rather than proximity as their way of relating to objects of their desire, which determines them on the path towards indifference or joylessness.

The novels may have helped Larkin to resist the New Critical campaign to arrest the reader in a formal response to poems, and propose a consumeristic pleasure which, I argue, is intended to disrupt the critical demand to read for form. The second chapter examines Larkin's polemical deployment of this 'pleasure principle' as what the reader coming from a position of otherness to art is entitled to seek in it. Comparing Larkin's position with Adorno's in *Aesthetic Theory*, a major twentieth-century work on aesthetics in the capitalist age, I try to locate Larkin's difference from Adorno and

develop the perspective he offers in his essays and poems to show that it allows readers to approach literary writing without being constrained by formal prescriptions.

The last three chapters are studies of three themes that have been the focus of special attention in Larkin criticism: subjective voice, place and death. In the third chapter, I argue that Larkin's poetry makes use of (what I identify as) a 'Romantic' register that is undercut by a 'personal' one. I do this by examining how a Romantic voice – one that constructs the self and projects it into the world in symbolic and lyrical forms – interacts with a personal voice which sees these forms as prisons. The result, I argue, is an art that explores the idea of being 'different from oneself'. Chapter four, on the significance of place in Larkin, argues that while he does subscribe to certain notions of belonging to England, and more importantly, to the idea of belonging as a poetic imperative, he also problematizes what belonging means, treating it not as identification with a place, but as an unsettled and sometimes defamiliarizing relation to a place with which one finds oneself in necessary connection. The last chapter, on the theme of death in Larkin's work, shows that it uses 'death' not as a fixed point of annihilation, but one that moves backwards and forwards in life, informing its sense of possibility, and constituting an experience of something that is always present and yet always beyond experience.

I ask throughout if we can read Larkin differently, which is not to read him in unprecedented ways, but to read him with the awareness that the poetry, novels and essays relate to questions of politics, history and individual self in ways other than those

chiselled out by the debate between modernism and conservatism in British poetry,
which has overwhelmingly shadowed the reception of Larkin's work.

Nearer Thus: Fictions of Non-Relation

'I wanted "to be a novelist" in the sense that I never wanted "to be a poet"', Larkin remarked in an interview. The sentence conveys a sense of frustrated ambition; yet Larkin had already published two novels by the time he came to publish his first major collection of poems, *The Less Deceived*. Later he would dismiss *Jill* as mere 'juvenilia' (*Required Writing* 24)²⁰ and disown the emotional stance of *A Girl in Winter*: 'I do think it's remarkably... I suppose the word is *knowing* ... and considering I was only twenty-two' (*RW* 63). Yet in their own right these novels are not merely signposts along a developmental trajectory, but sustained works with distinctive preoccupations that are pursued with stylistic intelligence. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the novels is that they have not received much sustained critical attention, despite their obvious merits. No doubt Larkin himself fostered the impression that the novels were a false start; yet, as the remark above indicates, he also seems to have suggested that they were the true start and poetry the rather disappointing consequence of his unfulfilled apprenticeship.

Andrew Bennett writes in *Literature, Ignorance and Agnology* that lyric poetry allows us

²⁰ Henceforth 'RW'.

an inward sense of another person, of that person as, in a sense, oneself... The apparently unmediated subjectivity of the lyric poet's 'I' may be said to perform a rather complex trick, the result of which is that, despite it being *another's* subjectivity, the effect of the other subjectivity is to allow an identificatory reading which seduces you into the sense that this other consciousness is in fact your own... By contrast, the novel seems to present us with a way of knowing the *otherness* of others, of knowing others *as* others[.] (101)

Taking a cue from this passage, I wish to ask how Larkin's novels deal with the question of 'others *as* others': what can his portrayals of the main protagonists of his two novels tell us about what the self can *do* with otherness? In the poems, Larkin often uses devices of self-dramatization and scene-setting which seem like staples of novelistic technique. The novelist Martin Amis has called him 'a novelist's poet' (xiv) in his volume *Philip Larkin: Selected Poems*; reviewing his book for the *Guardian*, Sean O'Brien remarked that Amis's remark 'might seem a bit cheeky, given that Larkin (who gave up novels, or had the gift withdrawn) can do in a page what most novelists struggle to manage in a book' ('Philip Larkin: Poems selected by Martin Amis'). This seems to hint that something of what novels do survived in Larkin's poems, the best of which came after he had stopped publishing novels. But it also sends us back anew to the question of what is different about the novels. Are they simply a kind of prequel to the poetry, rehearsing themes that would find a more congenial habitat in lyric verse? Can we agree with John Bayley (writing in the *New York Review of Books*) that 'a poet was born to succeed an aborted novelist?' ('Philip Larkin' 21). Larkin has provided a key to the difference himself. In an interview in 1967, he said:

I don't know about my novels. I think someone once said – I did, actually – that poems were about yourself, novels about other people, the fault of the novels are that they're about me. They're not really about other people, they don't have the sympathy with other people and interest in them, so I suppose that, when I'd

written them, I'd said all there was to say about me in that form. (*Further Requirements* 33)²¹

In another interview in 1982, he said: 'When I was young, *Scrutiny* ran a series of articles under the general heading of "The Novel as Dramatic Poem". That was a stimulating, an exciting conception. Something that was both a poem and a novel' (*RW* 63). A little later he commented, 'my novels were more original than my poems, at the time' (*RW* 64). Taken together, these remarks show that not only is Larkin thinking of novels in a way similar to Bennett, but that he is aware of the status of novel-writing in his oeuvre as something akin to a self-difference and an experiment. They were stimulated by an engagement with the literary-critical thought of their time, and they are an investigation of self in a form that Larkin explicitly recognises should be used to think 'about other people'. His diagnosis of his failure – whether or not it is one the reader agrees with – is also an affirmation that for him novel-writing explores otherness, but that because he could do this only by investigating *self*, the limits of his approach were inscribed in the terms of the investigation. This is echoed, perhaps unintentionally, in his attributing this view of novels to 'someone', and then identifying this 'someone' as himself.

I would argue that perhaps the most urgent question Larkin's novels ask that the poems cannot or do not, is: how does the person who has only the resources of the self to tap learn to enter into a felicitous sociality with another and with others? Can the self-interested person, driven in upon himself by an incalculable combination of inclination

²¹ Henceforth 'FR'.

and necessity, regard another as not only the object of duty or possession but also (in Gillian Rose's words) 'as itself a self-relation'? How does he desire, and not merely coexist with, such a self-relating, self-differentiated, temporally and physically changing other? In *Mourning Becomes the Law*, Gillian Rose writes that:

[T]he other is never simply other but an implicated self-relation. This applies to oneself as other and, equally, to any opposing self-consciousness: my relation to myself is mediated by what I recognise or refuse to recognise in your relation to yourself; while your self-relation depends on what you recognise of my relation to myself. *We are both equally enraged and invested*, and to fix our relation in dominance or dependence is unstable and reversible, to fix it as the 'world' is to attempt to avoid these reverses. All dualistic relations to 'the other', to 'the world' are attempts to quieten and deny the broken middle, the third term that arises out of misrecognition of desire, of work, of my and of your self-relation mediated by the self-relation of the other. (74-75)

In this chapter I will look closely at Larkin's two published novels. Larkin's novels show, as my readings will make clear, a crisis and atrophy of desire in its failure to allow for the desired one's self-relation, her otherness to herself. They show characters who long for selflessness and transcribe records of selfishness, and, in the process, provide an insight into what happens when humans invest in others without recognising that their self-relation makes them other to themselves, and so impossible to possess.

John Kemp, the main protagonist of *Jill*, is a northerner in a southern town and a poor scholarship student at Oxford; it is not a surprise that he finds himself adrift in southern, elitist Oxford. But the novel does not show the rich young posers that he now finds himself among to be at home in it, either. These male scions of the hereditary or new

rich are marked by a befuddled passivity towards the university as an institution, especially an institution of learning, for which they compensate by their earnestness in pursuing sexual success and aggressive one-upmanship, in tackling life as sport.

Into this world Kemp is thrust only half willingly, by his school tutor's early-career ambition to make scholarship students out of raw material. From the beginning of the novel, the theme of creativity is central, but in a pointedly anti-celebratory, dysphoric manner. Chosen by the rather Dickensian schoolmaster Crouch to be the mug for his jug, Kemp reacts with fear rather than appreciation: the tutor's gesture is predatory. He is chosen because he shows competence without originality, will without wilfulness. His weakness is allied with a surprising stamina and endurance, but the novel is at pains to indicate that the work Kemp is given to do by Crouch has no connection with a personal or psychic history or with social ambition – with a 'character', in short. Kemp is a conduit for others' plans and fantasies, and this will be important, in my view, for the novel's later charting of Kemp's infatuation with the schoolgirl Jill.

The story of John's boyhood education inaugurates the theme of the imagination's place in the economics of power that knits the novel together. John is picked out for mentoring by the ambitious new tutor Crouch. Crouch's choice is directed not at all by concern for the boy or a desire to help him; instead it is motivated by a hunger to invest his capital of knowledge. This is literalized in a scene which shows Crouch considering the idea of mentoring John, in the afterglow of a satisfactory meal:

He was pleased to find that his landlady had boiled him an egg for tea and that there was a new cherry cake. Not till he had satisfied his appetite and was

smoking a cigarette did he reconsider the idea, but when he did it seemed more and more attractive. If he could catch a boy in the present fifth form, for instance, and encourage and develop his talents; if he could act the role of a tutor, lending him his dusty little texts and meticulous notes, by judicious suggestion and direction of his reading bring the whole of literature within the range of the boy's mind... How tired he was of expurgated copies of Macbeth and The Golden Treasury. How he longed to ascend once more to the remoter plain, to talk of Marlowe and Norse literature, to draw sweeping parallels and make irrefutable assertions.

Picking up an empty eggshell that his spoon had scoured clean, he gazed at it solemnly. What should he do? Should he indulge his fancy? He sat grinning, increasing the pressure of his thumb and forefinger, until with a sudden smash the shell collapsed. (68)

This scene-before-education pries open the motives that enable John's mobility from a small northern town and a career in a nondescript office to the seat of higher and 'voluptuous' learning whose emblem Oxford is. He is chosen to be the audience of a great act – Crouch playing the pedagogical saviour – and the medium for the transmission of something that becomes 'the whole of literature' when represented to the blank, unformed mass of John's mind. There is a touch of pathos in Crouch's avaricious desire: he wants a student who will allow him to reinvest the learning that he is bursting to impart and that isolates him in his distinction. The right response to 'sweeping parallels' and 'irrefutable assertions' needs others who have the proper knowledge and process of reasoning to receive them. Crouch needs to fashion this other, a process he anticipates with sadistic pleasure. The boiled egg, cracked open, eaten and finally smashed, is the unedifying metaphor for the student in the novel.

Can it also be said that Crouch does Kemp a good turn? In a devastating admission of Kemp's inertia, *Jill* indicates that he could not be prized apart from home,

moved from one point to the other, without Crouch's cruel intervention. The novel very much implies that had it not been for Crouch's 'smashing' of him, Kemp could not have become someone who had the necessary dissonance, non-coincidence with self, to become knowable as a character. Being smashed up and re-animated by his tutor's desire gives Kemp the task that plots his paradoxical desire for Jill: to free himself from executing others' desires into forming a relationship that allows him to desire and act on his own; and to suppress the self-relation of the person with whom relation is desired.

Jill suggests, I would say, that Kemp seeks love as a relation which can be formed when there is no reason or exemplar for relation, that cannot be learnt from learning, be reproduced by rule or willed as a goal – contrary to the education he has received, which has made him internalise and resist the erotic-pedagogic desire of his tutor. *Education* is decidedly on trial in the novel, which depicts how romantic love goes to work with the forms of imagination and self-assertion it has been taught.

Larkin lays the groundwork for this in this extended portrait of Kemp at school. He is shown to have little of his own to bring to the educational game – talent or originality or even a healthily vapid resistance to Crouch's advances. It accounts for his great success as an educational project, unlike Crouch's first choice: a boy with a 'racy and impressive' literary style, 'nebulous and slightly impertinent replies' who leaves to become a reporter on the local paper (68). Kemp represents a second, wiser attempt. The novel quotes a line of Kemp's essay, italicized for emphasis, that 'makes him [Crouch] pause': "*Macbeth does not feel remorse, for he does not feel he has done wrong; evil is embodied in the witches, and he is not as bad as they are.*" There is a bleak comedy in

Crouch's response to this line that explains away Macbeth's lack of appropriate feeling as a result of his self-comparison to an embodied absolute. Crouch does not see the essay as 'brilliant' or 'original'; 'but that was not to be expected':

Its virtue was one of extreme efficiency. The boy knew the play and could quote appropriately from it; he knew the introduction and could paraphrase that. The style was not excessively immature, and the unfamiliar handwriting was neat. And the sentence that arrested his attention was like a fancied streak in the sky before dawn; perhaps it was imagination, or the sun might be near. (69-70)

Kemp does not disappoint his tutor on the score for which he picks him – his being a good workhorse. He does achieve the independence to do what he is shown to do by himself. Pushed to compete for the scholarship a year before originally planned on account of the war, John, in a frenzy of fear, begins to work at the limits of his capacity. Crouch finds it 'a delightful change to have him working independently' and 'strangely as if a mechanical man he had painfully constructed had suddenly come to life. And in this sudden luxury an indifferent cruelty came to him: it interested him to see what pitch the boy could drive himself to. He did not hold himself responsible in any way' (83). The machine becomes an object of curiosity as it shows the sign of life – doing more than it was made to do – but, as machine, it still does not call forth empathy or responsibility. Ultimately, though, Kemp frustrates the educationist's 'fancy' and so, ironically, leaves his power thwarted. Crouch is 'more than satisfied' with the progress he makes, even admits that he had underestimated his student's ability. But:

Finally, he felt he had been cheated... he was a burden to teach. His character was almost purely negative: if they had come one spontaneous idea from him during all the span of his acquaintanceship, Crouch would have felt repaid, but

the hesitancy and heaviness that he had imagined would wear off as the boy's imagination widened and deepened persisted month after month, until Crouch was forced to admit it was native to him and would never go. He could not advance a step beyond guidance. The poetry and good writing he read meant nothing personal to him... (79)

Kemp leaves his tutor underpaid by doing exactly what he asks him to do; in not exceeding what the tutor gives him, he allows his tutor to reproduce but does not allow him to achieve the individual difference that underwrites the logic of reproduction as opposed to mechanical production. Education, here, can be seen as the endeavour to achieve difference and distinction through the cultivation of sameness, the achievement of responsive conversation through the cultivation of insensitive modification in another. In Kemp's successful and unsuccessful education it finds its bathetic anti-climax.

The story of Kemp's initiation into and liberation from education is at every stage a story of his tutor's desire for self-perpetuation; by the end of it Crouch is shown to have abandoned professional ambitions in favour of the pursuit of matrimony. For Crouch, Kemp represents that last thrust of will before 'the war brought some curious change in him: he no longer bothered to read intelligent books, or to subscribe to weekly reviews; the book that lay face downwards on the carpet by his chair was an indifferent novel' (83). In novels the reading of novels (and 'literature' more generally) is often the indication of the path that desire takes for its protagonists. In Austen, for instance, novels allow men and women to find common ground for conversation about desire, and to establish the difference between desire and the world in which it works itself out. In Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* novels reveal Emma's desire to herself, but not in the sense

that what they reveals is hidden before the revelation. A public dream becomes her secret possession. In Larkin's novel, the appearance of the indifferently-read novel in Crouch's hand reveals the abandonment of desire at the moment when it begins to reveal the self. Crouch stops wanting to elicit a response from Kemp by remaking him into his own image, and stops wanting to elicit the same response – a coming-to-life through learning – from himself, too, which was perhaps his deeper motive. He abandons his previous self without self-questioning, reserving for it at the most curiosity and at worst cruelty.

It is fitting, then, that when Kemp enters University he is finished with the formal business of education, though he hardly knows this himself. 'He remembered his disciplined study, and raged at his powerlessness to carry it on' (54). 'If the empty days that meandered past had any object at all, it was to please Christopher [Warner] and to win his favour' (60). Kemp attempts to repeat the motions that he had earlier performed for his demanding tutor, but the ability of the good student to please by doing another's will has now run its course. Instead, there is the task of winning the desire of others. What Christopher Warner wants is obscure to Kemp, perhaps as obscure as what his successor, Jill, wants; both literally and metaphorically, he does not touch them. Before embarking on his erotic self-education as Jill's creator and lover, Kemp's prevalent condition as he enters into the life of an adult is of worklessness. It underscores the relationship between making work or giving oneself work and the ability to form attachment and conquer indifference. The letters, diary and finally novel in which John begins to write Jill is the work that he finds himself to do, in an alien environment. It is

an alliance that he makes with his imagination against the indifference of others. Its solitariness, which is its cause, is finally its undoing.

‘Larkin uses the reader's idea of tradition to create a world that feels remote, almost mythical; a world the reader can never enter into fully, but which is familiar enough to make their exclusion into exile’ (Hedgecock 97). It is interesting that Hedgecock should see Larkin’s novels as *exiling* machines rather than meditations on the condition of exile; nevertheless her observation that Larkin estranges and exiles his characters within the *familiar*, from settings that they are obliged to call their own, is important. It is equally important to stress that, though Larkin’s characters operate in sites of displacement, they recognise their displacement as itself familiar, continuous with rather than disruptive of their previous lives.

Jill is, first, the sister Kemp invents to provoke his roommate Christopher Warner’s interest and envy. This invention only retains Christopher’s fascination momentarily, but soon becomes an object of obsession for John himself. But Christopher’s brief interest in Jill is critical to her genesis in Kemp’s mind because he wants to want what *others* want (there is also a strong suggestion of homoerotic desire for Christopher). John begins to write letters to Jill in the hope that Christopher might read them, but soon drops this pretence and dispenses with the imaginary addressee; he then begins to write a diary as her, then a story about her, or, rather, writes her into a story. As Terry Castle has noted, ‘psychologically speaking the interpolated tale seems

at once uncanny and overdetermined: it is as if Kemp both wants to *have* Jill and to *be* Jill' (Castle 102) The always-present paradox in the creation of character is inescapable here: to have Jill, John must make her into an-other; to make Jill present to himself as someone else, her writer needs simultaneously to invent her and release her into unknowability. His imaginative possession of her as character re-appropriates her otherness, annihilates her difference.

As if to prove that an extreme of appropriation paradoxically leads to defamiliarization, the matter is taken out of John's hands when the girl he imagined appears as a real girl, Gillian, whom he runs into in a bookshop. The conventional liberation of art from the artist takes a phantasmagoric turn: instead of writing her into freedom from the text, he finds that she has collided with it, walked into his fantasy as recognisably its object but from the external world. Larkin later recalled that 'Jill was based on the idea that running away from life, John's fantasy about an imaginary sister, might lead you straight into it – meeting the real Jill, I mean. With disastrous results' (*RW* 63). Freed of her writer's power with a vengeance, known but unknown, the real Jill deprives Kemp's artistic labour of any available artistic fulfilment; or, more precisely, she changes the terms of fulfilment from *his* art to *her* life. In a variation of the Pygmalion theme, Kemp must try to become the lover of the being whom he has got to know by imagining her existence. Larkin's Pygmalion is, unprecedentedly, no bold creator: he is withdrawn in the extreme, unable to relate to others or to make others care for him, and struggles pathetically to find a way to make his life touch the animated statue's while keeping her from his or any other's touch. In *Body Work*, Peter Brooks

has noted that the scene in which Galatea comes alive in answer to Pygmalion's prayers is marked by a deployment of a 'series of words having to do with Pygmalion's touching of the statue' (23), as if to show that when art becomes real, touch leaves 'its imprint, as in wax'. The sign of becoming other through being the object of desire is a body that can be imprinted, wounded, marked, that turns to wax from stone. This fiction 'realises simultaneously erotic desire and the creative desire to know and make', and it is able to bring its object to life not in spite of but 'precisely because her perfectly sculpted body has become the object of intense desire' (24). In Larkin's fiction, intense desire operates in reverse of this: it fails to make its object other because the artist wants to preserve its untouchability. Kemp wants to maintain Jill's distance from his own making-and-desiring self, whose action upon her will change both her and, crucially, himself. This, I think, is connected with 'imaginative satisfaction' and the 'creative impulse' having no stake in the world and the other. The metamorphoses the imaginary Jill undergoes before the 'real' Jill appears in John's life as someone alien to it, shows that the imagination that creates solely for itself must also keep the created object *from* itself; otherwise, it risks becoming different from itself, more and more 'like the others'.

John's original lie about a sister is a desperate bid to get his roommate Christopher Warner to recognise him as an equal; Jill is something worth envy that will gain John entry into the society of his peers, who all have enviable possessions. Christopher's own possessions are formidable: apart from a wealthy home and an attractive mother, talent for male camaraderie and prowess at sport, he has the self-confidence of thoughtlessness and, most importantly, brutality. Christopher Warner is

Entitlement. The only time John sees him touched with longing, in lack, is at mention of a sister with whom John enjoys a close relationship: '[Christopher] laid his cigarette in an ashtray and let it burn, staring down at the fire. John saw with gathering amazement that he had said something that made Christopher envious of him – only for this moment perhaps, but none the less envious' (118). Envy is the bond that holds together the type of society that Christopher represents; someone like Kemp, who has nothing that the next man can want, is powerless to initiate relationships. As John discovers in Jill the 'something' whose possession makes him enviable, he suddenly becomes part of this societal economy: as if to confirm this, Christopher immediately afterwards returns him the pound that he had borrowed earlier and apparently forgotten about. In recognising him as someone who has something worth having, Christopher recognises him as well as someone to whom something is due, rather than as a no-one who can be taken from without acknowledgement.

Why should John's possession of a close relationship with a sister call forth Christopher's envious desire? *Jill* brilliantly portrays the nostalgia for home that afflicts its just-post-adolescence male characters. This 'home' is not a place, but a place-holder, a shifting identifier of comfort and belonging that are perceived, in the present, as lost. Christopher envies John Jill because she represents a bond with 'home' that he has lost in the necessary education of becoming a man:

He seemed to be following a private train of thought. 'But you do lose touch with your home if you go to school young,' he said. 'It's a good thing, it teaches independence, teaches you how to stand up for yourself, teaches you how to handle people.'

John nodded, watching him. He had heard Christopher say all this before.

‘But I regret it sometimes, you know... One sort of loses touch. And one doesn’t get a second chance, ever... (118)

But in another place it is this school and its mores that are portrayed as the place that gave Christopher and his friends their native stamp.

The life they described was intensely primitive to him... The astonishing thing was that he could catch here and there a note of regret in their voices, a nostalgia even. In the intervals of comparing notes and customs, they would sigh and gaze sadly at the fire, as if they were exiles gathered together far from their homes. And little by little John himself came to understand their sorrow, as what they had lost became clearer in his mind. To him it was wild and extravagant, a life that was panoplied and trampling compared with his own: it seemed to him that in their schooldays they had won more than he would ever win during the whole of his life. At first ill-treated, they had lived to be oppressors whose savagest desire could be gratified at once, which was surely the height of ambition. As the picture grew in his mind, he ornamented it with little marginal additions, until in the end the thing was as unreal as a highly coloured picture of an ancient battle, but he had no inkling of its untruth, and he looked on them with curious respect. The pimply Eddy; Christopher, dark and unshaven as a boxer; the selfish and smiling Patrick, and even Tony Braithwaite – all took on a picturesqueness in his eyes, as if they were veterans of an old war. (58)

Homes compete with each other in the nostalgic imaginations of these scarred young men who seem also to be completely at home in the impersonal ‘hotel life’ of the College. It would be difficult to classify them as romantic, and yet their automatic nostalgia for whatever they have survived or missed shows something of the inveterate sentimentalism that informs a certain Romanticism. John lacks this particular sentimentalism; his imagination is invested not so much in a past which confirms conquest and entitlement – he hasn’t got such a past, as the novel labours to say – but in

a person or persons who open up the possibility of acculturation. The imagined Jill, as we will see, is a refuge against the environment in which he finds himself, but she is also his relationship to it, his secret possession that makes him in his own eyes an equal to the others.

In *Jill*, and in Larkin's novels in general, foreignness is not an exception. Everyone is foreign to something, exists in a state of exile from something, and being native is a relative disposition to this foreignness. The native is the foreigner who has no elsewhere, whether this is because he fails to construct one or chooses not to construct one, like the speaker of the poem 'The Importance of Elsewhere'. Kemp begins to acquire his own habitat when he begins to construct a fictional one for Jill. At this point the novel shows him becoming 'drowsily content' (132); the expression on his faces changes from 'strained and mistrustful' to 'relieved and dull' (134); 'he had grown accustomed to the buildings and did not notice them any longer' (133). As Jill's writer, he is not simply an outsider among the band of more-or-less at ease men at his College; he, too, is in exile from somewhere where he belongs and which he can call native. He has adopted the process of solitary writing, a secret work that reworks his surroundings to his will, as his native element.

But Jill becomes yet more: she comes to represent a reorientation of desire for Kemp. Initially purpose-built to exercise a hold on Christopher's imagination, her continued gestation is owed to John's own desire, until eventually she crosses the line where she is a means to an end – a possession to make Kemp equal in the envy of others – to the end itself. She becomes 'someone' whom Kemp recognises as known but does

not know at all, crosses the line from being an object of desire to the other who is desired without being known. Jill becomes a foreign or 'real' presence he can or cannot get to know, whom he will or will not be able to love. This takes us close to the heart of the novel's reflection on the work Kemp's imagination sets itself to do: in creating an alternative to 'real life', does this work 'actually' bring the solitary labourer closer to it? Is writing Jill a secret desire to get nearer and nearer to something called 'life' that Kemp enacts without knowing? Does creating a private world bring Kemp to the point where he can recognise the foreignness of Jill to his story, even as it is *his* story, cobbled together out of the impressions, images and desires that make up the meagre stuff of his experience? In short, can art produce alterity out of its own resources?

Up to a point, I would suggest. Art brings Kemp to the point of wanting to know Jill as real, but does not prepare him for her reality. While writing letters to an imaginary Jill at school, Kemp reaches 'some insuperable barrier' (135) which forces him to stop writing to Jill and to begin to write *as* Jill. At first, the excitement that Jill affords him when he abandons writing letters to her that Christopher might secretly read, and begins to write *to her*, is the excitement of her unresponsiveness:

He was trembling when he dropped [the letter] into a pillar-box, and leant against the wall a moment, filled with exultation at the idea of thus speaking with nothingness. He envisaged the envelope wandering around England, collecting pencilled scribbles of suggestions on the front and back until, perhaps a year or more hence, it came to rest in some dusty corner of a dead-letter office. How many years would it stay there? Till he, perhaps, had changed out of all knowing.

He must write again, write dozens of them. Dozens of letters to Miss Jill Bradley must wander through the postal service. (131-132)

The letters are something new for Kemp: an exultant sending out of his life into an element that will not respond, a record that will remain the same and so mark his difference from it: that *he changes*. In sending them out Kemp is also sending out a self to circulate and eventually die out. The 'speaking with nothingness' is still an attempt at making a self-fissure, a 'speaking with' and not a silence; it is compensation for the absence of friendship in his life, the more usual circulation of the self on the way to extinction in change or in death. But the counter-instinct to this excitement at unresponsiveness, the desire for an answering self, is not absent when he sends the letter to nothingness. Addressing the envelope to Jill, he finds that he does not 'want to connect her with himself' by giving her his name (131), the family name under which she was proffered to Warner. The despatch of the letter and the changing of the name occur at the same time and are part of the same contradictory impulse. Kemp begins to make Jill unlike himself at the moment when she is almost completely his self-projection and self-consolation; by renouncing in his imagination the tie of kinship with her, he paves the way to making her not just a surety of his own foreignness in a world of foreigners, but a foreign presence to himself. Jill's foreignness makes it possible for his wish for intimacy to come out of the shadows. The extrinsic, undirected movement of the letters allows Kemp to change towards a different self, and this change allows him to conceive of his own creation as foreign, holding out the promise of knowability and the impossibility of possession through knowing that marks the touch of the 'real'. So a point comes after he has starting fictionalising Jill's life when she is revealed as someone 'he had never thought of ... before'.

It was as if he had been talking to her from a public telephone-box, talking interminably, and then had looked up to see her listening in the next compartment, smiling at him through the glass with the receiver held in her hand.

‘You — ’he began, then broke off again. That sheet he tore up.

Suddenly it was she who was important, she who was interesting, she whom he longed to write about; beside her, he and his life seemed dusty and tedious. (135)

It is this foreignness (rather than mere difference without heterogeneity) that the real Jill, become real through force of fictive fiat, both fulfils and displaces by intruding on his fantasy with her own ‘real’ foreignness. The wish for a different self is thwarted by Jill, and the novel moves towards a consideration of the damage that otherness does to John Kemp.

When the real Jill runs into Kemp in a bookshop, he notes that ‘what actually happened had the deliberate and tantalising quality of a dream’. ‘Disconcertingly, the idea he had concocted out of the world’s sight had suddenly showed itself as ordinary flesh and blood, as real, calling for real action on his part’ (158). The novel indicates that this action can take the form of either doing things that lead Kemp to come nearer the object of his love, to travel distance as a path, or to seal her off from his life into an absolute distance which would allow her to be completely present and so completely possess-able in imagination. This choice does not represent the difference between altruism and egotism, but between different forms of desire. Kemp does both these things; indeed, the tragi-comic bewilderment that sets in at the end of the novel is due to Kemp’s doing one as he thinks he is doing the other: he wants to discover Jill’s real life from a distance that

would allow him to observe her with the completeness with which he wanted to imagine her. He resolves not to approach her but to stalk her:

All that would remain for him to do would be to discover her real life, to follow her about and not be noticed, to make lists of the clothes she wore and the places she went to, to make her the purpose of his life once more now that he had just begun sniffing enviously again at the society of Christopher Warner and Elizabeth Dowling. In this quest loneliness would be an asset: it would be mobility and even charm. (159)

She furnishes his loneliness with purpose and charm; she strengthens him to resist the desire for human company, which he sees as servile. A little later in the novel, after Kemp has been indulging his fantasy of getting to know her by haunting the places she could be and waiting for her to show up, he is shocked by another ‘reality’. Jill is not just his private quest or private vice: she represents to him what other women represent to other men. Hearing Christopher speak about his planned seduction of a woman, he recognises both the commonness of their desires and the ‘disparity he stumbled upon between his imagination and what actually happened... If this was all that his quest for Jill was leading to, he would give it up without a second thought’, ‘although he knew he would think of nothing else all day’ (170). Ironically, it is at this very moment that Jill walks into the College room he shares with Warner, leaving Kemp in bewilderment that he ‘had run her to earth in the very centre of the place he wished to avoid’ (176). He is shocked again when his friends guess all-too-easily what is in his mind – sex: ‘[I]t was incredible to him that the secret he had guarded should be parted in fifteen minutes between Eddy and Patrick’ (188) – but stubbornly refuses to identify the content of his

desires with theirs. The lack of exclusivity of what he wants separates her from his secret possession of her. Changing track, he resolves to befriend her, instead of secretly dogging her footsteps, but as a way of keeping her to herself and therefore for himself:

If he could make friends with her he might push her back into her own life, where he himself could follow. Never must she be allowed to go outside her own life. And then through her, he might enter this life, this other innocent life that she led. (170)

The terms of even this friendship with her in her isolated 'own life' are decided by him in advance, however, and they are conditional and self-defensive in the extreme:

He recognised... (with a certain shameful relief) that it was not likely that he should ever get to know her, but if he did, it must be away from his present surroundings that they must move. And as he knew he would lack Christopher's rather brutal self-confidence when the time came (what was the time?), he must also see to it that the time never did come. (171)

Nearness to Jill *or* failure to achieve nearness, both would equally destroy the illusion of knowing her, of being able to escape into a life she represents but which is not her own.

Nevertheless, the concluding sequence of the novel sees a Kemp returned from bombed-out Huddlesford attempt an action that is ambiguous in meaning. Finding a note inviting Warner to a party with Jill and others, he is drawn, in a frenzy of anger and drunken longing, to seek her out – 'he had no idea what he would do, only that he wanted to be with her' (234) – and kiss her. This action almost costs him his life: Christopher hits him and leaves him outside on the wet grass, as a result of which Kemp catches pneumonia. There is no success with Jill, either: the last mention of her finds her

crying, a frightened young girl at the receiving end of a menacing experience. But in terms of choices in the novel, has Kemp attempted nearness to or complete severance from the object of love?

As an answer the novel offers us two fragments of dream, to be placed beside each other. The dreams parallel and comment on, whether intentionally or not, the novel's own fearful search for relation between willing the love of another and coming nearer love. There is something fragment-like about them, offered as they are without further development: they have yet to relate themselves to time and place, to narrative.

He could feel her lips pressed against his, but he could not feel the rest of her. He could not feel her with his body at all. He hugged her harder, rolling desperately against her, but it was all nothing, he could not feel her at all. (241)

And:

They sprawled together on the couch and John was filled with a lassitude so great that it alarmed him, it seemed a kind of treachery. They had lived there so long together that their love had worn thin like a coat; it was shabby with wearing. He looked at the young girl he held ... and was frightened at his own indifference. (241)

The first dream is about physical proximity, and registers the failure to feel what he touches; in the second physical intimacy is unproblematic because it is refracted through boredom and envy, which is only altered by Christopher's advance towards the house. In an effort to prevent Christopher from claiming Jill, John turns 'his grip into an embrace, hoping to cloud her mind with sensuality... though knowing all the time that she looked over his shoulder out through the window, that Christopher had seen her and he was

coming towards the house' (242). Both dreams result in different kinds of loss, leading to the reflection, 'within the framework of the dream', that

[T]he love that they had shared was dead. For the fact that in life he had been cheated of her was not the whole truth. Somewhere, in dreams, perhaps ... they had interlocked and he had his own way as completely as in life he had been denied it. And this dream showed that love died, whether fulfilled or unfulfilled ... the result was the same: and as his confusion increased, it spread to fulfilment or unfulfilment, which merged and became inseparable. The difference between them vanished. (242)

The end of this novel, then, shows Kemp brought to a standstill by the lack of difference between his own desires; or, we might say, the novel searches and fails to find the love that makes for difference, that distinguishes between nearness and possession. Nearness, especially in the mode of touch, is a continual reminder of difference, even when there is desire to establish sameness of purpose or feeling. Not-feeling and realised desire amount to the same thing in Kemp's dream, and over them hangs the threat of Christopher's stronger claim, which reminds Kemp that what he, Kemp, wants is truly a shadow of Christopher's desire. This indifference comes to the fore even more clearly in Larkin's next novel, *A Girl in Winter*, as a forceful conversion of fear into knowledge that betrays the loved one.

The wartime excursus that Larkin introduces into the text at the point where Kemp has been forced to desist from his pursuit of Jill by the weight of peer pressure and lack of reciprocity, does more than just put Kemp's existence into proper war-time historical

context. In this journey back to his destroyed place of origin, the war forces him to relive the experience of belonging and then be released from it. Having travelled back north to a bombed-out Huddlesford, Kemp 'was praying for his parents like a child and fervently. He gasped aloud that he would do anything, promise anything, if only it would be all right. Any attempts at a personal life he had made seemed merely a tangle of hypocritical selfishness; really he was theirs, dependent on them forever. Everything would be renounced, if everything was all right'. The recommitment of self to belonging to a family and a past mean, for Kemp, renunciation of a 'personal life', the acknowledgement of dependence, 'renouncing' as the necessary condition of keeping things 'all right' – and the conditional involves an indeterminate 'everything' (214). Kemp is released from the huge weight of this 'everything' when he finds his family has been spared; their survival frees him of the bond of dependence (the inference being that their destruction might well have trapped him into dependence through suffering, as it does the people he meets in the Huddlesford pub who in their shock look like they are 'awaiting a train' (216)), and deeper into a future that is perpetual exile without home. The safety of his family gains his own release; on the way back to Oxford, he sees the scenes he has just encountered in different terms:

Once again the scarecrow buildings, the streets half heaved-up by detonations, the candle-lit bar. It no longer seemed meaningless: struggling awake again, rubbing his eyes with chilled hands, he thought it represented the end of his use for the place. It meant no more to him now, so it was destroyed: it seemed symbolic, a sort of annulling of his childhood. The thought excited him. It was as if he had been told: all the past is cancelled; all the suffering connected with that town, all your childhood, is wiped out. Now there is a fresh start for you: you are no longer governed by what has gone before. (219)

From seeing the past in terms of total self-sacrifice, to seeing it as annulled and himself released from all ties to it – this swing of the pendulum defines the concluding problem of the novel, the riddle in place of an ending: the problem of indifference. The exhilaration of indifference is the survivor’s reward; but the paradox is that, instead of detachment or divestment, it leads to a renewed appetite for aggression. The newly-freed Kemp finds his life simplified in the light of his absence from care towards others, but he thinks of this simplified life as a weapon to wield against ‘them’ : ‘What a mess he had been making, when it was all so easy: he could hardly believe it. He had been a proper fool, worrying and bothering himself. But he’d show them... light-heartedly, he simply repeated that he’d have done with it, that it was all over, that now they’d be seeing something’ (219). The Kemp who arrives back in College is more noticeably the equal, in manner and tone, of the ‘others’ – Christopher and Patrick and Eddy. Eddy ironically echoes his new attitude in a tone of more perfect crassness when he asks about Huddlesford, ““Do people live there?”... “I thought it was a music-hall fiction” ’ (221). Indifference is also the new possession that compensates him for loss of Jill, though the reversal is neither neat nor fixed. The Kemp who dreamed of throwing a party for Jill to which ‘[e]veryone came’ and she ‘stood all evening, dressed in white, in a corner, turning and turning one tiny unemptied glass in her hand’ (189-190), becomes the Kemp who, armed with his indifference, plans to throw a party with the others as ‘a very useful contribution to the war effort’ (223).

Stephen Cooper writes that ‘*Jill* provides many of the narrative and thematic tropes of Larkin’s later poetry. The ploy of colliding voices and attitudes, the techniques

of inverting and undercutting conventional categories of understanding, and the use of a complex system of symbols and leitmotifs, all find their way into the “mature” volumes’ (47). Keeping this in mind, and as a postscript to my reading of *Jill*, I want to read a poem from Larkin’s last collection, *High Windows*: ‘Sympathy in White Major’. Written in Larkin’s most ‘mature’ period, it does not, apparently, have much to do with the novel of a very young Larkin. My argument is that it echoes without resolving what I have described as one of the main concerns of the novel: the business of getting nearer.

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

While other people wore like clothes
The human beings in their days
I set myself to bring to those
Who thought I could the lost displays;
It didn't work for them or me,
But all concerned were nearer thus
(Or so we thought) to all the fuss
Than if we'd missed it separately.

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

(*Complete Poems* 76)²²

²² Henceforth ‘CP’.

Barbara Everett has brilliantly characterised this poem as the inheritor of ‘a chain of Anglo-American-French images’ of chilly whiteness and aesthetic purity, of Gautier, Swinburne Mallarme and Whistler (60): ‘this fantasia picks up the lingo of a whole tradition – and then makes something new out of it’ (62); ‘An elegy on Symbolism is delivered in the age of the TV commercial; and in its style’ (63).²³ Her reading, however, makes too little of the tension of voices and the dramatic modulations present in the poem itself. The poem is, she says,

a sympathetic ‘symphony in white’ as aesthetically clever as Gautier’s own; its speaker is framed against an image of himself as ‘the whitest man I know’, like Whistler’s subject, and hesitates between illusions as Swinburne’s beauty does. (Everett, ‘Philip Larkin: After Symbolism’ 60)

This moves a little too quickly to conflate various moments in the poem in a symphonic reading. White swans, girls dressed in white and the salutations of fellow-drinkers are all present, obsessively so, in *Jill*. The speaker of this poem is in a drunken dialogue with ghostly friends. Solitude and urbanity of tone make him appear to be in control, but, as if to undermine this from the first, the poem begins with him imbibing ‘three goes of gin’. Significantly, the speaker is seeking both a ‘chime’ and a ‘void’, and the poem plays on the ambiguity between the two. ‘I lift the lot in private pledge’: it is not clear what the ‘lot’ is, nor indeed what is being pledged, since the words of direct speech that follow are not a promise made by him but an acknowledgement made to him by this ghostly fellow-voice. The self-glorification and the self-exultation of the speaker are obvious. But the poem, spare as it is in words, still manages to suggest a drunken incoherence that borrows phrases from the public fund of platitudes. This is a speech in the process of

²³ Peter Robinson agrees with Everett; see ‘Philip Larkin: Here and There’ pp. 5-7.

being composed and its rhetoric is, to put it mildly, uneven. ‘While other people wore like clothes/ the human beings in their days/ I set myself to bring to those / who thought I could the lost displays.’ The grand and universal cadences at the beginning of these lines peter out in a lame ‘lost displays’, which, if anything, sounds like a muddled reference to pornography. What is under the clothes is not just the real person but also the naked person. Trains of thought collide in exasperating inarticulacy. But there is, as well, an attempt at honesty in this inarticulacy; the speech composer loses the thread of his thought and admits that ‘it didn’t work for them or me/ but all concerned were nearer thus’ – to what, we are never told. This, then, is not only a self-congratulator, but also a man who has been at work at something, trivial or important, mean or noble, to do with others: getting nearer and getting everyone else nearer. The gruff clichés don’t make this seem like an admirable labour. But the modest boast of the self-toasting or ventriloquizing voice is that, because of ‘him’ – himself or another –*they* are ‘nearer’ than they would have been had they ‘missed it separately’.

The unknown ‘private pledge’ of the speaker has something to do with the not-private tribute by another, or another self, in whose voice he addresses himself. The string of platitudinous praise that comes rolling out in the last stanza (in a voice whose bluff regimental vocabulary does not rule out its literally being a Major’s) mimics this pledge – perhaps it is only a self-aggrandizing pledge to be the person who is the toast of the party – even as it ironically acknowledges the distance between the pledger and the desired self of the speaker. This sympathetic but uncompromising self-difference should be placed beside the indifference of the young student who cannot find a way for his life

to matter to others. 'White' is a term of commendation used several times in *Jill*; Christopher says it is 'white' of Kemp to lend him some money, for instance, at a moment when they seem to find some common ground on which to appreciate each other; immediately afterwards he invites Kemp to have a drink with him for the first time (60). Narrow and self-serving as it might be, this is the business of getting nearer 'the fuss', as the speaker says, the business of getting close and getting on. It may not be entirely 'his favourite colour', but it is the other side of the 'fantasia' of the white swan and the girl in the white dress that, in *Jill*, leads to the indifference between various possibilities.

Larkin has here dramatized in poetic form a moment of agreement with self or with others that constitutes the 'atmosphere of male camaraderie, sympathising with Jim's entrapment and empathising with his quest' (35), that Alice Ferrebe sees in Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* and more generally in the novels of Larkin's male contemporaries. However, Larkin's use of irony, inarticulacy and obscurity, all work to deny this kind of camaraderie any moral superiority; the extreme syncopation of his dramatized form leaves its attitudinal stakes ambiguous. Ferrebe argues that a masculine text's 'primary function, through the process of "suture", or the enmeshment of the reader within its structures of power and meaning, is to create a community' (*Masculinities in Male-Authored Fiction* 197). But, crucially, while the speaker of 'Symphony' can be imagined as being in a moment of some such narrative, this is not a form of enmeshment that the reader will find in *Jill*. Kemp is far from toasting himself in the voice of another, or even from a deluded pat-on-the-back for doing something for a

friend. Castle has praised ‘the greatness of Larkin’s novel *Jill* – perhaps the most exquisite and self-lacerating male-authored English fiction of the postwar period’ (99). Whalen argues for the distinctiveness of Larkin’s portrayal of ‘male speakers’ who are in his poems ‘very often uncertain about what they should do next, and it is a mark to his resistance of a 1950s notion of male confidence that he would present them so’ (‘Philip Larkin and *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*’ 191). Larkin’s novel shows the problem of relation where later novels deploy the theme of anger. In his second novel Larkin takes this unreceptive and unrelating male persona forward by giving it a female person,²⁴ and by making the problem of how romantic attachment shapes the individual’s ability to relate to others even more explicit.

‘The masculine self is characterised with reference to its isolation, independence and rigorous exclusion of what it is not’ (Ferrebe 12). Ferrebe’s remark provides a clue as to why Larkin might have chosen to make the protagonist of his next novel a woman. For Katherine in *A Girl in Winter* is isolated, independent and distant from others’ emotions. But she is not interested, as Ferrebe’s male protagonists of the ‘50s are, in social conformity or in community, even in the inverted sense of struggling to get out of it. She

²⁴ I do not go as far as to say, with Stephen Cooper, that Larkin is in his novels actively trying to subvert gender roles, and that they are about the overcoming of the masculine by the feminine. Cooper writes that ‘John conceived Jill to be “serious” and “innocent” as a foil to the orthodox sexual politics of Elizabeth and Christopher, his interest in “the real” Jill –Gillian – alerts him to his own involvement with the coarseness of male desire’ (45-6), and that ‘John recognises that, despite the humiliations that his male desire has caused, his “feminine” side is still in touch with Gillian’ (46). I would stress, rather, that John’s inability to relate to masculine desire as he sees it in his peers is linked to his inability to relate to Gillian’s lack of desire for him. The point is not an either-or identification with male or female desire, but how extremes of non-relation with either lead to neutralization of desire – for knowledge of and intimacy with self and other – in the novels.

has more in common with the heroines that Ferrebe describes in an article on Elizabeth Taylor's work as questioning 'the very idea of shared female experience' ('Elizabeth Taylor's Uses of Romance' 62). But to see more clearly the ground on which Larkin's novel is staked, we can look at Elizabeth Bowen, whose work Larkin admired and may even have been influenced by, writing about a contemporary of hers who was decidedly on Larkin's mind in this early phase of his career, in these terms:

The most remarkable, the most natural of [Rosamund Lehmann's] qualities is the power to give emotion its full value and play, to transcribe into prose emotion that is grown-up and spontaneous, fatalistic but not abject, sublime without being high-pitched, infusing life but knowing its isolation. She attempts to make no relation, necessarily a false relation, between emotion with its colossal, unmoving subjective landscape, and outside life with its flickering continuity of action and fact.

[...]

Olivia is alien, uncertain, nostalgic... Whereas Rollo is more than an inmate of his world; his world is part of his nature; she sees in him the strong and happy flowering of it. From this world, now that their love affair has begun, she is bound to know him apart; she is conscious that, in being with her, he is dissociated, however happily, from the major part of himself. Their love has for him the exhilaration of an island life, whereas for her it is a continent. (Bowen 140-41)

Elizabeth Bowen's review of Rosamund Lehman's *The Weather in the Street* (from the *New Statesman* 1936) can help us understand what the choice of a central female protagonist might offer a male novelist like Larkin in an examination of romantic attachment. Bowen's reference to the 'necessarily false relation' between 'emotion with its colossal unmoving, subjective landscape and outside life with its flickering continuity of action and fact' points to a way of positioning an affective world as a feminine world. Larkin deploys the atmosphere of this affective world, albeit with important

differences.²⁵ In Lehman's novel, for the female protagonist love reflects the public world to the self through attachment to a man, and the increasing isolation and disillusionment of the couple leads to greater distance between world and self.²⁶ Larkin, too, is interested in the effects of emotional isolation on Katherine and her feelings for Robin Fennel. But the important difference is that Katherine does not need Fennel to be her conduit to a public world; she is a working woman, and emotional dependence is not one of her problems: in fact it is the opposite. Larkin's novel is percipient in asking the question that a later generation of women writers would broach: what does Katherine, an emotionally withdrawn and financially independent woman, want from Robin?

In making his main protagonist a woman, Larkin frees her of the primary relationship to the masculine world that that excludes Kemp but still lends comprehensible purpose to his actions, and towards which the writing of Jill is directed in the first place, as both aggression and seduction. Larkin absolves her from the heroic struggle against social conformity that is often the subtext of male-authored fiction. In *A Girl*, Larkin is less interested in envy and possession than in the elusive connection between self-reliance, as well as autonomous self-revision, on the one hand, and a

²⁵ James Booth Notes in the Introduction to *Willow Gables* that Lehmann was an influence on Larkin; her 'romantic novel of Cambridge undergraduate life, *Dusty Answer* (1927), supplies another of the epigraphs in *Trouble at Willow Gables*' (XX). The epigraph in question is: 'I wonder if men are really nicer?' (22). As if to answer the question, follows a chapter in which the older Hilary imposes herself as a 'nocturnal tutor' upon the junior-former Mary, 'a very sensible girl' (23). The droll scene of seduction which ends chastely involves Mademoiselle de Maupin, irregular Latin verbs and a plate of biscuits that Mary turns down. 'If love could be pursued without biscuits', muses the lascivious but stingy Hilary, '*tant mieux*' (26). Larkin's transposition of the careful-reckless older seducer and the blandly cheerful, erotically unaware young female, stereotypes of heterosexual romance, into biscuit-munching Latin-swotting schoolgirls cannot be faulted for its humour.

²⁶ On Lehmann, see Wendy Pollard's *Rosamund Lehmann and her Critics: The Vagaries of Literary Reception* and Claire Hanson's *Hysterical Fictions: The Woman's Novel in the Twentieth Century*.

capacity to respond and care, on the other. Katherine's association with Robin is also an association with a part of her life that has been left unmarred by the traumatic events she experienced in the unnamed European country she fled. In contemplating her relation with Robin, past and present, she desires to re-establish connection with desire itself, to return herself to persons and places in which she had an affective as well as physical existence. This, I argue, plots her desired return to Robin, and, through him, to the Fennels.

The story of her summer holiday with the Fennels is told within the narrative of one day, as an excursus of memory. Katherine Lind forms a pen-friendship with Robin Fennel, a boy of her own age, sixteen. Invited to spend a holiday with them in England, her boredom with his letters turns to fascination; Robin surprises her by seeming to want something from her. Once in England, though, she is confounded by Robin's behaviour, which is formal in the extreme and bears no mark of the interest that she feels must have motivated his invitation. The mystery is solved when his sister Jane, who had heretofore seemed like a tedious chaperone to Katherine, reveals that it was she who instigated the invitation. Just before she returns home, Robin kisses her; Katherine catches a glimmer of what he is like without the mediation of family and convention that had tempered him to the point of vapidness. At this point, the story returns to a now-exiled Katherine in a small provincial English town, making the best of her life as a war refugee. Though not belaboured, there are hints of atrocities and of Katherine's Jewish origin. She contacts the Fennels again upon reading of Jane's infant daughter's death in a newspaper. On the particular day that the novel chronicles, Katherine offers to escort home a female

colleague who has toothache, and persuades her to visit a dentist when her condition appears bad. This small sympathetic gesture is something of an achievement of feeling in Katherine's emotionally impoverished life, and leaves her both prepared and unprepared for a letter from Robin informing her he'll visit her on the same day. Katherine resolves to avoid her visitor, but finds him waiting for her at her flat when she returns. Robin, now drafted into the army, is a complete surprise to her, and the end of the novel explores Katherine's reluctant reception of this changed man whom she then takes as her lover, in a scene that ends on a strange if not paradoxical note of fatalistic ambivalence.

Edward Said has written that 'in a very acute sense, exile is the solitude experienced outside the group... How, then, does one mount the loneliness of exile without falling into the encompassing and thumping language of national pride, collective sentiments, group passion?' (175) Whether exiles are sometimes closer to home in exile itself is a question that Said does not quite ask, but it is one that is foregrounded by Larkin's portrayal of exile without home. Said offers an anecdote about two friends that indicates one way out of exile: poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz meets radical intellectual Eqbal Ahmed in exile in Beirut, and recites his verses to him, while Said watches. Said observes that '[w]hat I watched required no translation: it was an enactment of a homecoming expressed through defiance and loss, as if to say, "Zia, we are here." Of course Zia was the one who was really at home and who would not hear their exultant voices (Said 175). This homecoming asserts and affirms, between familiars, a presence *to* the place from which the exile is banished – even though the

place itself is oblivious of this moment of poetic triumph. If exile is a dilemma not only of separation from land to which one has a filiative or legal claim, but of separation from others who allow one to be oneself, the overcoming of exile in poetic address to another can be seen as the only transfiguration it allows. Larkin's Katherine is a variant of this type of exile: she does not wish to reconstitute a pre-exilic home from land or history, but rather to find an access to a past self that can recognise another with whom to belong or love. Her exile, then, searches not for the already known or the utopian, but for that *newness* in herself that would recognise the old Katherine who could puzzle over a boy's mystifying behaviour, and feel empathy and desire. Not surprisingly, then, she realises that 'even if her old life had been waiting for her, she no longer wanted to return to it'. Realisation of this is a sign that 'she had broken fresh ground' (183). She is in exile from a land to which she not just cannot but does not wish to go back, but she does want to return to a self who was at home in that land.

'Where did the Fennels come into all this?', the novel asks, and the answer Katherine gives is that 'they supported her failing hope that she was wrong to think that her life had worsened so irrevocably... It was the only period of her life that had not been spoiled by later events, and she found that she could draw upon it hearteningly, remembering when she had been happy, and ready to give and take, instead of unwilling to give, and finding nothing worth taking. It was as if she hoped that they would warm back to life a part of her that had been frozen' (185). The Fennels' very conventional, very English existence comes to represent in her English exile, not a home, but a point to which return could perhaps be possible through another's recognition. The return to the

known Fennels, which she thinks would make her able once against to bear strangeness, is also a return to an unknown Robin who was ‘in the forefront of a time when she had come to this same strange country, and had been welcomed by strangers and taken in amongst them ... with emotions that could be snipped off like flowers, only to make the next crop more luxuriant’ (216). Katherine’s nostalgia is thus janus-faced: the nostalgia for acceptance by a familiar, and also nostalgia for what she doesn’t know, has seen only as a possibility.

It is through remembering and reconnecting with the past that Katherine is able to articulate the desire for a future.²⁷ But the future begins to re-appear as an extension of the past at the price of dismissal of the present, in which she ‘ate, slept and worked, and refused to compare what she did or ate, or where she slept, with any work or food or household she had known in the past. Everything had to be reduced to its simplest terms’ (181). She attends to the few articles of clothing from her previous life with a ‘sort of love. They were all she had left’. But to live with this possessive reduced attachment to what she has, Katherine must ‘live from day to day, as she had been doing, shut out the past, but it shut out the future too, and made the present one long, temporary hand-to-mouth existence’ (182). In this, the novel signals towards Larkin’s later treatment of temporality in many of his poems, like ‘Lines on A Young Lady’s Photograph Album’,

²⁷ The future the absence of which is the melancholy burden of Katherine’s meditations can be understood as the supplement of the past. A supplement, as Mark Curry says, is ‘something extra that comes afterwards, and which Derrida’s readings consistently show has some conceptual priority over the origins from which [it is] supposed to follow. The logic of supplementarity, for Derrida, is a counter-logic which such explanations carry within themselves. That is to say that an explanation which secures itself on the scheme of an originary presence followed by a supplement which is extra, a? secondary, will often contain its counter-logic which suggests that the supplement is in fact prior’ (14-15).

where what appears as a curiously-arrested backward glance is still not translatable to a desire to live in the past but to live with presence of the past.

The content of this past-future revolves around Katherine's impression of the teenage Robin, and the contrast with her encounter with the adult now-drafted Robin is instructive, for it shows that temporality by itself can only offer an empty horizon. Not just the possibility of experience but also its content, the active work and passive wear of experience, make up the horizon of possibility. The novel shows, perhaps in spite of itself, that to call a future back is not enough if it is not also actively created in the present by the one who goes forward, willingly or unwillingly, to meet it.

Robin is the representative of the past and the future. He fascinates Katherine in his self-possession. His chief characteristic as a boy is that he fits in, projects no signs of dis-identity with his surrounds or his self: 'It was impossible to know what he was thinking; he seemed perfectly adjusted to all his surroundings – including her – and able to withdraw his real personality elsewhere' (77); 'He was at ease among his inherited surroundings' (87); 'to be so independent, yet so gracious – and Robin's movements were always beautifully finished and calm' (90-91); 'this reserve, this sandpapering of every word and gesture until it exactly fitted its place in the conversation, this gracious carriage of the personality – this was not natural, or at the most it was a manner so familiar by now that his thoughts and motives could change freely behind it. Somewhere behind it was a desire to see her ... The time would come when he would let her see' (91). Jane, his sister, is by contrast neither beautiful nor composed: 'she looked pale and irritable, rather like Robin after a long illness... She had none of his poise' (88).But

Jane, maladjusted and restless, shows signs of being someone who can truly return Katherine's love; intellectually and emotionally she is Katherine's equal in a way that Robin does not approximate. It is Jane, and not Robin, who has summoned Katherine to England. She is the one who attends to Katherine's letters, feels the presence of a kindred spirit in the words of a distant stranger, and engineers an invitation. In spite of Katherine's idea of her as idle and listless, she initiates the action of the summer idyll. Katherine, on discovering this, is astonished that 'the nets that she had contrived so cunningly to capture Robin had succeeded down to the last syllable in snaring Jane... it was ridiculous that she should affect a person she did not care about. Besides – the impossibilities thronged upon her – she was sixteen, while Jane was twenty-five, middle-aged, and foreign, too' (150).

The adult Robin presents himself as a much better and more complex human being than the rather stiff, complacent schoolboy Katherine had romanticised into a self-sufficient, mysterious figure, and it is deeply revelatory that Katherine then finds him undesirable. Jane responds to Katherine in the way that Katherine wants Robin to respond; but Katherine considers a relationship with her an impossibility. At the same time, she desires Robin as he is, and any change in him would make him unrecognisable, and therefore undesirable. The young Katherine muses, in a fit of worldly wisdom, that for them to be together 'she would have had to be different, and he would have had to be different also, and it would not happen' (128). When Robin returns at the end of the novel, however, he *is* different. There is perhaps intentional comedy in Katherine's description of his face as not having 'achieved any maturity. Oddly enough she began to

remember how Jane looked... where had this jauntiness come from? and this restlessness, this perpetual unease? He reminded her of nothing so much as a boy in the presence of women' (231). This new Robin, however, questions Katherine with genuine interest and sympathy, is hurt by her corresponding lack of interest in him, wants to make love to her and looks at her with expectation and need: 'His gaiety was automatic, restless, pitiful, but his eyes preyed on her, as if he wanted to tell her of some trouble'(233). Another layer emerges from under the story Katherine tells herself: that she has wanted Robin to love her is stripped away to reveal the knowledge that she wants to possess the future as the past, to have the Robin whose poise and detachment she remembered. In fact, Katherine is the one who is like the Robin of her memory (echoing her former frustration with him, he accuses her of being 'as friendly as a blasted block of ice', 238), and the novel presents her preoccupation with Robin as, simultaneously, auto-affection and auto-alienation. In expecting Robin to return as the past, Katherine forecloses the possibility of change to the expected-unexpected other; she exults in her lack of need of him ('she felt superior to him, for she wanted nothing of him' 241). 'The strongest bond between them', she feels, was 'that they were journeying together'; there 'was so much laconic mutual help, while outside lay the plains, the absence of the moon, the complete enmity of darkness' (237). She feels not joy in meeting an old friend or a new lover, but simply an 'exhaustion' that allows her to reach 'the boundary of a completely new land... where all things tossed and shook in a kind of lonely exultance, irrelevantly, simply because they were alive' (241). She reduces, in short, life to bare life, lived time to empty futurity opened up by the movement backward and forward of death.

Mark Rowe has argued that the reason Larkin does not continue to write stories with lesbian protagonists after Jill is that ‘sexually and artistically he had begun to sort himself out, and no longer needed to be sustained or supported by fantasy’ (‘Unreal Girls’ 92). This is very much a view echoed by Booth in his introduction to *Willow Gables*, to which Terry Castle has taken brilliant exception in ‘The lesbianism of Philip Larkin’. Instead, she proposes a continuity between Larkin’s lesbian fiction, published novels and indeed the rest of the work by drawing attention to what she calls ‘Larkin’s poetic identification with what might be called the “Sappho position” – that of the sex-starved, ugly, erotically luckless pseudo-man’ (93). She points out that ‘questionable moments apart, one can’t help noticing how curiously *unerotic* the “Brunette” stories are – how often they seem merely diffident and strange...The overall mood is one of *tristesse*’ (91). Not her kinkiness but the almost mythical terrain of disappointed desire it maps might have led Larkin to try to find ‘in the waywardness of [Brunette Coleman’s] desire ... a way into his own’ [105].

[W]hat almost all the works in the Western lesbian canon share – including the more worldly or forgiving – is the sense of the *unviability* of female same-sex love. To yearn for a woman, it would seem, is to fall victim to an *amor impossibilis* – to lose oneself in a sterile, unwholesome, usually fatal enterprise. (Castle 94)

This position, she thinks, is the one that Larkin explores in the novels and which settles into a persona in the poems: ‘No Enormous Yes, or even a Tiny Yes, in the Larkin love-and-sex game: sadness, loss and loneliness – the original Sapphic hat-trick – seemed from the beginning the main thing on offer’ (96). Castle restricts her comments to *Jill*,

but it is in *A Girl* that Larkin goes furthest in exploring the Sapphic position, and he gives it a special, almost vertiginous twist. The heterosexual-Sapphic male persona is developed through a woman, Katherine, who is in love with a man, Robin; but it is another woman, Jane, his sister and alternate self, who brings them together, who offers the possibility of dialogue and reciprocity, and is the channel through which their reunion takes place. She is also the talisman of possible future intimacy in the final scene of the novel, for it appears that Jane had named her dead daughter (notice of whose death gives Katherine the chance to get back in touch with the Fennels) 'Katherine'. In first rejecting Jane and then rejecting a Jane-like Robin, the novel suggests that Katherine wants not the wrong person but the wrong self in this person: her own self.

The last chapter shows a coupling attempted joylessly but which does not seem to leave the relationship between Katherine and Robin concluded one way or the other. It is striking that this last chapter is attempted entirely in direct speech, except for the concluding passage which has no person. This is a surprise after the previous chapter's chronicling of Katherine's adverse reaction to Robin at wearying length. It records the chilling superior indifference with which she decides to sleep with him, and the touch of pure farce in her forcing him to pretend to leave and then come back in order not to have trouble with her neighbours, as if to underscore her condescension with a glimpse of her anxious want-no-trouble priggishness. This is the only scene in the novels written in direct dialogue. The result is that Robin's voice takes on a weight which it had not been given vis-a-vis Katherine before. He rambles on, post-sex, about the war and the futility

of contemplating marriage at such a time – and of not contemplating it. The final suggestion is that Katherine just might agree to marry Robin, albeit ungraciously. The novel ends in a prose-poem which bears an echo of Joyce's 'The Dead'²⁸ – except that in Larkin it may have appeared in a story called 'The Dying'.

There was the snow, and her watch ticking. So many snowflakes, so many seconds. As time passed they seemed to mingle in their minds, heaping up into a vast shape that might be a burial mound, or the cliff of an iceberg whose summit is out of sight. Into its shadow dreams crowded, full of conceptions and stirrings of cold, as if icefloes were moving down in a lightless channel of water. They were going in orderly slow procession, moving from darkness further into darkness... Yet their passage was not saddening. Unsatisfied dreams rose and fell about them, crying out against their implacability, but in the end glad that such order, such destiny, existed. Against this knowledge, the heart, the will, and all that made for protest, could at last sleep. (248)

This prose-poem gives the end of the novel a riven, unconcluded aspect. For in a manner peculiar to Larkin's work it depicts, on the one hand, aim and movement, and on the other, immovability and resignation. It is unclear by the end of the passage what the pronoun 'they' is attached to: it could be the snowflakes or the sleeping couple. Who or what, then, is implacable? The natural, orderly world of winter, or the humans in it? And does sleep mean a permanent arrest, or an interval? This ending, for all its seeming fatalism, is a gesture towards other, still moving, endings.

²⁸ Cooper has noted this (66-7) as well as remarking that the 'characteristic imagery of *A Girl In Winter ...* light, snow, ice cold, are reinvoked in the later poems as a means of signifying degrees of aloofness and social exclusion' (68).

She felt one of her faculties had died without her consent and knowledge... The world that she had been so used to appraising, delighting in, and mixing with, had drawn away, and she no longer felt that she was part of it. Henceforward if she needed comfort she would have to comfort herself; if she were to be happy, the happiness would have to burn from her own nature. In short, since people seemed not to affect her, they could not help her, and if she was to go on living she would have to get the strength for it solely out of herself. (184)

As this passage shows, Larkin's novel is notable for its portrayal of the bleakness of individualism lived both as an affliction and as a means of self-defence. It does this by showing the power of moments of empathy in Katherine's day to create the expectation of an arrival that she finally cannot respond to unless she herself changes into the self that was capable of those exceptional moments. On the day that the novel chronicles, Katherine has two unusual experiences. She persuades her frightened younger colleague, Miss Green, to visit the dentist and get her tooth out while she is accompanying her home; and having accidentally swapped her handbag with another customer's at the chemist, she then undertakes a second expedition to reclaim it. Katherine recognises her curmudgeonly boss Mr Anstey's writing on an envelope in the bag, reads it; its recipient (Veronica Parbury) confides tearfully in her that Anstey wants to marry her and has offered to pay for a nursing home for her invalid mother, but will refuse the offer as she is not willing to leave her mother to the care of strangers. Miss Green involves her in an experience of feeling and acting on behalf of another; there is a remarkable description of Katherine watching her tooth being taken out:

... she felt an upswerve of terror lest the girl should still be half-conscious but unable to move or speak... Katherine could almost feel the pain exploding below the anaesthetic, and nerved herself against a shriek. It seemed impossible for the

girl to feel nothing. As the dentist levered and wrenched again, the muscles in his wrist moved, and as he withdrew the forceps she thought he had failed until she saw the long root in their grip, bright with blood. (48)

Momentarily Katherine experiences, 'almost' physically, the pain of an unconscious other person, without herself calling upon conscious will: she feels in the place of another without the mediation of conscience on either side. In the second encounter, Veronica Parbury forces her to feel the limits of her own affective and ethical world pressed up against those of another: 'this other point of view, that flung away at the start all conception of fortune and misfortune, this she found herself reluctantly respecting' (205). Yet, at the end of the day, getting Robin's telegram that he will not visit, she is 'shut out in her own life again... forsaken among the broken spars of the day' (212). The meeting with Robin that does take place is, in a way, the annihilation of the day's accumulated wealth of experience; yet the novel is careful to say that it was the *hope* of meeting Robin again that brought to Katherine the capacity to see anything different in her day, that has generated connection, one thing touching another, and therefore narrative: 'He had been the power that had set this extraordinary day moving, that increased its speed until she and a few other chance things and people were drawn up in a kind of whirling tower of air, their faces meeting, their hands touching[.]' (212-213).

The word 'touch' has a musical dimension in the novel. In a number of instances the novel describes the unhappiness that Katherine is preparing for herself as one in which nothing and no one can touch her: 'in these times no other thing or person would be able to help her, though they might try sincerely, and she might try equally sincerely

to be helped. But they would no more be able to touch her than people standing ten feet apart can take each others' hands' (217); 'There were times when fear of it touched her as cold as wet steel: when she could see herself as hardly aware that she was unhappy, because her feelings had so nearly atrophied' (185); '[Her thoughts were] touching this, touching that, but always dropping further away from the exaltation that had faded with the daylight' (215-16). Awareness of felicity and infelicity is rendered in the register of tactility, of contact and nearness rather than possession. But touch as connection fails between Katherine and Robin. In their encounter, desiring touch is apprehended in a rather jaded vocabulary of popular romance ('Every nerve in her body had snapped as if with electricity'; yet it is 'cloudy and shameful. It put a curious constraint upon her' [127]) Even the younger Katherine's brief ruminations on desire show her perceiving in it immediately a fissure between will and involuntary affect: 'If this was love – even this tiny shudder caused by his holding her waist for a second – it made her feel guilty, for it did not change him in her eyes... She simply thought him beautiful, against her will' (128). Later on, meeting the adult Robin, Katherine is again apparently helpless to change her affective apprehension of him as undesirable. Will and desire are not only at cross purposes, but recognisable in either case through the annulment of one by the other. Thus Katherine's sexual encounter with Robin is preceded by touch becoming in her mind the opposite of proximity or pleasurable contact, the opposite of touch, as it were: 'Every word he had spoken fell short, leaving her untouched' (236); 'Truly she did not care one way or the other... Her spirits were rising higher. He could not touch her. It would be no more than doing him an unimportant kindness, that would be overtaken by oblivion in a few days' (243). The chillingly moralistic vocabulary of selflessness that

takes its place is in fact a vocabulary of self-triumph. The direct-speech mode of the final scene between Katherine and Robin silences the narrating voice that renders her thoughts, and their spoken words are silent about what has passed between them.

The poet whose essays I address in the next chapter explicitly wishes to give pleasure through his writing to himself and to his reader as another self. But the pursuit of pleasure is mostly missing in the novels, which detail bewildered, self-ignorant quests of self-preservation and self-sufficiency. The alternative to pleasure, it is implied, is a triumphant lack of desire. The question of pleasure in Larkin's work, which I will explore in the next chapter, has an import beyond the confines of the novels. The Larkin who in his novels shows his possessive, self-saving protagonists to be engaged in singularly pleasureless pursuits of love, advocates self-gratification as a desirable attitude towards art.

The presentation of the impasse of possession and nearness in these novels is an artistic achievement in itself, but they also expose its limiting effects to a harsh searchlight, approximating to a supplement of self-criticism to the poems that has not previously been noted by commentators. Pleasure escapes Kemp and Katherine, it may be said, because the objects of their desire are incarnate others, suffer temporality and change, and are unpossessible insofar as they are not identical to that which was desired: their imagined or remembered being. The continual process of self-differentiation that

marks existing bodies makes them impossible as objects of a desire. The novels show the atrophy of self that happens when incarnate others are not desired because they can never fully remain *what* is desired; and because, desiring them, the protagonists would have to enter into another's time and will. Desire remains trapped among disincarnate, fantasised selves, and the best that art can do is to recognise this and not do violence to life.

Luce Irigaray has commented that in a monosexual culture (of the male sex), pleasure is thought of as what is invested in something and can be recuperated, rather than the something that invests in the other, or in a vocabulary of touch, gesture and word: 'Either pleasure is a mere expenditure of fire, of water, of seed, of body and of spirit... or else it is a unique and definitive creation. In this sense, it is time. It is ineffaceable, unrepeatable' (181). She advances a conception of '[p]leasure transcendent and immanent to one and to the other, and which gives birth to a third, a mediator between us thanks to which we return to ourselves, other than we were' (180-1), this third being not the child, but the 'work' of mediation (Irigaray180). It is striking in this regard that both Kemp and Katherine are beset by a listless disinvestment in the work they do with or for others. Katherine asks herself: 'Did she really care what she did in England? There would be other things for her to do, and whatever it was she would do it unwillingly obstinately, as if she were working in a field... and her time would be spilled away with it' (216). Here, work is done by the self to ward off death, not to create time. Perhaps this is why Larkin's art is addressed to the supposed 'non-artist', one of the multitude who are supposed to be not the makers but the sufferers of their

desires, and who wield their sufferings as effective shields against coercion. But because it is made and not suffered itself, the work nevertheless draws attention to the *poesis* of the unpoetic self, not least by exploring its desire to evade 'the risk of coming to discover the self-relation of the other as the challenge of one's own self-relation' (Rose 100).

Art, If You Like: Larkin's Reasons for Attending to Pleasure

One of Philip Larkin's more contentious assertions about poetry is that it ought to cater to a market, and subscribe to the 'pleasure principle'. Exactly what this means is spelt out in an essay of the same name, written in 1957, in which Larkin memorably caricatures the situation of the modern reader as follows:

[T]he reader has been bullied into giving up the consumer's power to say "I don't like this, bring me something different." Let him now so much as breathe a word about not liking a poem, and he is in the dock before he can say Edwin Arlington Robinson. And the charge is a grave one: flabby sensitivity, insufficient or inadequate critical tools, and inability to meet new verbal and emotional situations. Verdict: guilty, plus a few riders on the prisoner's mental upbringing, addiction to mass amusements, enfeebled responses. It is time some of you playboys realized, says the judge, that reading a poem is hard work. Fourteen days in stir. Next case. (*RW* 81)

The essay builds relentlessly on this *reductio ad absurdum* of modernism. Larkin paints, with a few deft strokes, a picture of the reader shaped and conditioned by a regime of alleged modernist demands, upon refusal of which he is judged perennially backward, in need of schooling that equips him to understand poetry, certainly not competent to let his own inclination towards pleasure determine his choices in poetry. To restore the

ascendency of the reader, Larkin proposes to place him in the market rather than the courthouse, by which he means a transaction between writer and reader in which the first has something to offer the second that he can take or leave. The reader is a consumer and the artist needs to sell him his work. But in the scene of judgement that Larkin sketches out, the artist has also become a producer of judgements about art, which relegates the consumer to an even more passive role in the economy of art production. In the market, Larkin implies, consumers can refuse to let their voice be drowned out by the producers. They can shop around for what gives *them* pleasure.

This is a provocative way of framing the issue, and probably extremely unappealing to many present-day readers who associate consumerism with greed and manipulation and see their artistic interests proceeding along different, perhaps morally and socially worthier, lines. Wisely, Larkin does not go so far as to suggest having consumer surveys to pick the best poems. He mentions that ‘nobody nowadays believes that a worthwhile artist can rely on anything but his own judgement; public taste is in any case twenty-five years behind, and picks up a style only when it is exploited by the second-rate. All this is true enough’ (*RW* 81). He concedes that it is not so much the stellar quality of public judgement that is at issue here, but the idea of a reading public that demands to be pleased and not just ‘improved’. Here, Larkin plays the idea of the ‘cash customer of poetry’ against the ‘student audience’, of those ‘who used to put down their money in the sure and certain hope of enjoyment as if at a theatre or concert hall’ against the ‘humbler squad ... who have uncritically accepted the contention that they cannot appreciate poetry without preliminary investment in the intellectual equipment

which, by the merest chance, their tutor happens to have about him' (81). The contrast he draws is between an audience that comes to art without the coaching or prodding that eviscerates its self-pleasing inclinations, and an audience whose responses have been schooled by a 'judge'.²⁹

In this chapter I examine this apparently cavalier advocacy of the 'pleasure principle' more closely to see if it offers a way of thinking about the reception of poetry which avoids the pitfalls of a modernist paradigm of reception, which links art with autonomy. Autonomy (in the sense I am concerned with) means a principle located in the work which activates and directs response to the work. This principle need not take the form of a hermetic interiority of the work, it can also appear as the work's interiorization of the outside, of 'culture' or 'otherness', as what is included in its 'form'. Peter Howarth points out in 'Autonomous and Heteronomous in Modernist Form' that in more recent modernist studies the problem of autonomous interior form is solved by showing how the 'very interior of the work is structured by its supposedly external context' (75). However, he continues, this solution solves very little if it is noticed that it eliminates the difference and tension between the inside and the outside:

[T]here is one thing such a stance has in common with the defenders of the work's autonomy: a desire to reduce any possible tension between a work's inside and its outside. There are two ways to eliminate exteriority: to become utterly autonomous, so that the outside cannot impinge on you, or to become perfectly heteronomous, so that there is no difference between inside and outside. Claims that a work's interiority is saturated by the cultural conditions of its emergence are the double, not the opposite, of organic form. (75)

²⁹All this could be taken as a piece of Movement posturing. Indeed, this seems to be an unambiguously Movement moment (for an intelligent recent treatment of this issue, see Stefan Collini's 'Self-Positioning' (in *LRB* 25 June 2009), as well as 'The Long 1950s I: Happy Families' in *Absent Minds*).

An account that offers something different from this autonomy would be able to separate reading from reception, and be able to offer critical writings that do not operate as templates for response but *ask* for response from someone not anticipated by or coded into the text's form. As I show in what follows, one strand of formalist criticism fails to do this because it includes affect in the form of the work.

The critical lexicon of New Criticism banned pleasure via its prohibition on speaking of affective response, which was castigated as interrupting the elaboration of the work in the pure lexicon of organic form. Pleasure, therefore, offered Larkin a way of confronting the critical consensus about how poetry should be read with a dissenting model of why and how its readers might read it. In my view, Larkin's poetic stance in 'The Pleasure Principle' and remarks in other places, amount to a recognition of the otherness of pleasure to the work; that is to say, an approving recognition that a critical account of the work which locates its value in a formal interpretation or elaboration does not necessarily capture the reason why it may give pleasure to a reader. What the reader reads for is vicarious, unpredictable, perhaps unshareable, or shareable only or preferably in a personal rather than a critical idiom. Larkin's pleasure principle, I argue, opens up these possibilities by transferring poetry-reading from the type of exchange he associates with the 'student audience' to what he credits to the 'market'.

This is a debate which has not expired with New Criticism, nor has that critical doctrine stopped animating the changing shapes that modernist criticism continues to

take.³⁰ To show that the way Larkin frames the question of pleasure has a relevance to contemporary debates about pleasure in art I will place the modification his remarks on pleasure offer in relation to the problematic of pleasure found in Theodor W. Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (1970; hereafter 'AT'). Criticism influenced by Adorno centres on the question of whether speaking of pleasure reduces art to being the secondary effect of a culture that refuses the possibility of emancipation and which is most active in the psychic economies of individuals who live in that culture; and, analogously, if speaking of individual pleasure in art reduces talk about art to a register of the 'merely' subjective which, by isolating the individual from the collective possibilities encoded in art, makes him or her even more vulnerable to domination. I will then offer an account of what I see as the different 'autonomy' that Larkin's essays see art to be able to simulate. This autonomy does not rely on a response that is linked to art's subjectivity, or, in other words, to its encoding its otherness and so its emancipatory possibilities within itself. It allows, rather, that poems (and by implication, other forms that are designated as 'art') can be assimilated by others in ways that they themselves cannot anticipate, and through this process poems still remain singular and unique by virtue of being the 'things' that

³⁰ A book that does a useful job of reconstructing the literary practices of modernism that were eventually incorporated into academia is Lawrence Rainey's *The Institutions of Modernism*. 'Literary modernism constitutes a strange and perhaps unprecedented withdrawal from the public sphere of cultural production and debate, a retreat into the divided world of patronage, investment, and collecting' (75). Among the things he considers are the concretization of the literary into a unique object (74-75), the manipulation of the market for the purpose of obtaining 'justification for ... aesthetic and cultural claims' (72), and the seeming 'ideal realisation of a noncommodified mode of cultural production' which was 'so uncertain of its aims and status that it had to disguise its activity as investment' (171). Rainey stresses that contributions to debates about art and the public sphere 'will continue to be negligible as long as our dominant history of twentieth-century culture continues to describe modernism or the avant garde as a mythical age of insistent subversion or pure opposition to commodity culture, futile in the long run or fruitful only so far as it anticipates our own more enlightened engagement with popular culture, epitomised under the rubric of postmodernism' (171-2).

the response is a response to. In other words: a poem travels under its own name, appears to have singularity, even and perhaps especially when it does not anticipate the response of a reader in its unique constellation of form, but when a reader speaks (or acts, or thinks), vicariously or with a consciousness of necessity, to link his or her response to a unique and particular poem, whatever shape this response might take.

Before I do that, however, it would be useful to set out some critical views on Larkin's status within academia. The question has some bearing on the question of Larkin's advocacy of pleasure since the academy is the site of readings of literature that have an institutional investment in making a claim to necessity, systemacity and social purpose – all of which can be undercut by the arbitrariness of pleasure.

Graham Holderness subscribes to a recognisably modernist view of Larkin's work when he writes in 'Philip Larkin: The Limits of Experience' that

Larkin's conception of an ideal audience is anti-intellectual and anti-academic: He prefers an audience of 'ordinary' people with whom he, (as an 'ordinary' person) can identify: people who read poetry spontaneously, for pleasure; who are more interested in 'feeling' or 'content' rather than 'technique or form'; and who would find in Larkin's poems an honest and truthful reflection of their own experience. (108)

Randall Stevenson and Geoffrey Hill argue along similar lines when they explain

Larkin's popularity in terms of his ability to be congenial to an anti-modernist audience:

In some ways, [his poems'] lasting appeal is easily explained... 'Reverence for the real', conventional structure and comprehensible language established a thoroughly accessible poetry, dignified in the name of a 'new aestheticism' and an English tradition reaching back to the august figure of Hardy. Such poetry proved agreeably easy to teach in schools, congenial and unchallenging to readers and many poets alike, and freed of demanding metaphysics or the formal complexities of modernism. (Stevenson 173)

What Larkin represents is an assumption, a narrow English possessiveness, with regard to 'good sense' and 'generous common humanity'. 'Good sense', so propertied, so keen to admit others, at a price, to its properties, strikes me as a deplorable kind of *beanséance* ... The notion of the accessibility of his work acknowledges the ease with which readers could overlay it with transparencies of their own preference (*Complete Critical Works* 701).

Robert Crawford and Daniel Weston provide explanations of Larkin's relationship with a popular audience by charting it through the expansion and consolidation of academia. Crawford has argued that Larkin's work recognises the need to escape from the routinization and standardization of academia, crediting him with a sophisticated awareness of the cultural politics of the academy. He notes in *The Modern Poet: Poetry, Academia and Knowledge since the 1750s* that:

Larkin might be caricatured as an anti-academic poet; such a view would be at best a partial truth. More accurately, he represents the poet who labours hard within academia [as a librarian] and who therefore becomes aware of the need to inhabit the machine with skill and to evolve escape mechanisms from his job, protecting areas of his or her imagination from numbing routines. (273)

Daniel Weston argues that the intent of the communicative strategies in Larkin's work can be seen as an attempt 'to maintain consensus across social boundaries.' Rather than divide Larkin's audience between academic and anti-academic, he sees his poetry as attempting to bridge the communicative divide that opened up in post-war Britain, of which the specialist-non-specialist chasm was a symptom.

The intended audience of Larkin's poetry therefore informs its intended function in a wide conception of culture. Addressing the issue of audience in 1957, Larkin wrote that 'poetry, like all art, is inextricably 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 each September is no substitute'. The usual hierarchy of readership is here inverted. Larkin favours a non-specialist audience who read for pleasure while denigrating the academic 'mob', whose influence can be felt in 'a new kind of bad poetry'. Larkin has often repeated such differentiations and allied his own poetry with a popular audience. Such an alignment has a significant effect – the poetics of consensus and the structure of balance that characterise Larkin's poetry, at least in part, result from it. Furthermore, the special importance devoted to the issue of communication can be understood as resulting from the necessity of bridging the divides evidently present even in a consensus-led society. In fact, the poetics developed here are deployed perhaps with an awareness of the function that culture might perform in the support and promotion of negotiation in society. (325)

Here Larkin is portrayed as taking a stand for social consensus through inverting the 'hierarchy of readership' – the assumption being that such a hierarchy was well-established at the time of writing. Larkin's poetry thus comes to assume an explicit responsibility to bridge the divide between a 'popular' and a 'mass culture',³¹ and more generally, between 'different artistic communicative potentials in order to perform a guiding role in the reconstruction of post-war society' (325). Weston thinks because

³¹Larkin's engagement, in a poetics of consensus, is also concerned with a related set of contemporary anxieties regarding "culture". Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) charts the ways in which a genuine and vibrant popular culture was being eroded at the expense of a developing mass culture', (Weston 325).

Larkin employs ‘different communicative potentials’ in this poetry – from the symbolic to the empirical³²-- his poetic practice is informed by the desire to bring them into alignment, and to acknowledge ‘the limitations placed on [poetic] possibility by language and by the necessity of maintaining consensus’ (324).³³

The writers cited above all see Larkin’s appeal to a popular audience as a symptom of his desire to limit the scope of his poetry in order to achieve the social narrowness or, more positively, the consensus, that a broader public appeal demands.³⁴ However, in sticking to the more contentious word ‘market’ that Larkin actually uses, I am attempting to foreground that what Larkin appears to be interested in is not popularity or a unified appeal to a public, but the ability of his poetry to come into contact with and appeal to individual others who would be able to apply to it whatever standards or prejudices they hold. The ‘market’ in this sense implies that what the buyer

³² In ‘Philosophy and Literature in the 1950s: The Rise of the “Ordinary Bloke”’, the philosopher Colin McGinn connects the radicalism of the Movement writers with an empiricism that coincided with the philosophical sway of Austin, Ayer and Wittgenstein, and emphasises that a tendency that now seems a regression from modernism appeared to contemporaries a liberating break from tradition: ‘Sometime around the middle of the twentieth century, a philosophical mood took hold that regarded itself as breaking with the past, stylistically and substantively. Certain intellectual values characterised this mood: clarity, tough-mindedness, descriptive accuracy, attention to linguistic fact, down-to-earthness, anti-obscurantism, celebration of the ordinary, respect for common sense, hatred for pretentious nonsense. Above all, I would say, the mood was one of debunking those elements in the tradition that seemed empty, frivolous and foolish... The primary questions should be: how do we actually speak? And I might add: what do we actually think? Because maybe what we actually say and think, as ordinary people, has more depth and truth in it than what philosophers can dream up.’ (129-130)

³³ Though he does not go as far as to call it *consensus*, David Trotter has also signaled that he thinks that Larkin’s poetic stance changed in response to the ‘increasing dominance of pragmatic criteria in all walks of life’. This ‘may have helped to persuade Larkin that the glancing agnosticism of poems like “Here” and “The Whitsun” Weddings” was no longer sufficient. For the validity of those things we believe in even though we cannot understand them was coming under relentless attack; or so it might easily have appeared. And Larkin responded, I believe, by shifting to a far more militant and assertive stance than before’ (*The Making of the Reader* 184)

³⁴ Andrew Swarbrick, however, dissents, suggesting that Larkin’s later poems show ‘deepening anxiety about the relationship about self and community’ (124).

of poetry is looking for is unknown to the producer so long as there is no actual exchange of goods for cash, and even this transaction reveals very little apart from the fact that a number of people *want* to read the work in question. How and what they are reading for is, crucially, beyond the remit of the market:³⁵ the pleasure the audience seek in the poetry they buy shows simply that they are looking for *something* in it, it does not extend to interpreting that ‘something’ as consensus or easy gratification.

Yet ‘pleasure’ has connotations of self-gratification, easy or difficult, of something that an individual seeks without coercion and which he cannot be sure of finding as a result of following a prescription. It depends on finding what ‘works’ for him. Furthermore, it can be argued that pleasure can signify different things or different aspects of the activity of reading: it can mean the expectation with which a reader turns to a work, it can mean the initial response to a work which is based only on an impression, or it can mean the self-conscious practice, informed by method, of aligning information and response to fashion a coherent account of the work for the purpose of sharing with others; equally it can mean a flash of recollection that connects a line of a

³⁵ ‘Market’ in this sense is different from market as schema or paradigm for the concretization of consumerism, which ‘controls’ social reality by standardising radically different relationships of exchange into equal and exchangeable entities, and thus becomes a kind of ‘master subject’ at the same time as it appears to be a formal projection of desires. A theoretical determination of what the market as a paradigm permits those who participate in it to experience rules out, ipso facto, any allowance of unknowability; arguably this is what takes place in Adorno’s work. This conception of the market is often explicit or implicit in modernist discussions of readers or audiences in capitalistic societies. For a discussion of ‘how abstract entities such as the market came to be figured as subjects’, and, in particular, as ‘unified intentional subject[s]’ (132), see Campbell Jones’s ‘What kind of Subject is the Market?’ In ‘Financial Crisis, Social Pathologies and “Generalised Perversion”: Questioning Žižek’s Diagnosis of the Times’, Boucher and Sharpe ask ‘why the stakes in the most important contemporary debates must be framed as questions of the “One of identification” that forms political subjectivity. In resistance to global capitalism should the ‘One’ be ethnic identity or communist egalitarianism?’ (77). They approach the question through a discussion of the society of generalized perversion, and its underlying ‘sociological assumption that society needs a single set of binding representations for its social cement’ (76).

poem to an experience where formerly it had had no bearing, and whose expression may never take place or may wait upon further knowledge or experience. All these things can be accommodated in the vagueness of the ‘pleasure principle’, but they still have to satisfy one requirement: it is always *someone* who feels pleasure, and the expression of pleasure furnishes a point from which a *someone* begins to find an idiom in which he or she may attempt to articulate a response. Pleasure, conceived along these lines, not only indicates a positive subjective response originating in an individual, but further indicates that the form of expression that it takes has a connection with the experience of the individual and not only to the ‘form’ of the work, however arbitrary, clichéd or intellectually sophisticated the expression of this experience may be.

Larkin indicates that he is aware of this further consequence of evading the formalist claims of art by ending ‘The Pleasure Principle’ with a double reference to two very different literary texts. One is to Samuel Butler – ‘I like things that make me like them at once and no trying at all’ (82) – and the other to David Daiches’ essay ‘The “New Criticism”: Some Qualifications’ (1956), a scholarly piece which takes exception to the New-Critical ‘affective fallacy’ and thus connects Larkin’s concerns directly with New Criticism:

Messrs Wimsatt and Beardsley, in a widely discussed article...have in their very title boldly stigmatized as a ‘fallacy’ the consideration by a critic of the impact of a work of art on the reader. Their concern with what a literary work is, uniquely and formally, rather than with the reasons for which it is enjoyed, logically leads them to dismiss the testimony of those who enjoy literature as irrelevant.... A poem, so the argument runs, should be enjoyed for those of its aspects which differentiate it from other forms of discourse; whether it is ever so enjoyed is considered an irrelevant question. (Daiches 172-173)

Daiches opposes this stigmatization on the ground that the New Critics are ‘requiring the student of today to do without tools which they themselves are continually using, though often not consciously’ (175). In other words, The New Critics rely on tastes and discretions which they cannot have developed following their own prescriptions, and which their prescribed methods of reading will discourage if not eliminate in others. The New Critics rely on affective response as much as anyone else, but they disingenuously (and, it can be said, non-democratically) restrict the idiom of criticism to ‘what a literary work is, uniquely and formally’.³⁶

In using the idea of pleasure to evade the demand that works of art must be appraised formally, Larkin goes against not only the orthodoxies of the formalist criticism of his own day but also of the broader paradigms of formalist criticism laid down by Immanuel Kant, which survive in critical positions that distrust pleasure unbound from value or sublimated by disinterest as leading to the abolishment of a universal basis of judgement. In Kant’s formulation judgements of taste are necessary but subjective, universal but without a concept of the object (*Critique of the Power of Judgment* § 38, 170). Pleasure, in Kant’s system,

³⁶Speaking of the adaptation of I. A. Richards’ theory of the coordinated impulses to New Criticism, Steven Connor has noted that it hardens into a ‘critical technology of tensions, ambiguities and resolutions, having apparently purged itself of the awkward questions of affectivity and response that here [in Richards’] bulks so large ... [!]It is plain that his stress on the ironic equilibrium of contending forces provides a model not only of the well-adjusted person, but also of the well-balanced liberal state. It is equally plain that the model is contradicted by the implicit divide between those who have access to the affective complexity of the cultured classes and those who have abandoned to the cretinous gratifications of mass culture’ (‘Aesthetics, Pleasure, and Value’ 206)

accompanies the common apprehension of an object by the imagination, as a faculty of intuition, in relation to the understanding, as a faculty of the concepts, by means of a procedure of the power of judgement, which it must also exercise for the sake of the most common experience: only in the latter case it is compelled to do so for the sake of an empirical objective concept, while in the former case (in the aesthetic judging) it is merely for the sake of perceiving the suitability of the representation for the harmonious (subjectively purposive) occupation of both cognitive faculties in their freedom, i.e. to sense the representational state with pleasure. (§ 39 172)

Pleasure is a sign that the judgement is an aesthetic judgement; indeed it cannot be known apart from such a judgement. The function of pleasure in a judgement on taste, which is a formal judgement, is to enable the claim that a feeling is universally communicable.³⁷ Pleasure must be deduced from how we formally appraise the object – if the appraisal is one that we require others to share, then it can be said that we ‘sense the representational state with pleasure’ as an *it is*, rather than an *I feel*. The judgement of taste must be a felt one, but feeling’s role is restricted in this type of judgement to establishing ‘the possibility that certain things are objects, and ... secure the possibility of cognition for these objects even if cognition does not necessarily give rise to determined judgments’ (Gasché 156).

It can be seen that including pleasure within the form or the object dispenses with the need for a distinct intellectual or sensual expression of pleasure; it abolishes the need for a transaction between pleasure and the object because pleasure situates itself

³⁷‘This feeling must necessarily rest on the same conditions in everyone, since they are subjective conditions of a possibility of a cognition in general, and the proportion of these cognitive faculties that is required for taste is also requisite for the common and healthy understanding that one may presuppose in everyone. For this reason, one who judges with taste (as long as he does not err in this consciousness, and does not take the matter for the form, the charm for beauty) may also require the subjective purposiveness, i.e. his satisfaction in the object, of everyone else, and may assume his feeling to be universally communicable, even without the mediation of concepts.’ (Kant §39 173)

within an object which is sensed as an object of communicable judgement. From the point of view that Larkin adopts, it can be argued that the danger of self-censorship is intrinsic to this type of formalism. Indeed Kant gestures towards this when he describes the ‘communal sense’ as

a faculty of judging that in its reflection takes account (*a priori*) of everyone else’s way of representing a thought, in order **as it were** to hold its judgment up to human reason as a whole and thereby avoid the illusion which, from subjective private conditions that could easily be held to be objective, would have a detrimental influence on the judgment. Now this happens by one holding his judgment up not so much to the actual but to the merely possible judgements of others, and putting himself into the position of everyone else, merely by abstracting from the limitations contingently that attach to our own judging; which is in turn accomplished by leaving out as far as is possible everything in one’s representational state that is matter i.e. sensation, and attending solely to the formal peculiarities of his representation of his representational state. (§40, 174-5)³⁸

Larkin’s ‘market’ does the reverse of this: it encourages individuals not to judge from the ‘position of everyone else’ but to consider what the art-product does for them. In place of organic form, it reinstates pleasure and the object of pleasure, between which transaction is attempted by a standardized coin of value. In making pleasure external to objects, its communication separate from the description or elaboration of objects’ form, Larkin does not appear to aim at social consensus (as the authors cited above contend) but rather to make the art’s form and the form of response of its ‘consumer’ non-

³⁸Paul Guyer argues in ‘Kant’s Ambitions in the Third Critique’ that it ‘cannot mask the fact that he offers no basis for this assertion, no argument to bar the possibility that even if in some general way all human beings have the same cognitive capacities, different people might find that different objects set those faculties into free and harmonious play, even when personal interests in the agreeable, the good, and any other identifiably idiosyncratic association have been set aside. Kant’s insistence that the cognitive powers of all humans must be alike both at work and at play seems more a matter of faith than a justifiable a priori principle’ (157).

identical. This makes the move of assuming that the work is the subject (and, paradoxically, autonomous and ‘objective’), in the manner of much formalist criticism (including Adorno’s, as I discuss below), redundant.

If Larkin can be seen as dismissing the modernist demand of objectivity and necessity in response to art in favour of the claims of the feeling which engages an art-object from the outside, as it were, then is he running the risk of insisting on a solipsistic mode of engaging with art? Is a poetry that calls exclusively for a ‘merely’ subjective response, for pleasure, hostile to communication? Does the ‘pleasure principle’ imply that poems should forsake the possibility of becoming a site of articulation for the social?

It is relevant to note that the social in the sense that Larkin allegedly forecloses, in the name of pleasure, conceives the emancipatory potential of art to be located in its capacity to figure the communal. Jacques Rancière has outlined very well the intersecting trajectories of these communal mappings of art in *Dissensus*, particularly in ‘Communism: From Actuality to Inactuality’, ‘The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes’ and ‘The Politics of Literature’. The promise that art makes of ciphering a communal sociality is part of the story of art itself as it has unfolded over the last two centuries. ‘The pattern of ... critical explication of “what literature says” relied on the same system of meaning that underpinned the practice of literature itself’ (164); ‘the *explicans* and the *explicandum* are part of the same poetic plot, which is why they fit so well, maybe even too well’ (127). The pattern holds whether art is figured as being a

radically different version of the common from what one finds in actual society *or* one radically indistinguishable from it.

The key here is the conflation of form and sociality. Form's status as a created or produced thing which necessarily demands response commensurate with itself links art, and more specifically, literature, to possibilities of social constitution. Response that is just 'subjective', and makes no further claim to or spins no further narrative of rationality, goes against the grain of this tradition. As I mentioned in my introduction, even when form is said to *freely* determine response on no basis other than itself, it becomes a ground for the groundless responsibility to others; singularity is thus reinscribed into the collective by tying it to a determination of response by the (shareable and explicable) form of art. Hence my argument that a shift seeing response itself as enigmatic and possibly other to the form of the work can be explored as a different perspective from which to begin to formulate a way of looking at art that does not encode possibility of sociality in form.

If this is what Larkin is doing, he needs to find a way to connect art with the audience in a way that does not have recourse to the formal and the social. He thus invents his own story of art and the 'common'. He replaces the sociality implicit in formal judgements with an idea of the market – an idea, that is, of a mechanism which presents isolated individuals removed from the work and from each with a product which is at once accessible and enigmatic, which can be possessed but which itself internally changes the meaning of 'ownership'. The market, for Larkin, transacts with art on the principle of pleasure, of desire and its satisfaction – and so, apparently, privileges

individual subjectivity. If one agrees with Stanley Cavell in *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* that ‘the issue of conflict between the objective and subjective (in aesthetic matters, as differently in moral) becomes a matter of how, as rational beings, we are to confront one another’ (262), then the general importance of this question is clear.

What difference does Larkin’s desire to write poems that *want* to please an audience as part of their formal *raison d’être* introduce to a specifically modernist paradigm of affectivity? As I have already mentioned, this desire can be held in suspicion in the light of his own provocative assertion that he wants his poems to be treated as consumer items: the shadow of consumerism immediately places art within a familiar battlefield of cultural domination and delusion on the reactionary side of the ideological divide. To understand better what Larkin’s position implies, I will place it beside some passages from Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*, a modernist text that makes the case for the autonomy and objectivity of art as something of an anti-pleasure principle, as staking the fortunes of a radically autonomous art on form and the social.

Why have modernist writers, reacting ostensibly to the pressures of modern consumer society, vilified the subjective registering of pleasure in art as an inappropriate place from which to begin the elaboration of a response? The following remarks by J.M.

Bernstein and Ross Wilson exemplify the logic that anti-subjective criticisms often bank on:

Once we can fully comprehend a work of art apart from sensuous engagement with it, once our understanding is capable of exhausting the work, or at least finding nothing in the experience of engaging with it that remains resistant to us, excessive and yet demanding, then the situation is no different from rational experience outside art. The particular disappears in its understanding or sheer familiarity. (Bernstein 94)³⁹

[H]edonistic aesthetics simply demands that we be given what we know we like. The reason that Adorno offers for this lack of insight into pleasure on the part of 'ästhetischer Hedonismus' is that mechanical insistence on subjective feeling simply leaves out the relation to the artwork, which is the only basis on which whatever is compelling in aesthetic experience can be understood ... This kind of description of pleasure is targeted against the view that pleasure is readily available from momentary effects, rather than from the artwork as a whole strictly speaking because to grasp something as an artwork as a whole would require the mediation of its parts. (Wilson 281)

Pleasure does not compel or startle the reader into response. It leaves him in control, and to be in control is to seek pleasure that is sure of giving satisfaction; it is to remain in a state of homeostasis. The art that is sanctioned by such a view then takes on the appearance of something already known, calculated to satisfy an unfree desire for satisfaction. Whatever is fixed in knowledge and sure of giving satisfaction is in a sense already consumed, ingested, and therefore offers no possibility of outwardness or

³⁹ Keston Sutherland dramatizes this view in 'Wrong Poetry'. Giving extended consideration to Adorno's remarks on philistines' resistance to difficult art, he applies them to a 1798 version of a line in Wordsworth's 'The Thorn', later revised, about which Henry Crabb Robinson recorded in his diary of 1815 that Wordsworth said of these lines that 'they ought to be liked'. From this Sutherland concludes: 'But how else can I possibly begin to like the lines, if not by interpreting Wordsworth's insistence, and my own impression, too, that I am obliged to like them, and by finding in their bid for absolute literalness a dislocated expression of revolutionary thinking and intransigence?' (778).

escape. The already-known cannot have surprises or secrets, cannot be other-than-itself. In giving no quarter to the Ulysses-like persona of the critic, providing no space for displacement and alienation, search and research, the already-known resists the activity of the critic by *not resisting* him.⁴⁰

The opposition to ‘hedonistic aesthetics’ can be related usefully to the critique of pleasure and affect that, after Kant, comes forcefully from critics drawing on the cognitive, culture-resisting possibilities of Adorno’s work.⁴¹ The first thing to note is that both Larkin and Adorno are interested in seeing artworks in the aspect of commodity. Adorno’s view of the reification and commodification of art takes as its point of departure Marx’s description of the purely social existence of the commodity as value. The commodity becomes a fetish; it acquires a mysterious, objective quality that seems to cling to it in virtue of what it is rather than from its use or absolute value.⁴² A product’s genesis in human labour and destination for the world of human use is

⁴⁰ ‘Also see Rey Chow’s ‘When Reflexivity Becomes Porn’, esp 141-4. She writes: ‘[T]he rhetoric of discovering underlying conditions is intended to call attention to what has become unthinking (that is, mindless), but when examined closely, the potential for change and changeability (what is supposedly an endless and unpredictable process) that is attributed to art is also underpinned by an opposite kind of desire -- that of exposing fundamentals, to restoring things to an absolute, as-yet untouched state’ (144).

⁴¹ Ross Wilson argues that purity of judgement underwrites both Kant’s and Adorno’s theories of pleasure in ‘Voluptuousness and Asceticism in Adorno’; in particular he focuses on the notion of sensuous allure in Kant. Adorno, he contends, ‘revises Kant’s aesthetics, so to speak, both upwards and downwards. “Reiz” is emphatically sensuous at the same time as it leads modern art toward an at last inhabitable – that is, true – world’ (Wilson 283).

⁴² Jean-Luc Nancy explains the difference between these as follows: ‘[T]he commodity value (or exchange value) of the object (or product), which seems to be its intrinsic or immanent property (parallel in this way to its use value, which is extrinsic and completely relative to its utilization in a given sociotechnical context) only covers, masks or represses the origin of its pure or absolute value – this last value being nothing other than the living human labour of the producer, which the act of production incorporates into the product. But the commodity value deflects this incorporated creative life toward equivalence within an exchange, where the producer (the worker) finds himself surreptitiously stripped of the part of the value that the mercantile calculation does not exchange for the maintenance of its labour force, but rather sets to the account of capital’ (‘Two Secrets of the Fetish’ 3).

disguised in its apotheosis as a commodity, as is what it might be valued for apart from its use, in pure being-for-itself. Commenting on this mysterious transposition, Marx says:

[I]n it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves but between the products of their labour. This is the reason why products of labour become commodities, social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses. (Marx 77)

Commodity fetishism invests objects with qualities beyond those apparent in use value and thus makes them appear as if they have qualities other than what their makers have given them. Objects appear to form relations between themselves that determine their value and thus to have an autonomous power. Use values, also social phenomena, belong to the realm of need which places them outside the 'phantasmagoric' social realm in which Marx locates the commodity; as Nancy says they are 'extrinsic' and completely relative to social context ('Two Secrets' 3). Exchange values, however, do not merely serve the requirements of sociality but shape them by appearing to relate to each other of their own accord, in ways that are only partly open to observation. So the concepts of 'use' and 'exchange' configure different kinds of sociality – different kinds of psycho-sociology, as it were –but neither is able to capture the true or pure presence of the object that is interred in the commodity.

Adorno's account of art pivots round this apparent autonomy of the commodified thing. He is concerned with the behaviour of artworks as 'for-themselves', in the manner

of commodities; however, this happens according to Marx because of exchange while for Adorno it happens in the artwork in spite of exchange. For Adorno the autonomy of the artwork runs parallel to exchange, as it were, even as it mimics the forms of exchange. It undercuts social exchange and institutes a social and moral economy *within itself* that can attain its autonomy from the one in which it finds itself. It is a subversive anti-economic principle within the economy that mimics the economy.

In Marx, it is the fetishisation of the object that allows it the magical acquisition of a self that is apparently *its own*. The fetish autonomises. It does so by instituting a duality of perceptible and imperceptible within itself which allows self-differentiation, and by making itself appear capable of having relations with other entities. This makes the commodity deceptive, in need of demystification; but transposed to art the same duality and excess marks the metamorphosis of labour into ‘things in themselves, objectified by virtue of their particular law of form’ (AT 100). ‘[P]roducts of social labour that are subject to or produce their own law of form’ (AT 227) institute a double economy of truth, and separate out autonomy from heteronomy:

The truth content of artworks, which is indeed their social truth, is predicated on their fetish character. The principle of heteronomy, apparently the counterpart of fetishism, is the principle of exchange, and in it domination is masked. Only what does not submit to that principle acts as a plenipotentiary of what is free from domination; only what is useless can stand in for the stunted use value. (AT 227)

Heteronomy – literally, the ability to pass under many names – masks domination because it yields to different functions or desires. Art only apparently obeys the law of

heteronomy, of the marketplace of selves in which a multiplicity of powers and performances act on each other. If it has emancipatory potential, if it can yield a truth that shows the way out of capitalistic domination, then its heteronomy can only mask its autonomy; its apparent *uselessness* preserves art's suitability for truth in a 'universally, socially mediated world' in which 'nothing stands external to its nexus of guilt'. Artworks' autonomy makes them 'plenipotentaries of things that are no longer distorted by exchange, profit and the false needs of a degraded humanity' (AT 227).

The fetishism of the commodity thus emerges within a system of exchange which doesn't determine value according to 'true' human need or socially unmediated feeling. The art-work that is 'for-itself' has the power of evading the compromised needs and feelings of others. This discourse of art's truth opens up a field in which opposition to pleasure in the name of preservation of a 'true' pleasure not only seems tenable but also necessary. It might appear that this aversion to the deluded affects of art's others is excessive, but it becomes more comprehensible when it is seen that to be 'for another', to communicate with or to be substitutable for another, is to risk being consumed or being changed into something other than oneself. While it is desirable for human society in its present state of domination to be changed by emancipatory art, the reverse, that is, for art to be modified by human affect (or, to pander to what people want), can only mean a tightening of the noose.

The autonomising fetish institutes auto-affection; in becoming their own others, artworks become like selves, and the task of the subject who is external to them – the

reader, in the case of literature – becomes to ‘inhere’ in them. This is spelt out clearly by Adorno’s likening of autonomy to production. He says:

If it is maintained that, just as in the life process of society, production rather than reception is primary in art and aesthetics, this implies the critique of traditional, naïve aesthetic subjectivism. Recourse is not to be had to lived experience, human creativity, and the like; rather, art is to be conceived in accord with the objectively developing lawfulness of production. This is all the more to be insisted upon because the problematic—defined by Hegel—of the affects released by the artwork has been hugely magnified by their manipulation. The subjective contexts of reaction are frequently turned, according to the will of the culture industry, against the object that is being reacted to. Yet artworks respond to this by withdrawing even more into their own structure and thus contribute to the contingency of the work’s effects, whereas in other historical periods there existed, if not harmony, then at least a certain proportion between the work and the response it received. Artistic experience accordingly demands a comprehending rather than an emotional relation to the works; the subject inheres in them and in their movements as one of their elements; when the subject encounters them from an external perspective and refuses to obey their discipline, it is alien to art and becomes a legitimate object of sociology. (*AT* 355)

One might argue that ‘comprehending ... relation’ is not as impervious to manipulation as Adorno thinks here. But I am more interested in the idea that art should be conceived of ‘in accordance with the objective and law-like evolution of production’; art mirrors the objective product of labour, but is unlike the latter in that exchange plays no part in forming its objective character. The objective incarnation of labour in production, too, institutes auto-affection, a form of self-sufficiency. This autonomous object does not need ‘notions like lived experience’ and ‘human affect’ because it does not appeal to anyone nor try to communicate with anyone. Adorno marshals the objectivity of the product to resist the web of social relations that brought it into being. The object-

product, we might say, is an example of the emergence of autonomy from the morass of dependent exchange, and so the ideal paradigm for thinking about an art that wants to repeat this process in the other direction – towards social emancipation and not socio-capitalistic domination.

The object-product, by definition, does not ask for a response that engages the ‘I’ as an external other. Instead, the cognitive response that art demands makes possible a form of thinking which moves, as it were, within the object, without reference to feeling. This is in line with Adorno’s conception of the artwork as offering resistance to its audience by denying the neediness of art’s consumers:

By the affront to reigning needs, by the inherent tendency of art to cast different lights on the familiar, artworks correspond to the objective need for a transformation of consciousness that could become the transformation of reality. The moment they hope to achieve the effect under whose absence they suffer by adapting to existing needs they deprive people of precisely that which – to take the jargon of needs seriously and turn it against itself – they could ‘offer’ them. (*AT* 243)

The attitude Adorno himself sanctions is ‘shock’, the ‘shudder’: ‘it is eruption of objectivity into subjective consciousness’. Shudder ‘provides no particular satisfaction for the ‘I’; it bears no similarity to desire. Rather, it is the moment of liquidation of the ‘I’, (*AT* 245). Adorno calls this a ‘subjective experience directed against the ‘I’, but recuperates somewhat by immediately adding that it is ‘an element of the objective truth of art’ (*AT* 246). There are also other qualifications that he needs to make. Shudder is involuntary, but we are banned from assuming that it can come about through

distraction. 'Utmost tension' preserves the shudder 'from regression'. It is not part of art's illusion but 'psychologically real'. Furthermore, it is not 'delirium, which has a similar aspect', but a conscious, waking experience (*AT* 245). Having defended his shudder from these various misunderstandings, Adorno spells out what it involves:

For a few moments the I becomes aware, in real terms, of the possibility of letting self-preservation fall away, though it does not actually succeed in realising this possibility. It is not the aesthetic shudder which is semblance but rather its attitude to objectivity: In its immediacy the shudder feels the potential as if it were actual. (*AT* 245-246)

This moment is, as one might expect, closer to the Kantian notion of the sublime than to the beautiful. The artwork-object-form, then, partakes of the commodity form to such an extent that it becomes an 'absolute commodity'— 'a social product which has rejected every semblance of existing for society, a semblance to which otherwise commodities urgently cling' (*AT* 236) — which secretly resists the function of the commodity under capitalism. In fairness to Adorno, this does not mean that artworks cannot be sold; saleability is 'a simple consequence of their participation in relations of production' (*AT* 236). But their commodity form is a mask for the reversal of their function, their participation only a disguise for their real effectivity. The absolute commodity retains, in spite of Adorno's many conscientious qualifications to prevent it from being deified, its intactness and purity under the veil of its function qua commodity. False function disguises true function. The absolute commodity allows a point of exit from the complete social domination represented by the relations of production. Unlike social

illusions, or the illusions of the philistine, which are just dead ends, illusions that veil emptiness, the illusion of the absolute commodity presents a cognitive experience of autonomy which permits an intuition of emancipation under conditions of domination.

Feeling does have a place in Adorno's work: it belongs to the work. *It* feels.⁴³

The artwork *knows* what true feeling is.⁴⁴ In its tortured autonomy the work establishes a domain that shows the way to social emancipation by showing an exemplary attitude. 'In its immediacy the shudder feels the potential as actual' (*AT* 245-46). The involuntarily-induced tense shudder *is* the subject, of which the 'real' 'psychological' subject is a mimic; art makes the spontaneous, emotive and, it must be stressed, silent gesture that the human subject spontaneously imitates: 'non-judging art-works point – as with their

⁴³ As Ross Wilson also notes, 'The problem with aesthetic pleasure is not its pleasurable nature but its imposition on the artwork which already has its own claims on the beholder and is, in that sense, itself a subject. Furthermore ... artworks, on the one hand, suddenly transport the subject out of the nexus of exchange and, on the other hand ... instil the feeling of standing firm. Crucially, this twofold claim revises how we are to understand Adorno's declaration of the falsity of pleasure in the false world. Pleasure in artworks is not in the world but in escape from it. This is consistent with Adorno's sense that it is in the refusal not just of false pleasures but of the false world that pleasure, so to speak, devolves upon artworks. The pleasures of modern art are hence not immediate ones' (280).

⁴⁴ My formulation reverses that of Peter de Bolla who, in *Art Matters* and 'Towards the Materiality of Aesthetic Experience', offers a very interesting modification on the Kantian/Adornian theme of art's subjectivity by contending that, in Kant's judgement of taste, we feel that the artwork 'knows': '[T]he feeling aroused by our encounter with art (affective experience) sets up an agitation of the mind that constitutes a relation to the ways in which we know the world, be they practical or theoretical. As Kant says, the imagination refers this agitation to the means by which we come to knowledge. Does art, then, hold within itself something like knowledge, or knowing? This formulation must be understood as determined by the transferential impetus noted above whereby a quality of mental activity associated with the process of coming to judgment is attributed to the object perceived—it is "as if" the artwork has animation. Common sense would seem to dictate that art has no agency and therefore could not comprise a way of knowing, yet the power of attribution may create the virtual feeling that the artwork knows' (26). However, in my view de Bolla's argument throws up two problems that he does not sufficiently address: Does *feeling* that the artwork knows not merit redirected attention to the one who makes the virtual attribution of knowledge to art from his or her own subjectivity? And, why does the relation to knowledge culminate in the work holding 'within itself' something like the animation that counts as knowledge? De Bolla here crosses over from relation, which implies a movement between at least two simultaneously-considered terms or individuals, to form, which attributes to one what originates or is actualised in another.

finger – to their content without their thereby becoming discursive. The spontaneous reaction of the recipient is mimesis of the immediacy of this gesture' (AT 245) – a second-order, mediated spontaneity. This is not a demystification or even a deconstruction of spontaneity, but rather the setting up of a hierarchy between the silent gestures made by and tensions held within artworks, and 'actual' gestures made by auditors who do not mime artworks.

Larkin's difference regarding the approach to 'subjectivity' is plain. He does not consider subjectivity to be the sphere of domination, as does Adorno. However, this does not dispel the question of feeling and receiving in Larkin's poems, but opens it up anew. From Larkin's essay we see that his interest is in how artworks solicit or license the reader's pleasure when treated as exchangeable items. 'The Pleasure Principle' suggests that it is as items *with exchange value* that artworks are able to behave as things or objects that have an existence in their own right. In other words, if there is something that corresponds to the 'autonomy' of the artwork in Larkin (a question that I shall address below) it is intrinsically connected with its exchangeability, while for Adorno it establishes itself in spite of exchangeability.

In *Aesthetic Theory*, the commodity form of the artwork ironically makes explicit the hidden logic of the commodity, and that logic discloses it to be the opposite of what it is supposed to be, that is, an item of exchange, one that is supposed to give itself over completely in return for a commensurable token of value. The irony is that this is what commodities really do anyway, but the art-commodity uses this hermeticism and auto-affectation of the commodity form to provide a virtual experience of emancipation. As

Larkin also speaks of art as commodity, we can instructively frame the difference between Larkin and Adorno thus: for Larkin an art-object is an exchangeable item whose value cannot be realised without social exchanges, and therefore without commodification. The difference is clear if we recognise that *exchange* cannot be disentangled from putting art to work as art as an object that can bear others' significations, and can relate to others in ways not coded by calculations of utilitarian or utopian value. The form 'art-object' is a response to social exchange, not only a result of human labour being expressed in a substitutable, standardised form, but also in a form that is made for circulation in such a manner that it becomes capable of relating to others in ways that its original or 'true' formation did not envisage. It is useful to go back to Marx's original conception here, though it was not meant as a valorization of the commodity. Still, Marx's striking description of the commodity as 'a social hieroglyphic', which has resonated strongly in cultural criticism, draws attention to the process whereby exchangeability incarnates a meaning in the object which does not belong to the object either in being used or in being useless (*Capital* 78). Exchange confers object-likeness on art by making it appear that it has a capacity to be other than itself and so to relate in unpredictable ways to its others that chiasmatically transacts with the receiver's capacity to be other than himself. By giving a product an enigma, a hieroglyphicity, exchange invests it with otherness, with both appropriability and non-appropriability.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy surely takes us forward in this direction by drawing attention to how the demystification of social relation congealed in the commodity-hieroglyph, instead of revealing social truth and 'true relation', re -presents the enigma of the thing's presence which re-mobilises desire:

Larkin's stance on art can provide a perspective from which to ask: were it not for the possibility of this sort of exchange—where artworks are offered to alienated individuals as commodities, which Marx calls the only mechanism that reveals the social character of private labour under capitalism — would artworks possess, would they need to possess, objective form? For Larkin, exchange is an index of the need for art in a world where its instances are remote and insulated from their audience. But to accept this is to go some way towards accepting that artworks are unlike autonomous objects in Adorno's sense, because they do not resist the subjective needs of those who address themselves to them. However, they are, at the same time, object-like insofar as they are commodities for exchange: their object-likeness enables them to be traded in the world like other 'things', and be received by others in ways that their production cannot anticipate.

These are questions which resonate beyond Larkin's work, but by offering a contrasting explication of a very influential line of thinking in Adorno, I want to point out that they also resonate within it. It is a commonplace now to wish, with Adorno, for an art that resists the subject, that compels surrender to itself rather than countenance surrender to its auditor. In Larkin we find a different wish: to surrender to the audience, not quite in trust, but out of recognition that appropriation, too, can reveal the conditions for the establishment of an economy of the self that is not merely mimetic of the

'Behind the unveiled secret, another more convoluted secret cloaks itself—one that perhaps will never be revealed absolutely: it is that of presence in general, which might never be exempt of fetishism, that is, of the force of the desire by which I reach toward this presence in order to see it, touch it, and savour it, at least from the moment that "presence" does not designate the inert being of what has been put there (what has been placed there) and which is not even there, nor there, nor beyond, no matter where it is placed [...] The fetish is the being-there of a desire, an expectation, an imminence, a power and its presentiment, a force interred in the form and exhumed by it' (6).

economy of the world. The suggestion that I am here pursuing through Larkin's argument is that art might institute such an economy not by creating internal structures that withdraw it from general exchange, but by recognising in exchange one of the conditions that allows another to receive art on terms that enable him or her to have a relation with it that is not determined (though it cannot escape being influenced) by anterior demands for response. 'Form' in the formalist tradition which includes Adorno is a demand for response that knows better than any other what to do with art, under what codes to read or use or think it. Pleasure that begins to formulate a response that is not confined to sensing and mimicking form, offers a chance to become a domain of reception which begins at a distance from the 'work', at a point external to it.

In this section I will examine passages in Larkin's essays that set out the outlines of a view that sees the appropriation of literature by readers in terms that cannot be envisaged by the formula 'form is *for the sake* of what is formed' (Bernstein 87), i.e. the internal dynamics of the work, the play between idea and sensuous particularity. In its stead, what we find in Larkin and which can help in thinking about pleasure that is not solely aligned with immediacy are the notions of art's origination in the non-literary and its reception by others as rendering it anonymous (rather than autonomous or heteronymous) to itself.

Larkin chose the occasion of a talk for the Shakespeare prize (presented to him by the FVS Foundation of Hamburg in 1976) to reflect on the modern institutionalisation

of support for poetry through public subsidies. In this essay Larkin speaks of the printed word of the poem as its least constrained form, in which it is received by others without the intrusion of writer or critic. The ability to originate at one point and travel to another allows Shakespeare's work to appear as if autonomous; that is, to survive intact under its own name foreign contexts. However, in my view this autonomy is more properly seen as *anonymy*. The work of a writer like Shakespeare that makes its way by itself is closer to being surrendered to others whose experiences and practices of reading may subject it to codes of reception that are utterly different from the writers' or of the original audience.

Larkin begins from the publicity that modern poetry needs to survive. The distinction he makes, I think, is not between having and not having an audience; it is between seeing an audience as an *element* in a literary process of the work's unfolding, and as a non-literary point of reception, that is, as one whose response is not anticipated by the form of the work. The most striking recent change in poetry, Larkin writes,

is the degree to which it has become a public event. One might almost say that it has been encouraged to become part of the entertainment world, there has been so decided a shift towards spoken poetry, towards poetry on the platform, instead of allowing it to be read silently on the printed page. For the poet this has meant that he must learn new skills: he must grow used to microphones, and television cameras, and even to musical groups, and must be prepared to cultivate his personality as something that mediates between his poem and the reader. (*RW* 87)

The second shift that Larkin mentions is his old *bête noir*, the teaching of poetry by poets: 'poetry has been encouraged to move into the education world' (*RW* 87-8); and the third, related to them 'and most important', is the subsidization of poetry. Taken together, these have created conditions in which 'it has become possible, as it so rarely was in the past, to make a living, if not by poetry, then at least by being a poet' (*RW* 88). The poet has become a multimedia ensemble, with didactic and entertainment components, and he has become this through an investment in the figure that the set of his activities represents to the public. In this academic-cum-commercial economy the poet and the poetry are complementary parts of the show on offer.

Larkin's distinction is also one between two types of commercial exchange that can take place between poet and audience. One is the exchange of art for money, the standardised coin of value, which he favours; and the other is poet, poetry and audience become part of an economic system in which money is not exchanged for poetic 'goods', but is present at each stage to ensure the unity and homogeneity of the system. No one offers anyone anything in this system – desire and satisfaction are not the motives that drive it -- but all get a share of the money and therefore of the art. As a consequence, the poet's poetic preoccupations becomes the art-ness of the art, or the sort of poetry that he ought to write for the sake of writing poetry, rather than poetry that someone who is not part of the system would want to read. And this is, paradoxically enough, not a poetry that is best read on the page without support from the poet's performance or the critics' exegesis; instead it is a poetry that earns its writer a living in the entertainment and the educational worlds (*RW* 89). In the absence of desire, poetry

and money are shared out for what becomes a common project between reader and writer. The poet's critical and performative functions then become, together with his poetry, a part of the poetic ensemble, and Larkin's essay strongly implies that this has come about because the subsidization of poetry has taken it out of the realm of desire and placed it in the realm of necessity. This essentially economic imperative, Larkin argues, entails the dangers that

by acting like a critic he may come to think like a critic; he may insensibly come to embrace what I think of as the American, or Ford-car, view of literature, which holds that every new poem somehow incorporates all poems that have gone before it and takes them a step further. Now I can see that making a living by weighing one poem against another may well make one imagine a kind of ideal poetry that gathers up what is best in all ages and all languages and asserts it in a new way, but the drawback of such a notion is that it suggests that poems are born of other poems, rather than personal or non-literary experience, and for a poet this is disastrous. He will become obsessed with the poems already in existence, instead of those it is his business to bring into being by externalizing and eternalizing his own perceptions in unique and original verbal form. In fact I am not sure, once a poet has found out what has been written already, and how it was written – once, in short, he has learnt his trade – that he should bother with literature at all. Poetry is not like surgery, a technique that can be copied: every operation the poet performs is unique, and need never be done again. (*RW* 89)

Here we have an explicit conflation of 'personal' with 'non-literary' experience. Why need poems have an origin in the non-literary? 'Ford-car' literature needs to establish itself within a genealogy that proves it to be a development, and therefore not arbitrary or inessential. By contrast, the imperative that Larkin takes for a different poetry is that, by distancing itself from literary genealogy and development, it draws attention to its being non-necessary, to its accidental character. Its existence does not refer to

‘literature’ – the body of literary writing that wants to expand and reproduce ‘the poems already in existence’. Larkin made a similar assertion in ‘Books’ (1972): ‘The books the past has given us, the books in which the bookseller deals, are printed; they are magnificent, but they are finite. Only the blank book, the manuscript page, may be the book we shall give the future. Its potentialities are endless’ (*RW* 86). The words that exist on the page gesture not to other words on other pages, to a body of works that can be found in words, but to that which does not yet exist in written form; so the ‘unique’ or new poem gestures not to other poems but to what has not yet been made into poetry, produced through the economy of poet-poem-audience. The ‘un-literary’ is the door out of this poetic economy.

Larkin ended this talk by recounting the story of the earliest introduction of Shakespeare to German theatre-goers. Before he was known in Germany as Shakespeare, he says,

versions of his plays were acted here, in German, throughout nearly the whole of his working lifetime... Some of these have survived, their language nothing like the original, and there are numerous farcical or sensational interpolations, but there is no doubt that people in Hamburg in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries knew about the merchant of Venice, and the murder of Julius Caesar in the Capitol, and Bottom the weaver, and the young prince who met his father’s ghost at night on the battlements. They didn’t know Shakespeare had written them: they had never heard of Shakespeare.

[...]

I find it enormously exciting to think of Shakespeare’s plays making their unofficial way under these conditions, in mutilated form, in a different language, with no grant from the Arts Council, no course of lectures at the local university

to say how good they were, no personal appearance of their author on television, in fact with nothing to recommend them but their own power to interest and amuse. (*RW* 91-92)

Shakespeare's work can make its way anonymously, does not need the poet or critical stage-setting to be received; Larkin relishes its form changing drastically in travelling incognito. Shakespeare's plays become 'crude' (*RW* 91) versions of themselves as they make their way to Germany 'on their own'; they lose much that makes them 'themselves'. Larkin's anonymity allows poems to become something entirely different from what they were written to be as they travel from poet to audience. The poem or play that moves 'by itself' ends up being very different from itself.

This, then, is a more paradoxical and ambiguous notion of reception than Larkin has been credited with.⁴⁶ The artist leaves his poems to be taken on any terms that the audience sets, including the terms of its own language and formal conventions. Poetry, whose writing Larkin connects with cultural specificity and pressure (see chapter four), is made to be anonymous finally. It can be anonymous amongst familiars or foreigners,

⁴⁶ Gillian Steinberg, who also addresses this question in *Philip Larkin and his Audiences*, does not go far enough in recognising what Larkin's emphasis on audience means. She writes: 'Larkin constructs his poems – just as he claims to – expecting a response from the reader, but that the poems anticipate multiple levels of reader involvement, not simple SIMPLY? the recreation of experience he claims to desire but also an interrogation of the poems' speakers and character and, ultimately, of the readers themselves' (xiv). She sees the interaction between the implied audience and the writer as dialogic, whereas Larkin was quite capable of denigrating poems, 'the kinds of poems that succeed only in front of an audience', which 'start to deal in instant emotion, instant opinion, instant sound and fury' (*RW* 88). I am suggesting that Larkin's stress on the audience does not depend on interrogating them or anticipating, positively or negatively, what they may think; it depends on the unknowability and the externality of the audience to the poem, which makes desire or money perhaps the only, and extremely opaque, arbiter between them.

but poetry that wishes to be taken as itself also declines to set terms for its own reception.

What is Larkin abandoning by giving up ‘form’ that needs to be maintained under the protection of a critical understanding of form? The marketability of art implies, for him, a double quality: the willingness of the art-product to treat itself as a product among others, subject to the same exigencies that befall other products; and the quality that art possesses of passing untrammelled through this exchange by not taking on any name – by giving up the expectation of being received according to its own code. Larkin seizes so avidly on poems’ saleability because in the logic he is pursuing, being ‘consumed’ as a commodity is not to be used up, made nothing in the change, but to be taken directly and ironically into the common measure of value, money. Money in Larkin is anonymous, but it is not just an empty token of fetishism but also a promise and presence which can be heard ‘singing’ (‘Money’).⁴⁷

In this chapter I have treated Larkin’s views in ‘The Pleasure Principle’ as a provocation to re-examine what we lose if we belittle the aspect of art that he wishes to portray as stubborn individual gratification, which insists *I want this* or *I feel this* in the face of possible disapproval and which Larkin describes, aptly or maddeningly, as the

⁴⁷ This is a question that can form the opening towards an historical treatment. Why, we could ask adjacently, did a current of Conservative thought promote a brand of politics, in and about the same time, in which transactions of value between individuals become the channel of all social relation? Why did it come to pass that (to take an extreme implication of Thatcherite politics) what was of value came to be conflated with what was of value to someone, price conflated with a price that someone was made willing to pay? Both the closeness of Larkin’s views to neo-liberal conceptions of the market *as well as* the difference open up possibilities of further investigation. The ironic and provocative use of the word ‘market’ serves to highlight, I think, the resemblance and the difference, and the desire for there to be both resemblance and difference between art and commodities.

market principle. Turning to Larkin's poems, in conclusion, we see a complex engagement with pleasure and the promise of gratification in the poems 'Reasons for Attendance' and 'Send No Money'.

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

But not for me, nor I for them; and so
With happiness. Therefore I stay outside,
Believing this, and they maul to and fro,
Believing that; and both are satisfied,
If no one has misjudged himself. Or lied. (CP 30)

'Reasons for Attendance' shows a speaker reasoning himself out of attendance at a gathering that, looking in from the outside, appears to be 'solemnly on the beat of happiness'. He senses with a kind of pleasure what is going on inside – 'the smoke and sweat / The wonderful feel of girls' – but does not join in. Something keeps him outside, and he calls this 'art, if you like'. But it is doubtful by the end of the poem if art is really the reason or the excuse. Is art's call insisting that the non-attendeo who stays out is individual, or is it really the glib and hostile non-joiner who is adamant that art can be a compelling reason for non-attendance, for being 'individual'? Finally, there is no resolution, but a recognition that the sharing out of parts between attendees and non-attendees only brings satisfaction if the *reasons* for each doing what they do are true. Art, here, gives pleasure if there is no self-deception, but the last line hints that this itself may be a reason for upholding the *lie* that no lies are being told. In 'Send No Money', a

much more direct and impatient speaker is waiting for time to 'tell him the truth'.

All the other lads there
Were itching to have a bash,
But I thought wanting unfair:
It and finding out clash.

So he patted my head, booming Boy,
There's no green in your eye:
Sit here and watch the hail
Of occurrence clobber life out
To a shape no one sees –
Dare you look at that straight?
Oh thank you, I said, Oh yes please,
And sat down to wait.

Half life is over now,
And I meet full face on dark mornings
The bestial visor, bent in
By the blows of what happened to happen.
What does it prove? Sod all.
In this way I spent youth,
Tracing the trite untransferable
Truss-advertisement, truth. (*CP 70*)

The poem asks what the boy getting more or less what he wanted – which was not to want but to find out – proves. Time is a schoolmaster, and he flatters this boy who knows nothing about him yet (‘no green in your eye’: he is without envy of others, his motivations are selfless) with an idea of himself as risky and unique, daring enough to wait for a ‘shape no one sees’. The boy is obsequious, eager to prove himself a good pupil. The last act of the poem does not show time to have lied, exactly: ‘the hail / Of occurrence’ clobbering life out is not too different from ‘what happened to happen’, only more violent, in keeping with time’s swaggering posture. The last two lines with their astonishing barrage of *ts*, their trochaic beginnings and brutally slowed-down metre – until truth is literally spat out – speak of the truth as the primal advertisement. What happens to happen and what time promises will happen to happen are, nevertheless, still not identical, as the ‘truss-advertisement’ truth and the truth that is ‘truth’ are not identical. (Time stands between them, the interval between promise and ‘finding out’ make them different, which is marked by the ‘bestial visor’. ‘Visor’ is both face and mask – it is the disguise and the mirror of life, where ‘what happened to happen’ leaves tangible marks.) They are similar enough, however, for no transference to take place between them; when truth behaves as if it were the truth, the advertisement and the reality are in sync, the result is not deception but the failure for transfer of meaning to take place between the truth of time and the truth of the self.

The face that testifies to this battering is ‘bestial’ – that is, animal-like, and therefore more human-like than the inhuman elements that shape life. In ‘Toads’ and

‘Toads Revisited’, too, Larkin uses the animal to express what is closer to the human than himself but still not identical.

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

[...]

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*, ‘Toads’ 38-9)

Work and the worker are not the figures of each other’s truth, but they cling to each other as hard luck clings to ambition, or the comic, in these poems, to the unworldly.

‘Think of being them!’, ‘Toads Revisited’ repeats, when it *is* thinking of being them in order to think of being himself as not-them. ‘All dodging the toad work / By being stupid or weak’ – the cruelty of the lines is also a cruelty to the not-toad in him who is on their side, ‘[t]urning over their failures / By a bed of lobelias’. The not-toad self is gentle and futile, lazy and yet courageous. It is at home with grass, sunshine and playgrounds (likely a reference to Cyril Connolly’s *The Condemned Playground*); what it doesn’t have is armour against time:

Hearing the hours chime,

Watching the bread delivered,
The sun by clouds covered,
The children going home;

Think of being them (*CP 55*)

These characters who cannot give themselves work to do, are vulnerable, above all, to time. Larkin's insensitivity to the question of social equality is not hard to deduce from his work. However, there is in his work (not a compensatory, but only a different) sensitivity to the vulnerability of those who are waiting, whether through necessity or choice, to be freed from the trap in which they find themselves, with which he asserts no identity and to which he can bring himself to make no reply. As in 'Myxomatosis':

Caught in the centre of a soundless field
While hot inexplicable hours go by
What trap is this? Where were its teeth concealed?
You seem to ask.
I make a sharp reply,
Then clean my stick. I'm glad I can't explain
Just in what jaws you were to suppurate:
You may have thought things would come right again
If you could only keep quite still and wait. (*CP 37*)

The killing of trapped rabbits in place of an answer to a question that the entrapped creature *seems* to ask: there is, in this procedure, an imagined transfer of suffering from the 'I' to the 'you', and yet the difference is brutally enforced in the 'reply' – putting to death of one by the other. The killer and the trapped are, after everything has been imagined, not the same – though one can imagine what the other *may* have thought. This difference is similar to Larkin's questioning of the identity of the reader's response with the form of a work through the setting up of a principle ('pleasure') that recognises that the reasons for turning to art are not reasons that art itself can give, even if we choose to

see it as the concretization of the idiom of the common. In posing starkly the contrast between the 'trapped' and the 'liberator', Larkin's work, too, invites readers to reconsider where they start from, and recognise that the place of departure may be elsewhere than the poem.

The Romantic and the Personal in Larkin's Poems

Perhaps the most famous remark Philip Larkin ever made in an interview was '[d]eprivation is for me what daffodils were for Wordsworth' (*RW* 47). It has opened up a characteristically double-edged perspective about how to think about this 'me' which compares the self-revealing neediness of 'deprivation' to the dancing, gleeful company of Wordsworth's daffodils. It is a quirky, question-begging comparison.⁴⁸ In this chapter I will look at the self in Larkin as it speaks about itself. Once again the leading question will be posed in terms of relation. In this chapter I shall limit myself to the question of the self in relation to the presentation of oneself, leaving for the next chapter the presentation of place (though admittedly the boundary that separates the two is not always a firm one). I argue that the self in Larkin emerges from a tension between the Romantic and the personal registers in his poems, and that the poems work out the 'I' in a way that allows the difference between the two registers to become clear. This is also reflected in the manner that 'person-less' poems in Larkin, those that do not have a speaking first person and have been read as aestheticist or symbolist, poetically concentrate meaning in themselves and yet do not work as symbols. A *Romantic* mode (in the sense that I use this term) registers the self's engagement in the construction of a persona, a landscape, or a figure that embodies meaning. The term *personal* indicates

⁴⁸For a brief but interesting comparison of Wordsworth's scenes from rural life and Larkin's characteristic imagery see Ian Almond's 'Larkin and the Mundane' 187-88.

another mode of the self, which registers that the constructions of the Romantic mode are mired in ignorance, inadequacy, or success of a kind that secretly achieves failure. The personal mode, then, is indissociable from the Romantic mode, but it can be considered the mode of unworking or undoing at the heart of projects of Romantic self-making -- even if their ambition be the construction of a selfless self. It is thus akin to the extra-literary, to areas of experience whose responsiveness to artistic modes of significance cannot be relied upon, and to visions which offer not ways of knowing but revelation of the blind spots and gaps that are internally present in knowledge and make it a site of otherness.

The 'self' has been a particularly forceful line of inquiry about Larkin's work. Partly this has been (as I discussed in my Introduction) because Larkin's work has been seen as the arch-representative of the anti-modernist literature of personality, in which the depiction of self-as-character is supposed to guide the experience of reading to the detriment of formal elements. In criticism more favourable to Larkin's poetic techniques, the question has more frequently taken the form of asking whether or not Larkin is a Romantic poet, or an aesthete. In 'Larkin, Decadence and the Lyric Poem', Edna Longley sees Larkin's 'medium' as 'the mask-lyric -- a medium he could not escape, despite his desire to write novels' (29), and 'narcissism' as the most apt psychological model for Larkin's poetry. Narcissism, she argues, 'is regressive when the narcissistic self withdraws, not exactly out of selfishness or self-love, but in response to threats to its integrity... [Larkin's] poems and letters reiterate the fear of being invaded, diluted, controlled or possessed by another' (36-7). However, the narcissistic self may be progressive when its energies are transformed into art: 'The art called into being by the

progressive aspect of narcissism is inseparable from the pathology of its regressive aspect which becomes its subject – in part consciously, in part unconsciously’ (37). M. W. Rowe sees Larkin’s aestheticism less as pathological and more as ‘a peculiarly attractive and liberating illusion’ (43). In a long reading of ‘Here’ he comes to the conclusion that Larkin ‘has achieved an impossibly pure form of consciousness, which dispenses both with *what* is conscious and what it is conscious *of*. The distinction between self and world has vanished; the subject has dissipated into what it contemplates; they have become one radiant and undifferentiated state of being’ (42). This self-dissipation is also what Larkin fears most of all, Rowe claims (*Philip Larkin: Art and Self* 43); I shall discuss his reading of ‘Aubade’ in chapter five. The self in Larkin becomes, in Rowe’s account, the point from which the abolition of subject and object in aesthetic contemplation is achieved. Rowe’s pure form of consciousness may be equated with the Romantic mode that achieves a complete mastery over its perceptions in the form of artistic creation.

The term ‘Romanticism’ has been used in relation to Larkin’s poems by Michael O’Neill, John Bayley, and Christopher Ricks, as well as Edna Longley in her earlier writings on Larkin (see her ‘Poète Maudit’). I will discuss their remarks in some detail below, but it should be noted here that the Romantic is better served, in Larkin’s case, as a set of connections to Romantic themes rather than as a classificatory term proper. Seamus Perry writes that ‘to hold that Scott and Blake are both “Romantic” may be a perfectly good use of language; ... to understand from this the existence of some underlying sameness (“Romanticism”) is to fall victim to something very like a pun, or

an optical illusion'. He offers some pointers about what a non-classificatory understanding of Romanticism could look like:

Both canon and concept enter the critical vocabulary as the gifts of tradition; but neither is fixed. The canon of works may always be changed, with new works added, or emphases changed, for all kinds of reasons (we should not expect a general rule here); and the new evidence offered by the reformed canon will, in turn, alter the concept subsuming that canon; and vice versa. In this way, the fluctuating canon of 'Romantic' texts and the concept of 'Romanticism' work one against the other, nudging themselves around in an endless circle of redefinition; and this is how the concept came to have a history of its own: it is a history of revision. ('Romanticism: The Brief History of a Concept'4)

Instead of ontological questions about Romanticism, he recommends that we ask 'What work has "Romantic" been made to do?', a question that is open-ended with respect to the method of investigation (4).⁴⁹This is helpful because Romanticism, as it has been written about with respect to Larkin, has not primarily been framed in theoretical terms. In Larkin's work, Romanticism has more bearing on the self's origination of an authentic voice and an extra-poetic mode of feeling in poetry. Blake Morrison writes in 'Still Going on, All of It': The Movement in the 1950s and the Movement Today' that 'Larkin yearns for what he doesn't know, and that is what makes him a Romantic' (31).⁵⁰'Larkin's achievement as a poet demonstrates a more

⁴⁹ Susan Wolfson makes a similar claim in *Formal Charges* when she notes that in Romantic texts '[i]dealising theory is strained by internal contradictions, and the most stridently polemical declarations are shadowed and cross illuminated by practices that register conflicting attitudes – about claims for distinctive aesthetic agency, about what it means to seek expression in poetic form, and about the systems of value involved in this search'. (22)

⁵⁰ This essay, published in 2009, is in many respects a revision of his earlier volume *The Movement: English Poetry and Fiction of the 1950s*, where he writes that the 'Movement poetry of Larkin ... can also be thought of as realist in tendency because of its marked preference for metonymy over metaphor' (164).

profound reappraisal of romantic [*sic*] values than is evident in any of his wryly dogmatic critical pronouncements', writes John Reibetanz in "The Whitsun Weddings": Larkin's Reinterpretation of Time and Form in Keats'.⁵¹ Michael O'Neill sees Larkin's 'idiom' as 'at once of its time and in contact with a poetic tradition that includes the Romantics' (291). Speaking of Larkin's 'Church Going', he says,

He moves beyond the 'awkward, uninformed and debunking persona' of the poem's opening, unobtrusively expanding, like Wordsworth in 'Tintern Abbey', from 'I' to 'We'. The 'hunger in himself to be more serious' which Larkin exemplifies in his poem is an appetite evident in many Movement poets, one that they often seek to satisfy through their fraught, exacting negotiations with Romantic poetry. ('Movement Poetry and Romanticism' 291)

Like Perry, these writers treat 'Romantic' as a term that denotes not classification but negotiation. Romanticism is the trait in Larkin which seeks connection, and which gives his poems the seriousness of engagement with the world that characterises Romantic writers. Nevertheless, Larkin's work does bear connection with the recent writings on the philosophical-Romantic idea of subjectivity, as I shall show in what follows.

Prominent among critics who have linked Larkin's work to the artistic and cultural preoccupations of Romanticism is John Bayley, who, in a somewhat pessimistic vein, makes an argument for him as the 'last', subterranean and fortuitous, survival of the Romantic tradition. In 'Philip Larkin: The Last Romantic' (*Selected Essays*) he writes:

⁵¹ See this article for an extended comparison of Larkin's 'The Whitsun Weddings' and Keats' 'Ode to a Grecian Urn', where the author further elaborates on 'Larkin's revision of Keats' (538).

The romantic [*sic*] has no possession or commitments, and a secret sorrow. In a world of sexual and material acquisitiveness his elsewhere can never be possessed, least of all by the poet himself. It makes him [i.e. Larkin qua romantic] pleasurable unpredictable, each poem unfamiliar. There is no place today where his poetry obviously lives, as there is, say, a Ted Hughes country and a Seamus Heaney land, a place domesticated by poets...

Larkin's deepest romanticism is neither knowing nor overtly symbolic, but concentrated on its own vision and frankness. The double self and the dual vision are fixed counters which give the vision and the personality behind it an unexpected variety, as well as a kind of instant grip. (99, 101)

Bayley's main contention is that Larkin's art is the survival of the Romantic strategy of escape in an overtly political age. It is, for Bayley, a version of the Romantic notion of freedom. The view that poetry that caters to collectivist impulses makes the poet available to his critics and to the critically-aware public in a mode of thinking and feeling that they understand and approve of, is implicit in Bayley's argument. Larkin, he says in an odd and interesting formulation, has a seeming capacity

to escape from his poems, not to be pinned down by them. The critic is not wrong or misguided, and yet Larkin is not there any more. Like the brides in 'The Whitsun Weddings' we travel with him on the same train, bound for the same destination, but when our procedures and projects get under way he has already departed elsewhere....

[A]bsence from the critic, even from the reader, is unusual in the poetry of today, which in general is distinguished by togetherness and communality, a complex and clever intimacy with the reader. Poets understand each other because they write for each other. It is not a new phenomenon; it has happened with all collective poetry, with the metaphysicals and with the poets of the 'Tribe of Ben'. But Larkin is not like that... his seeming intimacy can be startling and yet he can be both shameless and reticent, confidential and yet invulnerably refined, wholly unselfconscious and yet inevitably withdrawn, unavailable to us and yet totally forthcoming, absent in presence. His presence is its own style of 'elsewhere'. The interior of his poetry, like a Vermeer interior, is both wholly accessible and completely mysterious. ('The Last Romantic' 94, 95)

The polemical debates around Larkin mentioned in my introduction take his poems as an example of poetic conventionality, conformity, and accessibility in twentieth-century poetry. But does his popularity with the reading public and his reception by some critics sensitive to the nuances of his work point to the survival in his work of the artistic persona of the non-conforming, 'free' individual in the poetic economy of late-twentieth-century literature? Bayley's reading would certainly make this out to be the case, but the terms that he presents for its acceptance are startling. The survival of the Romantic, according to him, depends on its presence becoming, in his memorable phrase, 'its own style of "elsewhere"'. The Romantic personality, with its birthright of freedom and authenticity, depends on a style of self-performance. This is not the style of any freedom, or of any withdrawal from or availability to the world, but of one that combines these oppositions in, precisely, a style. 'Style' in this sense is an inflection of manner or appearance one grasps without exegetical effort. It shows itself, as it were, inescapably. The reader who doesn't see style is necessarily blind to the knowledge it imparts mutely. Style can be elusive as well as obvious, it can be an open secret. In Bayley's construal, Larkin's Romanticism is a style of Romanticism that is un-Romantic, or incorporates the un-Romantic as a means of presentation rather than as a dialectical opposition.

Who but Larkin would juxtapose the exotic obscenity and the romantic line in such a way that instead of making a brisk, glib contrast between real 'undeceived' life and deceptive dream, as they would in the work of most moderns, they come quietly together in their own secret, consolatory meaning. Change of key in Larkin is never for contrast but for obscurely rich enhancement[.] (98)

The Romantic can be recognised here by its unromantic style, not because of what it declares about itself, but because this intimacy that speaks withdrawal, this presence that appears as absence, fulfils Bayley's requirement of the 'Romantic' – 'The romantic has no possession or commitments, and a secret sorrow'. What the Romantic has is nothing, what he shows is hidden. He is behind the 'double self and the dual vision, [that] are fixed counters which give the vision and the personality behind it an unexpected variety, as well as a kind of instant grip' (101). Bayley's remark would suggest that the 'personality' is akin to a third term, present but not explicitly part of the poetic transaction. The dualities of the self – intimacy and withdrawal, reticence and frankness -- do not specify what this personality is, but nevertheless this does not make these paradoxes false. They are true appearances that do not exhaust the truth. There is something other in the Romantic that cannot be captured even in the language of contraries and paradoxes that it characteristically employs. This 'other', called personality here, is not apparent but 'secret'; apparency would allow it to become possession and commitment, a declared and not secret sorrow. Bayley's reading reveals a central assumption about Romanticism, to wit, that the phenomenon that goes by this name celebrates the creation and survival of the singular, free individual whose paradigm is the artist, but that the artist's 'grip' nevertheless depends on something that lies outside the paradoxical compositions of self that he offers. The existence of the free individual is, for the Romantic, predicated on the existence of the artist. The artist creates the work to serve as the image of freedom; but his own activity cannot know or explicitly foreground what makes it compelling to another, the poet's 'elsewhereness' or

his 'not-thereness'. According to Bayley, Larkin's poems are a reminder of this Romantic strategy.⁵²

While Bayley sees the poems working to turn what could be in opposition into 'obscurely rich enhancement' by the addition of this third term, Christopher Ricks, deploying a more rigorous but perhaps less suggestive logic, sees this process in terms of 'combination'. Ricks writes that 'Larkin combines what in less good poets proves incompatible: the understandings both of classicism and Romanticism. It is a matter of tone, but the printed page, or rather the printed page of my discursive prose, is crude in its notation of intonations' (276). But the combination still produces what is heard as immediate and singular, like style: tone. In the same essay ('Philip Larkin: Like Something Almost Being Said') Ricks speaks of opposing 'thrusts' in the poems, registers that can be told apart:

Romanticism's pathos of self-attention, its grounded pity for itself, always risks self-pity and soft warmth; classicism's stoicism, its grounded grief at the human lot, always risks frostiness. What Larkin achieves is an extraordinary complementarity; a classical pronouncement is protected against a carven coldness by the ghostly presence of an arching counterthrust, a romantic swell of feeling; and the romantic swell is protected against a melting self-solicitude by the bracing counterthrust of a classical impersonality. (*The Force of Poetry* 276)

Crucially, here, too, the dualities 'Romantic swell' and 'classical impersonality' are read through tone and emphasis; 'tone' makes them 'mean' at the moment of reading, in a way that the printed word cannot notate. So Ricks, like Bayley, sees Larkin's Romanticism-plus-classicism as consisting of an emphasis that belies an attitude while

⁵² See also, 'The Self as Available Reality' in Bayley's *The Uses of Division*.

not declaring it. ‘Tone’ or ‘style’ here come to stand for both the visible and unmistakable, and for that which cannot be said. I would connect this with what Bayley identifies as an important trait of Larkin’s Romanticism, its lack of interest in owning. ‘Tone’ or ‘meaning’ is a way for the poet to leave his signature on the work while simultaneously divesting himself from it (similar to the practising of what in the last chapter I called ‘anonymy’). Larkin makes himself available *in* his work, but the open secret of his personality cannot be located and fixed there. One merit of Bayley’s argument is that its addition of an unreadable and yet not wilfully self-concealing secrecy makes possible a reading of Larkin’s contentment in being in place within a locale and a tradition – England and English poetry sans modernism -- that does not occlude his work’s aura of being placeless that many readers respond to (as I will discuss at length in the next chapter).

As Perry’s remarks (quoted above) indicate, in both positive treatments that seek to elucidate its essence and in negative treatments that seek to demystify their chosen target, there has been a tendency to reduce Romanticism to either an empirical or a metaphysical concept. This is, as Geoffrey Hartman, writes in ‘Romanticism and Anti-Self-consciousness’, a constant danger courted by ‘the Romantics themselves [who] do not give, (in their conceptual moments) an adequate definition of the functions of art’ (Hartman 47). One way out of this impasse has been to see in Romantic works the inauguration of a subject that is not limited by the world that it finds itself in, or by time, but rather marks the beginning of a time and subjectivity. Michael O’Neill himself drew on this conception of the Romantic in his *Romanticism and the Self-conscious Poem*, which takes a hint from the work of Maurice Blanchot to posit the Romantic as the

‘advent’ of the self engaged in observing the effects and limits of its own awareness.

This self-conscious poem ‘knows that the creating self is at the mercy of the protean energies – linguistic and experiential – which it seeks to control’ (xxvii). Romanticism, then, consists not in this or that particular trait, but in the presence of such a consciousness at work on the *poetic* self or in the text. In the words of Maurice Blanchot, whose writings have been influential in recent studies of Romanticism:

Romanticism, the advent of poetic consciousness, is not simply a school of literature, nor even an important moment in the history of art. Romanticism inaugurates an epoch; even more, it is the epoch in which every epoch reveals itself for, through it, the absolute subject of all revelations comes into play: the ‘I’ that in its freedom adheres to no condition, recognises itself in no thing in particular, and is only in its element, in its ether, in the whole where it is free. (‘Athenaeum’, *Infinite Conversation* 355-356)

Blanchot speaks of ‘early’ or ‘theoretical romanticism’, of the tensions and intellectual ferment of Jena that contributed to the Romantic as it then recognisably came into existence. But it is not difficult to see what makes this insight an attractive one for thinking about Romanticism in general: it allows us to see the contours of the Romanticism being described in the practice of potentially any critic or artist in so far as such a ‘poetic consciousness’ can be detected. Similarly, Andrew Bowie has traced Romanticism to the idea that subjectivity, and therefore language, not only represents the world but creates it. He writes:

One major aspect of the philosophical Romanticism which emerges in the wake of Kant is the idea that if the subject always plays some role in how the world is constituted, language can be understood in a much broader sense, namely as the means by which those subjects respond to the world and to other subjects, rather

than just 'represent' it. In this Romantic view music therefore need not be regarded as something to be explained primarily in other terms, and so can itself become the source of new relationships between ourselves and the world. (243-244)

Analogously, literature, and the poetic especially, becomes after Romanticism not just a reflection of the world or a conventional activity that provides a particular experience, but a self-reflexive activity that generates reality-shaping meaning and reflects on the process whereby it does so. Subjectivity comes to the fore in the Romantic sense: as something that both creates and cannot be contained in the work. Blanchot is interested in the same implication of Romantic subjectivity when he says that

The 'I' of the poet, finally, is what alone will be important: no longer the poetic work, but poetic activity, always superior to the real work, and only creative when it knows itself able to evoke and at the same time to revoke the work in the sovereign play of irony. As a result, poetry will be taken over not only by life, but even by biography: hence the desire to live romantically and to make even one's character poetic – that character called 'romantic', which, moreover, is extremely alluring inasmuch as character is precisely what is lacking in that it is nothing other than the impossibility of being anything that is determined, fixed or sure. (357)

The picture of Romanticism we have here is one in which the poet is the place of determination of the poetic 'I', but he is also the guarantee of the existence of this 'I' outside the work, as a source of authenticity or control. The poet is 'present' in the work as something it cannot comprehend; the work registers that its maker exists elsewhere. But in spite of this 'transcendence' of the 'poet' or the externality of poetic activity to

the work itself, the 'I' is not able to secure an appearance, nor uniqueness or distinctness, without a 'work'. The work gives subjectivity form, even as this form presents itself as something that does not exhaust or become subordinate to subjectivity. An 'other' life of the poet then becomes part of the back-story of the poetic 'I' that appears in the work. For Romantic aesthetics this has the corollary that no lyric can be taken as biographical, but neither can it be truly lyrical if it were not speech from a source that comes from beyond the artifice of the poem. The relation between the poetic self in the work and the other self or selves of the poet, the story of the related masks (personae) of the life and the work, in short, comes to the fore as a specific Romantic problem. So does the problem of limit, as exemplified in Terry Whalen's reading of Larkin (in *Philip Larkin and English Poetry*) as a Romantic who is both 'ironic and romantic at the same time'. Whalen reads the irony as a limitation on the Romanticism, taking his cue from T. E. Hulme's idea (in his 1924 essay 'Romanticism and Classicism') of the classical as being faithful to 'the conception of a limit' (Hulme 95). Whalen finds that Larkin's poetry answers to this classicist demand for 'an intelligent control over romantic energies which is conservative without being inhibited' (52). Larkin is 'romantic in the manner of the cautious realism of which Hulme is speaking. There is an active polarity here which is creative' (53). The other pole of Larkin's poetic force-field, according to Whalen, is D. H. Lawrence, a 'poet of immediacy' (55). Polarity defines the romantic poet because the work has a conflictual relationship with the 'I', which visibly exercises control *and* fails to control the poem.

Some sort of polarity is then central to the Romantic; but I would argue that as well as polarity, Larkin's Romanticism offers us the insight that the difference in

question is between two registers of the self, and that this difference does not pose limitation by contrast so much as limitation of the same by the same, or a difference within the same. The self is limited by the self. Geoffrey Hartman and Andrew Bennett understand Romanticism in this manner, as a problem of self-consciousness and its relationship with knowledge of self. In 'Romanticism and Anti-Self-consciousness', Hartman writes that Romanticism 'is non-limiting with respect to the mind. It seeks to draw the antidote to self-consciousness from consciousness itself' (45). 'The retrospective movement [of Romanticism] may be visionary... or deeply oblique... In every case, however, there is some confrontation of person with shadow or self with self. The intense lyricism of the Romantics may well be related to this confrontation' (48). When it comes to Romantic art,

[n]either a mere increase in sensibility nor a mere widening of self-knowledge constitutes its purpose. The Romantic poets do not exalt consciousness *per se*. They have recognised it as a kind of death-in-life, as a kind of product of a division in the self. The mind which acknowledges the existence or past existence of immediate life knows that its present strength is based on a separation from that life. A creative mind desires not mere increase of knowledge, but 'knowledge not purchased by the loss of power' (*Prelude*, V). Life, says Ruskin, is the only wealth; yet childhood, or certain irrevocable moments, confront the poet sharply and give him the sense of having purchased with death the life of the mind. Construing what Yeats called an anti-self, or recovering deeply buried experience, the poet seeks to return to 'Unity of Being'. Consciousness is only a middle term, the strait through which everything must pass; and the artist plots to have everything pass through the whole, without sacrifice to abstraction. (Chase 47)

Hartman sees consciousness as a middle term, a passage, between empowering knowledge and unity of being. Andrew Bennett goes further than this and makes the

consciousness the site of a non-ontological division which does not (or does not only) polarise but constitutes subjectivity: ‘that the poet is *constitutively* rather than occasionally or contingently ignorant... marks out or characterizes the figure of the Romantic poet... The poet in each case comes up against the limits of human knowing, is constituted as a poet by his engagement with or apprehension of his own ignorance’ (*Ignorance* 66). For my purpose, the important point is that not knowing oneself and the human condition, a non-consciousness in consciousness, is central to the Romantic way of thinking as described by Bennett; in short, a certain non-contradictory neutralisation of the making and knowing done in the Romantic mode, whether it is of self or world, is central to the Romantic. Romanticism yearns for the absent other that it identifies outside itself, but at the same time it also plots to incorporate and obliterate it; what I am calling the ‘personal’ then becomes visible as something intimate to the knowing and doing self, and yet other to it, unappeased and out of accord with the project of self-elaboration and satisfaction. The otherness of the ‘personal’ is hidden, but non-dialectically, inasmuch as the personal voice or mode does not become an object of knowledge but the disaccord with oneself that nevertheless appears as a self-revelation, that drives self-knowledge from the inside outwards. The personal is the difference-from-itself of the Romantic.

In this connection, the anecdotal story that Larkin has told about a poetic conversion from a formal to a personal voice, from the music of Yeats, ‘pervasive as garlic’ (*RW* 29), to the emotional ‘obviousness’ of Hardy, acquires a new significance. Hardy, Larkin says, is liked by ‘very dissimilar poets’ (*RW* 175), and offers this reason:

I rather think they may have found what I found, that Hardy gave them confidence to feel in their own way. When I came to Hardy it was with a sense of relief that I didn't have to try and jack myself up to a concept of poetry that lay outside my own life – this is perhaps what I felt Yeats was trying to make me do. One could simply relapse into one's own life and write from it. Hardy taught one to feel rather than to write – of course one has to use one's own language and one's own jargon and one's own situation – and he taught one as well to have confidence in what one felt. (*RW* 175-176)

The confidence 'to feel' has its complement in the persona of the unprofessional reader of literature that Larkin studiously maintained in his critical essays. He has mostly spoken about his art, its genesis and its problems, in anecdotal form, in essays published, importantly, as journalism and not as specialist literary criticism. Larkin has, in his critical pronouncements, explicitly refused and even derided the persona of the critic or of the modernist poet who combines the roles of practitioner and theoretician of art as being disingenuous. The persona that he develops in his critical essays is a fundamentally uncritical one, uncritical, that is, according to modern canons of engagement with ideas about the 'poetic'.⁵³ Similarly, his poetic persona is that of a man who speaks as 'himself', does not recognise the poetic imperatives dictated by the academy, privileges artistic control and unhindered communication, and also provokes

⁵³ Larkin's preferences may also echo what Donald Duff calls Romantic '(Anti-)Didacticism'. In *Romanticism and the Uses of Genre*, Duff has pointed out that the anti-didacticism of the Romantics was an attempt to beat utilitarianism at its own game by deploying 'a new conception of the way in which literature is useful, as a vehicle of self-knowledge and self-cultivation', through a 'distinction between literature of knowledge and power' (117). In other words, Romanticism contrasted one idea of useful with another, an idea that 'intimates' rather than teaches, deploys the autonomy of the work to implant '(anti-)didactic' suggestion, a *modus operandi* that Duff calls 'one of Romanticism's most enduring achievements' (118).

charges of philistinism. What happens in Larkin's work is much more complicated. Larkin's poetry works by exposing the Romantic subject to the personal subject, and vice versa. The Romantic subject uses the 'I' poetically, to create a form that allows the self to express itself and assert itself against everything that is not self; the personal subject, however, recognises that 'art', which gives the 'I' an aspiration towards autonomy and freedom, also imprisons the self within the forms of self-construction that it proposes. Larkin famously said in an interview that '[o]ne of the great criticisms of poets in the past is that they said one thing and did another, a false relation between life and art. I always try to avoid this' (*FR* 24). A 'true relation' between life and art in Larkin's work entails maintaining a non-contradiction between word and deed, but also, paradoxically enough, craving the power to be different from oneself. The 'personal' voice in Larkin cannot always be taken as the Romantic one, but may more fruitfully be read as being in tension with and moving across the terrain of the Romantic.

The idea of differentness has a weight in Larkin's poetry which has not been considered in its own right. Though Larkin made it clear that he 'wouldn't want to write a poem which suggested I was different from what I am' (*FR* 23), he also wanted his poetry to be different from *itself*. Twice he spoke publicly about poems he wrote as being different from his usual fare. He explained his choice of 'Absences' for the anthology *Poet's Choice* by saying that 'I fancy it sounds like a different, better poet rather than myself ... I wish I could write like this more often' (*FR* 17). Introducing 'The Explosion' in 1972 on BBC Radio 3, he said: 'What I should like to do is to write different kinds of poems that might be by different people. Someone once said that the great thing is not to be different from other people but to be different from yourself' (*FR*

92). The following passage to Monica Jones in a letter of 6 November 1954 – in the Movement decade – sheds further light on this. This is one of several places where Larkin writes to Monica Jones about Katherine Mansfield's journal.

Do you see what struck me? The incessant harping on the conviction that the aperçus in which 'life' seemed most piercingly summarised (e.g. 'on the wall of the kitchen there was a shadow, shaped like a little mask with two gold slits for eyes. It danced up and down') put on her not only an artistic obligation to record them, but a moral obligation to 'live up to' them. This is stressed again & again & again. I think (but of course I've never been a girl) you do her less than justice in implying that wanting to be a different person was only self-dramatisation. In its numerous contexts it reads to me more like the ordinary reaction of any person who sees anything beautiful – a wish to return thanks to, or to – this is more like it – to struggle towards a state of mind in which such perceptions would be more common, and in which they wd be of more practical use. After all, that is what one feels towards such things, if only one could rely on them for help, seriously! Of course I only bother about this because I think her noticings (is that the English equivalent) are so extraordinary. I am quite sure nobody has ever written to touch her, not even Lawrence. That sentence, or pair of sentences, about the shadow on the wall seems to me to contain such a lot: the suggestion of a gaiety, sinister because heartless, at the very centre of life – yet only a mask! What looks through it is still a mystery. (*Letters to Monica*126)

He ends the letter with: 'You don't know how much I should like to write a different sort of poetry altogether! but when I try I just can't produce even a bad poem' (127)

Larkin's preoccupation in this letter is self-change, and what he sees in Mansfield's observation is the kind of perception that imposes a double obligation, artistic and moral. This reaction is the 'ordinary' reaction of anyone who feels their sensory world changed by the 'beautiful' – the name in Larkin for what initiates a struggle towards a 'different' state of mind and wants to retain this change. The sensory difference made by 'beauty' demands a moral struggle to be the sort of person who can

live with this altered perception. The end of the letter swerves from this desire to what Larkin designates as the pole that stands in opposition to beauty: truth. Truth in Larkin appears as the realisation that the altered sensory world that he wants can't produce 'even a bad poem'. One way to read this would be to see 'beauty' as the placeholder of experimentation in Larkin's poetry, and 'truth' his conservative and cynical choice of the successful poem over the risky, possibly unsuccessful one. I would argue, however, that having identified writing differently with perceiving differently, Larkin not only renews the challenge to respond to the changing sensory and emotional world that art finds itself in, but also indicates his own difficulty with taking up this challenge within the space of art, or in the 'Romantic' mode that guarantees the continuity between life and art through self-fashioning. The personal voice or register that struggles free of the self-dramatizing 'Romantic' one wishes for self-difference; it responds to the changing world – actual or fictional – it finds itself in by wishing for a state where the 'beautiful' could be lived up to or relied on for 'help', and not merely played out in a set of contradictions that ultimately serves to define self rather than unbind a self from itself. Larkin's work pivots around this conflict which, while it is not disguised, has gone largely unremarked. It attends to the painful, comic and essentially unresolved paradox that while the 'beautiful' appears to be an advertisement, a seductive or manipulative presentation of self, and 'truth' capable of transforming reality; yet it is truth that fixes the self in knowledge and the beautiful which beckons towards responsiveness and possibly irresponsible change. It is hard to say which of them has the last word in Larkin: truth is called a 'truss-advertisement' in 'Send no Money' (*CP* 70); and in both 'Sunny Prestatyn' (*CP* 64-5) and 'Essential Beauty' (*CP* 69), Larkin speaks of the

beauty in images that are offered cravenly to the basest desires, constructed according to the specifications that apparently affirm the world as it is. But these images are threatening, different even in their predictability, and ultimately vulnerable because recognised as 'beautiful'. In being exposed to anyone without defence they provoke their perceivers to respond to them with fear and violence, or at best in fugitive moments of heartbreak or illumination. In 'Sunny Prestatyn', beauty that makes for difference is defaced and covered over by obscene drawings; while truth, which promises cruelty and more of the same, is listened to reverently by the boy with no green in his eyes ('Send No Money', *CP* 70).

The misunderstanding of the powers of beauty and truth is not simply a situation brought about by the wrong desires or the wrong moral choices, but is a result of the possibility of 'art' in human life. 'Art', in Larkin's work, does not possess what might be called a transformative capacity, a capacity of inspiring through its own self-presentation a difference from life as it is, but returns to 'life' a desire for or opening towards change without presenting an 'object' that attempts to formalise what this change might look like. Larkin also shows that the pursuit of this 'ordinary' desire for difference through art carries the risk of paradoxically making the human being more resistant to change. Art's formal criteria of autonomy and success projected directly to life, the aspiration of a formalist Romanticism, prevent any transfer between art and life, leaving truth 'trite untransferable' ('Send No Money', *CP* 70).⁵⁴ Art, in Larkin, operates with ideas of

⁵⁴ The problem of art rendering human action more and more self-involved in spite of its best intentions belongs, as Jacques Ranciere has pointed out, to the historical advent of the 'aesthetic', the way of perceiving that isolates art as an object: '[A]esthetic definitions of art that affirm its autonomy in one way or another say the same thing, affirm the same paradox: that art is henceforth recognisable by its

autonomy and freedom that do not lead to art-like autonomy or freedom when lived out. Larkin works on this paradox in his own idiom, the idiom of the drama of person and of personless landscape, of mask and non-mask. It is, furthermore, formally reflected in his work which, by not making the process of reading a self-reflexive one so much as one that engages the poem and its other (sometimes 'life', sometimes the self), portrays the claims of art in a drama of conflict and submission between what a person is and what art tells him he could be. In the rest of this chapter, I will offer readings of 'Deceptions', 'Cut Grass', 'Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel' and 'Money', poems in which the Romantic self that 'evokes and revokes' itself is underwritten by a 'personal' self that unworks its determinations by its desire to be different from itself.

A good place to begin to explore the different modulations of the 'I' in Larkin's work is in the early poem 'Deceptions' (1950). The poem supplied the title of the collection in which it appeared and also one of the slogans by which the Movement 'type' came to be identified – 'the less deceived'. It has been argued that the desirability of being 'less deceived' was 'clearly in keeping with both the vigilant outlook of the post-war years and the philosophical empiricism that was prevalent at the time' (Regan 'Larkin and the Movement' 887-888). 'The less deceived' are sober and industrious, with modest desires

lack of any distinguishing characteristics – by its indistinction. Its products perceptibly manifest the quality of a thing that is made that is identical with the not made, a known thing identical with the unknown, a willed thing identical with the unwilled. In short, the specificity of art, finally nameable as such, is its identity with non-art' (*Aesthetics and its Discontents* 66). The mark of aestheticisation is a double movement in which an object is set apart from others and at the same time identified with a true or 'real' life of the imagination. The identity of isolated art-object and revolutionised life in the 'aesthetic' effaces the question of transfers between the art object (the composite art-life) and the recipient, with his altogether 'other' life that receives art in ways heterogeneous to its original determination. Ranciere has traced this elsewhere in his work through the figure of the 'worker'.

and a healthy sense of scepticism. Yet, if we turn to the line in the play, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which ostensibly lent the era a tagline, Larkin's title seems enmeshed in ambiguous possibilities. Ophelia's words, 'I was the more deceived' (III. i. 120), can be taken in two senses: she was the more deceived *because* she thought Prince Hamlet loved her when he didn't, or she was more deceived *than* Hamlet himself, who also thought that he loved her. A further cause of puzzlement: if Ophelia is the more deceived one because she believes Hamlet when he tells her he loves her, the only way she could remain *undeceived* would have been to refuse to believe vows of love at all, Hamlet's or any other's. In other words, by ceasing to be a passive recipient of any man's love, and becoming an active sceptic. Being 'less deceived' cannot here mean being a better judge of love, but rather being the one who refuses to believe or judge love ('You should not have believed me', says Hamlet in the preceding lines). Immersed in the process of belief and judgement, Ophelia cannot but be deceived; the deceiver, in possession of the meaning of his actions, is the less deceived one in the exchange. But in Larkin's poem, conversely, it is the passive and vulnerable one, in the grip of the knowledge of sexual assault, who escapes deception. As Larkin explained to George Hartley in a letter from 1955, 'suffering – well, there is positively no deception about that. No one imagines their suffering' (cited in Hartley 299).

This is merely one of the muddled genealogies of the poem. The poem's epigraph, from Mayhew's *London Labour and London Poor* (1851), seizes partially and one might say obsessively on a detail that appears to have had an obscure personal significance for Larkin, as has been argued very well by Peter Robinson in "Readings will Grow Erratic" in Philip Larkin's "Deceptions": '[T]he end of 'Deceptions' only

superficially grows more general, because it does so with a false analogy – and this superficial move to the generalising truth conceals an actual increase in the specificity of what is being imagined’ (304). Robinson’s reading, a long and thought-provoking engagement with the poem, explores personal and textual reasons for unease with the poem. Comparing Mayhew’s text with the poem he points out interesting divergences: the rape that Mayhew’s prostitute is narrating took place on a downstairs sofa where Larkin has an upstairs bed; it depicts the girl’s arrival in a Victorian brothel with a mistress and other women already present at the scene; the drink the girl takes is prepared not by the rapist himself but by others, and offered to her, not forced upon her (291). The scenic effects of the poem do not suggest a brothel as its location: the original ‘entrapment takes place in the society of London’s pleasure district. Larkin’s “attic” is the pitiful, and pitiable, location of sexually lonely men who cannot find a social form of “fulfilment”’ (305). Larkin abstracts from and re-imagines Mayhew’s story, first to give a vivid picture of the girl’s imagined suffering, and then to withdraw from this picture and state that the poem is unable to offer her consolation. This tension between the imagined scene and the imaginer is the fulcrum of the poem.

*"Of course I was drugged, and so heavily I did not regain
consciousness until the next morning. I was horrified to
discover that I had been ruined, and for some days I was inconsolable,
and cried like a child to be killed or sent back to my aunt."
--Mayhew, London Labour and the London Poor*

Even so distant, I can taste the grief,
Bitter and sharp with stalks, he made you gulp.
The sun’s occasional print, the brisk brief
Worry of wheels along the street outside
Where bridal London bows the other way,

And light, unanswerable and tall and wide,
Forbids the scar to heal, and drives
Shame out of hiding. All the unhurried day,
Your mind lay open like a drawer of knives.

Slums, years, have buried you. I would not dare
Console you if I could. What can be said,
Except that suffering is exact, but where
Desire takes charge, readings will grow erratic?
For you would hardly care
That you were less deceived, out on that bed,
Than he was, stumbling up the breathless stair
To burst into fulfilment's desolate attic.

(CP 41)

Larkin begins with a quotation from a book of historical, not fictional, narratives. An 'I' speaks here before the poet's poem begins; this 'I' assumes, in its quoted actuality in the poem, not only the burden of 'real' existence but also of a true report of the girl's experience. The quotation makes the accuracy of what is reported *in this moment* of the narrative the uncontested occasion of the poem. The 'I' of the poet, 'Larkin', appears in the wake of the first 'I' that appears (chronologically and materially on the page) at the beginning of the poem, and claims to inhabit this irrefutable person. Readers are not prepared for the transition from the 'I' of the Mayhew account to the poet's 'I', and the change is not obvious at least till we reach the 'he' in the second line of the poem. 'Even so distant, I can taste the grief'. Once it is realised that the 'I' speaking now is another 'I', 'Larkin', both the distance that this 'I' has from the very first moment established between itself and the other 'I', and also its curious proximity, even identity, become remarkable. 'Ever so distant, I can taste the grief'. Taste, the most private of the senses,

the one that only 'I' can inform anyone about, is the poet's mode of access to the girl's experience.

In the next sentence – lines 3-8 – the 'I' vanishes into a person-less scene – the print of sunlight in a room, the sounds of wheels outside, the sense of a city shrinking away from what the room has witnessed. This scene, following as it does upon what the 'I' can taste of this distant episode, modulates in person-less place, showing that it is not used only to identify a speaker in the poem, but is a sort of space in which the action of the poem takes place. It is the stairs and the attic; the girl and man. Now the centre of the poem becomes not the experience that 'Larkin' can enter into, the grief he 'can taste', but the gap and the continuity between the 'I' that speaks as the poet himself and the person-less voice that narrates the scene from lines 3-9. In line 10, the 'I' resumes speaking and withdraws from the scene it had ceded to, to become now a voice outside the scene, a point of view that is both physically and historically removed. 'Slums, years, have buried you'.

The 'I' can shift time and place, reviews its entry or trespass into the girl's narrative as a person who can speak not just for her but *as* her. The 'she' of the poem is the figure of exact suffering, the experience of utter passivity: she has nothing to do with reading, with the erratic or the erotic, with the proliferation of meaning or with 'bursting into' anything, physically or emotionally – in short, with anything active or desiring. Her only appearance in direct speech, the epigraph at the beginning of the poem, is as a citation; after the second line the scene of violence, light and sound and London, is presented through her consciousness, but even here we do not see *as* her for long before she is set apart from the scene in being directly addressed, 'your mind lay open as a

drawer of knives'. She is the one to whom violence happened, yet in the switch from free personless description to address, the poem intimates that it is a narrating 'I' and not she who actively imagines suffering. The second part of the poem, with its suggestion of a sonnet-like turn, slips back into the poet's 'I', who then refers to a third, a 'he'. Nowhere does the poem encompass the consciousness of the victim directly. The difference from Ophelia is notable: she is the more deceived the more she exposes herself to Hamlet's tortured self-contradictions – but deceived, nonetheless, as an unfortunate *actor* in the play. The woman in the poem, nameless, is less deceived because she is not an actor: she is a representation of passivity, not an actor who can risk deception. The rapist is the desiring and the deceived one.

The speaker, however, is also not just either passive or active, and that is his trouble. The distance between 'I can taste the grief' and 'I would not dare / console you if I could' is immense but indeterminate. Is the 'I' concerned with another's experience or with its own ability? Neither, it seems, for adumbration of the narrow region of 'what can be said' supplants both ability and activity. 'Suffering is exact': the possibility is opened up that what has just been imagined, the tasting of the girl's grief by a distant reader, may be 'erratic', that *desire to read* was pulling the strings in this straightforward novelistic description. Was desire in charge as the 'I' laid out the scene, revived in its imagination the consciousness of the long-dead victim and also entered the scene as the rapist? Then desire cannot be trusted to read; exactitude, absence of desire, is the trustworthy mode of reading. Desire belongs to the rapist making his way towards 'fulfilment's desolate attic', and 'Larkin' identifies with him insofar as he desires to enter into the lonely attic of the girl's experience. But the poet also claims the girl's

‘inconsolable’ suffering. The ‘I’ has been both exact and erratic in reading the scene.

The novelistic and realistic mode of becoming another-in-self is laid out on the surgeon’s table. For, finally, this ‘I’ that can become the other of itself, that can assume the mode of un-personed space or personed voice for the articulation of another’s experience, cannot address another in sympathy. It can only be undeceived if it remains passive, not passionate, without any active stance towards the subject that it addresses and imagines. In this poem, there is a violent, almost clinical wrenching apart of desire and desire’s realisation.

In this poem as in Larkin’s novels (as I discussed in chapter one), desire is undeceived when it can *be* another without *wanting* to be another, to possess another without addressing him or her.⁵⁵ The ‘I’ splits into an active and a passive part when it lets itself imaginatively become others, into a part that must receive and a part that must act and want. Thus the moral apportioning of relative deception; and the questionable insight that one of the other persons the ‘I’ has become in the reading, the person of the

⁵⁵In an essay of 1982, Larkin made remarks about Sylvia Plath’s poems that shed further light on his understanding of emotion in poetry. ‘Increasingly divorced from meaningful incident, [Plath’s poems] seem to enter neurosis or insanity, and seem to exist there in a prolonged high-pitched ecstasy like nothing else in literature.’ ‘Considering what one takes to be their subject matter, her poems, particularly the last ones, are curiously, even jauntily impersonal; it is hard to see how she was labelled confessional. As poems they are to the highest degree original and scarcely less effective. How valuable they are depends on how highly we rank the expression of experience with which we can in no sense identify, and from which we can only turn with shock and sorrow’ (‘Horror Poet’, RW 281). This is a complex judgement which refuses to close the gap between an admission that he finds the poems ‘effective’ – which is also an admission that he can feel the horror that Plath writes about – and the question of whether ‘we’ can identify with this experience. The alternative of refusing to see oneself in Plath’s ‘high-pitched ecstasy’ is suggested along with an apprehension that its appeal is potent. Also interesting is the characterisation of Plath as ‘impersonal’, which, perhaps, has not a little to do with Larkin’s suspicion that Plath was ‘ready to exploit her own traumas if they would make poems’. Impersonality then appears as an attitude towards experience, not least one’s own. Larkin seems to suggest that a writer’s strategy for refusing impersonality requires writing about experiences that do not force an extreme or unlikely identification; and that extreme emotions are convincingly portrayed only as a result of a ruthless self-exploitation.

rapist, is the more deceived one. The poem indirectly comments on what it would be like to read without desire or identification: it may always lead to the impasse of ‘I would not dare / console you if I could’”. I would argue that the lack of daring comes from changing the key of the speaking voice from imagination to judgement, specifically a judgement about *who* is less deceived. Here we can address Robinson’s unease with the idea of fulfilment in the poem:

The conclusion of ‘Deceptions’ is an instance of the uneasiness embedded in this poet’s ‘great strength’. There is frequently a complex stress apparent between the particular example or situation offered, and the concluding reflections drawn from it. Are the observations about sexual life in Larkin’s poem derived suitably from the poem’s occasion? The word ‘fulfilment’ in ‘Deceptions’ does not have a determiner, a possessive pronoun for instance, or a ‘such’. In moving from the particular to the general do Larkin’s own readings grow erratic? (301)

Larkin has himself stumbled, at the end of his poem, into the wrong attic. His closing metaphor has sought to catch the excitement that the thought of raping the girl might produce. It is as if he had been reading Mayhew as literary pornography, not actually raping, but fantasising a violent sexual encounter and simultaneously, or immediately subsequently, composing on the impulse to a romantic care for the victim that can coincide, or nearly coincide, with the temporary frenzy that would make her one. The ‘desolate attic’ of Larkin’s poem is a place where desire will not result in feelings that can be socially acknowledged, or ones that can contribute to the fostering of mutual wellbeing. (305)

Robinson recognises that the ‘impulse to a romantic care for the victim... can coincide, or nearly coincide, with the temporary frenzy that would make her one’. However, it is this matter of ‘coinciding, or nearly coinciding’ which is crucial here: the two impulses are not discrete only in time but also belong to two different orders, that of total passivity/exactitude, and the active, desiring stance that is responsible both for

causing pain and desiring to have empathy with it. The lack of a possessive pronoun before 'fulfilment' is not accidental: the poem wants us to feel the dangerous proximity of the rapist to the speaker who presents himself as imagining and addressing the episode. In this respect it is not quite accurate to say, as Graham Holderness says (through one of the several voices articulating different viewpoints on the poem in 'Reading "Deceptions"'), that it 'never pretends to be anything other than a poet in 1950, using a Victorian sociological document to tell a story about Victorian life' (92). The special erotic charge that Robinson detects in the last line is no doubt real, but the tension in the poem, rather than being between 'the particular and the general', is between an imagined situation and the reading which actively addresses it. Suffering is less deceived, but not entirely undeceived. If a reader chooses to interpret this quasi-romance of reading as an allegory of desire, one corollary would be the nominally undetermined fulfilment that Robinson diagnoses for 'Larkin' is available to anyone who can be 'I' – which is anyone who can read. Erratic desire nominates more than one self, and readers can choose to be anyone within the imaginary space of literature or refuse to let anyone else's 'I' speak for them.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Alice Ferrebe argues that, in 'Deceptions', Larkin's 'ideal reader and I-speaker, unlike the desperate woman, can appreciate the modest victory of being "less deceived"' (95). This fails to appreciate the strength of the admission that the woman 'would hardly care' what Larkin has to say about her, that she was less deceived. In saying that this poem displays 'a definitive feature of Larkin's poetry: the arousal of an unfamiliar emotion which is then figured into some kind of everyday truth – in this case, that male sexual desire (for this is assumed to be the rapist's motivation) is an irrational, ungovernable force' (*Literature of the 1950s* 94), Ferrebe goes further than Janice Rossen who sees the poem as remaining 'problematic because the poet shows a great deal of sympathy with the man who has attacked her'... but can 'to some extent sympathise with the girl's victimisation' (88). In using the rhetorical 'reader' as a mirror of the response that the poet allegedly displays towards male sexual violence, Ferrebe is able to use 'Deceptions' as an exemplary Movement poem to argue furthermore that the 'mores enshrined in Movement writing have cultural consequences well beyond aesthetics' (106). The issue is one of closure; does the poem close the issue of sexual violence through 'a familiar appeal to a contemporary reader to

'Deceptions' shows the poetic consciousness ripping apart the suffering-and-acting subject who responds to others' (whether the poet's or other characters') active cruelty or empathy. Inactivity is privileged as being closer to the truth: the *inability* of the suffering subject to avoid the truth is greater than the one inflicting suffering, but the price is that she is depicted as isolated, by time and trauma, from others' consolation, even that of the poet. It is significant that very rarely after this poem does Larkin try to attempt a dramatic subject who is not himself, or to pretend that the elements that go into the presentation of selves entangled in action and response are available to his kind of poetry. We can think of this poem as a stand-off between the lyrical and the novelistic impulse. Zachary Leader has made a good case for not seeing the lyrical moment as anti-historical or socially indifferent: 'though the moment of lyrical intrusion takes one out of the story, it hardly denies, (or represses, or occludes) the social or communal, or history. On the contrary, halting or disrupting the story can be a way of facing social reality, a release from ballad or narrative simplification or distortion' ("Lyrical Ballads", the Title Revisited' 36) A narrative that sees actors only from the 'outside' is not suited to presenting consciousness in an undetermined relationship to what happens or what is said, which the lyric can do because it does not speak through a single consciousness. However, as Sarah M. Zimmerman has noted, the Romantic lyric's aura of self-absorption is compromised by its rhetorical effect on readers; she claims that 'the spectacle of the poet absorbed in others' concerns or her own may paradoxically comprise the [Romantic] mode's best persuasive possibilities' (31). If it is true that

agree that "what can be said" *has* been said'? (94-5) I would argue that this further claim can only be made by assuming that the reader in fact does see the poem as such an appeal, and is unable to appreciate the double identification of desire with deception and with sympathetic imagination.

‘[n]ot only does the Romantic poet’s traditional capacity for sympathetic identification jeopardize that figure’s autonomy; its exercise is one of the mode’s primary aims of engagement with reading audiences’ (30), then Larkin’s incomplete sympathy, his problematic intimation that sympathy and aggression both emerge from desire, not only jeopardizes artistic autonomy but exposes the possibility that its action may leave addressees indifferent or unmoved. Larkin ends ‘Deceptions’ on a lyrical note which falls to the acting selves in the poem, the poet and the rapist. Lyrical and non-lyrical, then, are not just styles of poetry; they determine what kind of relation the reader as other can form to the consciousness being presented in the poem.⁵⁷ The choice Larkin makes in many subsequent poems to restrict himself to the lyric of self can be seen as a strategy of using self-presentation to suspend relation to others which, as Leader says, is also a way of ‘facing social reality’. I would argue, in addition, that ‘I would not dare / Console you if I could’ is a personal admission of lack of ability and desire (since the poem is clearly ‘Larkin’s’ exercise in intimately imagining a chance incident of violence encountered in a book) that leaves the question of sympathy hanging on willingness to take the risk, to say more than Larkin says. Romantic consciousness here leaves sympathy contingent on someone’s willingness to take the risk of desire, itself choosing only between levels of deception in between active and passive.

‘Deceptions’ is a prison-poem, with one voice circulating between three pronouns, all of which it neither sufficiently assumes nor distances itself from (Rossen

⁵⁷ Zimmerman’s first chapter in *Romanticism, Lyricism and History* discusses the complexities of the traditional view of the lyric as deriving ‘power from emotion’ and yet remaining ‘disinterested’ (8); she argues that the relationship of the lyric poet with the audience underwrites lyric emotion in ways that changes the model of reception claimed for it by writers as different as J. S. Mill and Theodor Adorno.

88). As Robinson notes, readers can come away with the feeling that the word ‘fulfilment’ tilts the whole balance of the poem towards the rapist’s point of view – it casts too long and powerful a shadow over the poem. In other poems, ‘Larkin’ speaks *as* himself, assuming a person for whose desires an ‘I’ can take responsibility. Furthermore, self-as-person is twinned in Larkin with a personless lyric. The distance and intimacy between these two voices needs to be kept in mind in any account of Larkin’s poetry, as I shall argue next. I look at three other poems here to trace the appearance and separation of these two voices: ‘Absences’, ‘Cut Grass’ and ‘Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel’.

‘Absences’, says A. T. Tolley in *My Proper Ground: Larkin at Work*, is ‘a poem that seemed out of place in *The Less Deceived*’ (120), presumably because the tone for the volume had been set by the fulfilment-thwarting, emotionally messy ‘Deceptions’. ‘Absences’ dates from November 1950; ‘Deceptions’ was written in February the same year. The obvious connection between them is the presence, as well as the unexpectedness, of the word ‘attic’.

Rain patters on a sea that tilts and sighs.
Fast-running floors, collapsing into hollows,
Tower suddenly, spray-haired. Contrariwise,
A wave drops like a wall: another follows,
Wilting and scrambling, tirelessly at play
Where there are no ships and no shallows.

Above the sea, the yet more shoreless day,
Riddled by wind, trails lit-up galleries:
They shift to giant ribbing, sift away.
Such attics cleared of me! Such absences!
(CP 42)

In a now-famous comment on the poem, Larkin said:

I suppose I like 'Absences' (a) because of its subject matter – I am always thrilled by the thought of what places look like when I am not there; (b) because I fancy it sounds like a different, better poet rather than myself. The last line, for instance, sounds like a slightly unconvincing translation from a French symbolist. (*FR* 17)

Larkin's poem is written by a 'different, better' poet; but then, it 'sounds like' this is the case: perhaps Larkin is already that poet?⁵⁸ Again, it 'sounds like a slightly unconvincing translation from a French symbolist': it is neither completely unconvincing nor a translation nor symbolist. It sounds like what it is not; but what it is not sounds better.

Remarkably, the poem is composed of more than one attic, the attics presumably of the sky and the sea, two self-cohering but mutually shaped spaces; the structure of the poem supports this division, too. Also, attics are generally associated not with emptiness but crowdedness, and indeed in his memoir 'Not the Place's Fault' (1959) Larkin speaks of an attic in his childhood where he was happy. In Coventry Larkin had friends who had in their house 'a long attic, that ran the length of the house, and which contained among many things the debris of a hat-shop the family had once owned' (*FR* 9). The attics that he writes about as an adult, however, are bare, desolate, made up of nothing but light and surface, though a sense of almost joyous elevation remains

⁵⁸See Grevel Lindop's 'Different From Yourself: Philip Larkin in the 1970s', 48-54, in *British Poetry Since 1970: A Critical Survey*.

attached to them. Larkin often seems surprised that the bare outlines of sky and earth seem to make up a generous habitation of sorts – in ‘Solar’ an always-giving sun spills ‘at the centre/ of an unfurnished sky’ (CP 89)– unlike his interiors where the idea of cluttering objects, with their auras and anxieties, crowds in to make the resident disconsolate.

The two divisions in the poem, the sea and the sky, are boundless but still somehow intact spaces. The rain that falls into the sea immediately becomes sea, but still it *patters*, as if it had hit a solid surface. Sea is all hard surfaces, ‘floors’ and ‘walls’; but these surfaces are endlessly at play, collapsing into each other. They rise and fall, become tower-like or hollowed-out, protean rooms with no fixed shape or limit. The sky is another fluid building, with ‘galleries’ of cloud shaped by wind; again, these rooms shift and dissolve, but a sense of their room-likeness persists – fixity in motion. The room, the walled impermeable space, the gallery which contains exhibition, is the soul of the poem, but it makes itself visible in materials that are fluid, unfixable, completely penetrable.

There is no ‘I’ in any but the last line, but of course once the seascape is acknowledged as seen the ‘I’ becomes apparent everywhere in its absence. That there is sky and sea on the page and before the eye, that the sky and sea are rooms that are built and dissolved in an endless, autonomous play – this we learn from someone who says he is not there, but in saying this, also establishes that without him, *its* being there in splendid oblivion to the eye is as if nothing.

By drawing attention to its absence from what preceded it, the last line makes us see it as a wilfully emptied of both voice and presence, now concentrated in itself.

‘Slightly unconvincing translation’; unconvincing because in the perfect symbolist poem (in which ‘form is meaning and meaning is form and whose archetype is the Image’, as Larkin summarised in a review of Frank Kermode’s *Romantic Image* (FR 174) no voice of self-assertion should disrupt the silent singularity of the image. In Larkin’s poem, the image has no fixed outlines, and is ultimately presented as a shaped emptiness from self that any truly seen, truly ‘objective’ thing must be; and yet the voice saying ‘me’ brings back the presence, contracted to one line outside the attics of sky and sea, as part of the form of the poem; this makes the poem unconvincing as a hermetic ‘Image’, but it also offers a re-vision of the image it elaborates as an entity completely suffused with (someone’s) sight, someone who is seeing them as a place of self-absence.

In *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, Derrida speaks of objectivity as crucially depending on absence, but absence itself is revealed only by someone’s presence, revealed by the unseen or unspoken relation of someone to an object which he perceives as other than himself:

In order to have a relation to the sun as it is, it is necessary that, in a certain way, I relate to the sun such as it is in my absence, and it is in effect like that that objectivity is constituted, starting from death. To relate to the thing such as it is in itself—supposing that it were possible—means apprehending it such as it is, such as it would be even if I weren’t there... That is why death is such an important demarcation line; it is starting from mortality and the possibility of being dead that one can let things be such as they are, in my absence, in a way, and my presence is there only to reveal what the thing would be in my absence. (160)

Derrida's remark makes clear the logic of Larkin's poem: to see 'objectively', that is, to see the attics as they are 'in themselves', the observer subtracts himself from what is seen. This not-being-there is necessary for letting things be as they are, but before the observer can absent himself he must already be present. Larkin's poem captures this thrill of seeing as if one were not there – the poetic thrill of form. But this is not a poem that thrills only to pure form; it is 'slightly unconvincing'. It inserts as a coda the withheld voice, dramatizes the pure absence, exhibits the power of the 'I' that bestows objectivity in silence – and then withdraws it by withdrawing that silence.

Clouds appear in 'Cut Grass', too, a poem in which the seen objects are not interrupted by an apostrophising voice at all. In this poem, comments Tolley, 'the vein of unironic lyricism' 'teeter[s] on the edge of the conventionally poetic' (118, 190); perhaps a not entirely surprising reaction to a poem that seems, on a first reading, too slight, too light, too easily locatable in a slightly unconvincing Georgian English summer.

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

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

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

(CP 94)

But this apparently aimlessly beautiful poem is, even upon a first reading, ambiguous in its tone. It is silently unpeopled; but the word 'grass' sends an echo of 'The Book of Isaiah' (40) reverberating within its cadences. Its silence is counterpoised to its anguished dialogue:

The voice of one saying, Cry. And one said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field: The grass withereth, the flower fadeth; because the breath of the LORD bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. (6-7, Revised Version).

The differences are important. Here the breath of mortality blows *upon* the grass, as if from the outside, but in Larkin's poem it dies the 'long, long' death *in* life, exhaling it from an inner source. In 'Isiah' the withering of the grass is a sign of the glory of the Lord of death; here the death of 'young-leafed June' is neither glorious nor inglorious, but the only movement possible to the living grass. The graceful intactness, the momentary completeness, of the poem is surprising when we consider that it begins with the word 'cut'. Larkin had certainly read the work of Andrew Marvell (about whom he wrote an article in 1978); Marvell wrote a few poems about mowers, playing with ideas of cutting and death. The mower, a god of the meadows who incarnates both nature and labour, is both the cutter and the cut. The grass is at the mower's mercy, but he is at Juliana's mercy. The drama of the poems come from the mower's transformation in love: he who in pre-Juliana days felt at one with the meadows that he scythed begins to have, after Juliana's advent, a sense of the kinship with the mortal fate of grass. Love makes him feel like a perishable bit of living matter.

My mind was once the true survey
Of all these meadows fresh and gay,
And in the greenness of the grass
Did see its hopes as in a glass;
When JULIANA came, and she,
What I do to the grass, does to my thoughts and me.
(‘The Mower’s Song’ 145)

While thus he threw his Elbow round,
Depopulating all the Ground,
And, with his whistling Sythe, does cut
Each stroke between the Earth and Root,
The edged Stele by careless chance
Did into his own Ankle glance;
And there among the Grass fell down,
By his own Sythe, the Mower mown.

Alas! said He, these hurts are slight
To those that dye by Loves despight.
With Shepherds-purse, and Clowns-all-heal,
The Blood I stanch, and Wound I seal.
Only for him no Cure is found,
Whom Juliana’s Eyes do wound.
'Tis death alone that this must do:
For Death thou art a Mower too.
(‘Damon the Mower’ 139)

These poems show the mover riven by a double identification with creation and a labouring divinity – the speaker is at once the mower and the mown. The meadows send back no image of self to him; he feels their indifference to him. At the same time, he recognises that as he is death-giver to the grass, so Juliana’s love is his death wound; she, too, is a mower.⁵⁹ The grass becomes like him in his sorrow, cut down, and alien to

⁵⁹ Tom Paulin writes in *The Secret Life of Poems* that ‘[t]here is a miniature massacre in the Marvell lines, which shadows Larkin’s implicit mowed field—this is a battlefield (205). The suggestion of a battlefield is perhaps not quite the sense of Marvell’s poems that Larkin echoes. In his own poem ‘The Mower’ (a

him in that he is no longer its 'true survey'. The mower becomes an estranged and tortured interrogator of the meadows as well as a cipher for its wordless suffering. In Larkin's poem, though the mower-god is absent, its first word, 'cut', attests to the death-giver's hand. Cut grass exhales its piteous 'brief breath', as opposed to inhaling God's all-sustaining and destructive one. Apart from the inaugurating 'cut', the progress of death described in the poem does not owe much to an external force. The brief, languorous lines of the quatrains that follow the first heavily-accented terse line exude the sense that the grass's cut-off share of breath, the life it exhales, is of little consequence; it is spent quickly enough. As James Booth has noted, 'Larkin is more interested in living than in Life; in the immediate plight of being than in the abstract concept of Being' (*The Poet's Plight* 197). The poem does not spend much time on this 'brief breath' of the accomplished death, but turns quickly to the 'long, long' unfinished dying life, and ends in the midst of its unfinishedness, moving from death into the more ambiguous space of dying.

Just as the unenclosed, translucent waves of 'Absences' were made of rooms, the late June summer of 'Cut Grass' is animated by its opposite, the weight and aura of snow. The grass's death takes place in the 'white hours' of June; all the flowers mentioned thereafter are white, and the hedges are 'snowlike strewn'. One is reminded of other famous scenes of snow-bloom. There is obviously Housman's cherry tree 'hung with snow' in spring. There is also Eliot in 'Little Gidding':

poem that details the death of a hedgehog caught in his garden mower which he has 'even fed.. once') the mower's does not know the consequences of his own activity. There is no battle of wills, but still unmistakably someone who suffers and someone who inflicts suffering – 'Next morning I got up and it did not' (118). Larkin, I think, is truer to Marvell's mower's ambiguous recognition of the violence he inflicts after a change in his subjective position from creator-worker to victim-sufferer.

This is the spring time
But not in time's covenant. Now the hedgerow
Is blanched for an hour with transitory blossom
Of snow, a bloom more sudden
Than that of summer, neither budding nor fading,
Not in the scheme of generation.
Where is the summer, the unimaginable
Zero summer?

(*Complete Poems and Plays* 191)

It is possible to read 'Cut Grass' as an inversion of Eliot's lines. Larkin's snow-blossoms are firmly located in summer. Summer in Larkin's poem, though, is neither out of time, like Eliot's snow-summer, or in time, a season with before and after. In the poem it becomes time's own measure: the cloud moves 'at summer's pace', whatever the duration of dying/living may be for *this* grass, *these* chestnut flowers. Time has no promises to keep, and nothing to transition to. And yet the whole of it, which could be any of it – 'that high-built cloud', that one, just by accident – is curiously adrift, its life/death embodied in its aimless movement.

Barbara Everett says of Larkin that he 'often seems to write... as a man experiencing and surviving the exact end of something vital' ('After Symbolism' 238). This is true, but in particular in this case we must slightly amend it. Larkin survives the end of the vital thing at the beginning of this poem: after this he reverses back into life, gently, without any apparent intent, to the point where things are in the heart of summer, suspended in its completely and exactly random time and place.

'Little Gidding' goes on to liken the midwinter spring to the real spring, but only to find it the same—

If you came this way,
Taking any route, starting from anywhere,
At any time or at any season,
It would always be the same
(Eliot *Complete Poems*, 192)

This place is a symbol of the ‘timeless moment’, the same in spring and winter, always in blossom. Some of Eliot’s readers may find the sameness of the ‘zero summer’ of winter and the ‘voluptuary’ summer of May a bit forced – nevertheless, the parallel is clear enough. Without referring directly to the church, Eliot builds up a picture of a sacred, unchanging, always changing, space, where life and death intersect. Death is able to speak clearly in such a place: its contrasts are really identities:

And what the dead had no speech for, when living,
They can tell you, being dead: the communication
Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.
Here, the intersection of the timeless moment
Is England and nowhere. Never and always.
(Eliot *Complete Poems*, 192)

The intersection of Larkin’s timeless theme with Eliot’s is obvious. Still: death is the more glitteringly eloquent speaker in Eliot’s poem; its sun flames the ice. In ‘Cut Grass’, movingly, the living have speech that the dead cannot have, and it is not the language of prayer. The grass, chestnut flowers and lost lanes of lilac say, forlornly and inconsequentially, ‘death is short, dying is long’.

This brings us to the vexed question of Larkin’s relation to symbolism, specifically mediated through his relation to Eliot. In a study that locates Larkin’s poetry

within the shifting discourse of nationhood in Britain since the second world war, Raphaël Ingelbien finds that Larkin, while promising a more inclusive and descriptive vision of England than Eliot's symbolist abstractions, nevertheless 'lapses' into symbolism.

Whereas Eliot's transcendence was affirmative and resonated with religious and patriotic meanings, Larkin's is an inverted transcendence which only affords a glimpse into lack and absence... His England disappears into the voids of his unattainable visions... [In *High Windows*] England had vanished into the dazzling visions of a full-fledged symbolism... In his moments of failed or negative transcendence, Larkin inverted the symbolism that Eliot had put in the service of religious patriotism, and was left with visions of absence which are perhaps the nearest English equivalent to the purity of Mallarméan azure and to the first symbolists' fascination with nothingness. (27)

I have argued, rather, that 'Cut Grass' does not offer a vision of lack or absence so much as a vision that bears no relation to anything outside it; is heavy with a meaning that has no obvious bearing on anything else but broods on its own puzzling fullness. Perhaps this is, or appears to be, the same as emptiness. Barbara Everett is surely attuned to this sense of the poem when she says, that 'Larkin's Symbolist imagery is a dis-relation with the idealising originals more than a relationship with them; but the context is one in which disrelations are relations, too' (238). 'He makes use, and very consistent use, of that species of literary idealism which Symbolism implies, only in order to record its unavailability' ('After Symbolism' 238). This unavailability may have something to do with the questions of inclusiveness and referential meaning that Ingelbien is concerned with; but, more resonantly, it comes from the unspecified relation of both the personed and unpersoned poem, the lyric that dramatizes self-relation and the lyric that presents a

scene without relation (as if objectively or neutrally seen, as self-relation always assumes a certain outside-ness to self) to another. Larkin's symbols do not extract a meaning from the world to embody it in a projected emblem of self, but essay a self that feels complete, not needing relation outside the text (whether to external knowledge or to literary prototypes) in order to be brought within the compass of meaning; at the same time this makes them ambiguously poised towards a response they have not yet anticipated, as if they were both asking for, and not asking for, relation.

Barbara Everett hones in on this full-empty quality in Larkin when she says of 'Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel' that it 'is filled with meaning by being emptied of everything else' ('A Lethal Fall'). This sketch of a hotel on a Friday evening, presumably after the guests have withdrawn, is a complex emblem of abandonment – of objects as well as of meaning. It is related not too distantly to 'Home is So Sad', in which objects are 'Shaped in the comfort of the last to go/ As if to win them back' (*CP* 54). As often in Larkin, objects in an interior seem to have a yearning, melancholy presence: they are what humans could well aspire to be, were they to attain the requisite degree of mute eloquence.

Light spreads darkly downwards from the high
Clusters of lights over empty chairs
That face each other, coloured differently.
Through open doors, the dining-room declares
A larger loneliness of knives and glass
And silence laid like carpet. A porter reads
An unsold evening paper. Hours pass,
And all the salesmen have gone back to Leeds,
Leaving full ashtrays in the Conference Room.

In shoeless corridors, the lights burn. How
Isolated, like a fort, it is -

The headed paper, made for writing home
(If home existed) letters of exile: *Now*
Night comes on. Waves fold behind villages
(CP 80-1)

There is no sense, at the beginning of the poem, that the hotel has ever been anything but desolate. In the absence of humans, the chairs and the dining-room are forced disconsolately to act out gestures from some cosy story of an evening at a hotel. The objects ventriloquize their deadness – ‘empty’ chairs ‘face’ each other, the dining-room ‘declares’ its loneliness. ‘A larger loneliness’ brings home, as if it needed more telling, the loneliness of the darkly lit chairs. In ‘Deceptions’, knives rather brutally figured the raped girl’s wounded and wounding state of mind. Here the image has been semi-domesticated – ‘knives and glass’ belong in hotel dining rooms – but their declaration of loneliness, and loneliness’s possession of and by them indicated by the ambiguous genitive, has a different kind of menace. Brokenness, laceration is contained in the empty sociality of the hotel, but the visitors (who will never arrive and have always just left) can do no more than nod at its deferential announcements by the servile objects themselves. Appearances, though unobserved, are being preserved. The hours that intervene in the sixth line before we learn that the salesmen have withdrawn do not seem to be hours *between* one event and another; they are merely conjoined with the salesmen’s departure. The salesmen may have gone before the hours began to pass, or they may have left just now. Even the material evidences of conviviality and commerce – the ‘unsold’ paper, the full ashtrays – do not manage to make them more than ghostly traces.

In fact the poem is an endless, unpassing now. The hotel has been fortified by being suspended in this moment and place, which seems to exist in a nightscape with a curiously papery, insubstantial quality. (It could be that the 'it' in the second to last line, which is 'like a fort', is the 'headed paper', the stationary of the Royal Station Hotel. It could be that the headed paper and the hotel are different names for the same place – the place of exile). The reference to Leeds does nothing to dispel this quality, even though it reiterates the reality of the interior. The poem provides its own text for the letter home, as if this were the only text. The line break after 'Now' leaves that word suspended and separated from 'night'. The waves that 'fold behind villages' could be the waves of the night, literally folding back the villages as if they were props; or they could be waves – of night or sea it hardly seems to matter – themselves folding behind a landscape of villages. But whoever is writing the letters, with only this information to communicate, is exiled in *now's* desolate hotel, shaped apparently to his comfort but really the antithesis of 'home' '(if home existed)'. ('Letters of exile' is another ambiguous possessive; exile itself could be writing this letter.) It is not as if the hotel is empty, but there is no home or *other* place which can give its darkly spreading meaning a world to mean in.

'Friday Night' allows us to think about Larkin's desire to make of each poem 'its own sole freshly created universe'. The combative early 'Statement' (from 1955) may seemingly evince a simplistic anti-modernist stance denouncing "tradition" or a common myth-kitty or casual allusions in poems to other poems and poets' (*RW* 79); but the material outlined in my Introduction suggests how the allegations of 'easy access' connected with Larkin's poems, which he himself encouraged, correspond to elements

of a sometimes enigmatic practice. Everett, too, recognises that accessibility was not just something that Larkin's poems aimed to provide, but something that gives them formal tension and a kind of displaced intentness, which operates 'at a depth and with a complication not altogether explained simply by praising Larkin's beautiful style' (Everett, 'Distraction v. Attraction' 9). The light from these poems spreads darkly. Everett's essays about Larkin have consistently seen in Larkin not simply a rebellion or endorsement of modernism, but 'a kind of heroic struggle not to be modernistic' ('After Symbolism' 231). Writing in 2002, she adds another layer to this argument when she calls Larkin a poet of 'attraction':

Larkin's new style proved that he could communicate best as a 'poet of attraction', a writer with peculiar powers to hold and engross the attention, to move the feelings, even to encourage identification in the more innocent readers. Had his artistic impersonality not prevented it, he might have become (let us say, to be cruel) a poet like John Betjemen, a poet sometimes of benign seduction rather than of true attraction[.] ('Distraction' 8)

The choice of the 'attractive' mode is, therefore, the datum to be explained. And here we see a connection between Larkin's poetic preoccupations and what I have called the aimless fullness of his poems, their concentration in themselves of meaning that does not wish to compose an intact symbol that reveals a definite other reality through its self-relation. Larkin's poems often do not know what to do with the meaning they are saturated with. These poems can be read 'easily', but their apparently smooth surfaces avoid specifying the interpretive stance that would make them 'symbolic'.

Therefore, Larkin's symbolism also needs to be seen in a slightly modified manner. Ingelbein feels that they fail to symbolise 'anything' and therefore are unserviceable for any communal vision, unlike Eliot's poems whose symbols reach outward into history and metaphysics and even into material landscape. It is true that Larkin does not transcend, move across and beyond, anything. His travels seem to leave him in the heart of things. Even 'The Whitsun Weddings', to which I shall turn in chapter four, ends in and not at the end of the journey. But to see this as leaving him with an unqualified 'emptiness' is inaccurate. Rather, there is the sense of an empty space around the poems in which they have their own oscillation; meaning centres within them in a way that appears at once clear and elusive. The poems stand still and or 'clash in surrounding starlessness above' ('The Card Players', *CP* 84). This isolation of the poem is at the same time an enclosure within a sky 'out of the frame' ('Distraction' 9) of the poem, blue or starless (as in the 'The Card Players'), which is part of what gives— as what lies outside — form, and also keeps it isolated and intact. We have seen, in the discussion of 'Deceptions', how the attraction necessary even to enter into someone else's suffering, to make an 'I' one's own, is not merely an assumption but a preoccupation in the poetry; and how certain formal avenues are opened up and others shut down in consequence of understanding and accepting the dangers of deception.

Perhaps the one place one can look, not for a resolution, but for an attractive complication of the problem is Larkin's poem 'Money'.

Quarterly, is it, money reproaches me:
 'Why do you let me lie here wastefully?
I am all you never had of goods and sex.
 You could get them still by writing a few cheques.'

So I look at others, what they do with theirs:
They certainly don't keep it upstairs.
By now they've a second house and car and wife:
Clearly money has something to do with life

—In fact, they've a lot in common, if you enquire:
You can't put off being young until you retire,
And however you bank your screw, the money you save
Won't in the end buy you more than a shave.

I listen to money singing. It's like looking down
From long french windows at a provincial town,
The slums, the canal, the churches ornate and mad
In the evening sun. It is intensely sad.

(CP 94)

Money is the universal equivalent, the symbol of the exchangeability of everything in the same measure. It is like 'life': the measure of everything that is done or encountered under its rubric, able to be transmuted into everything that living can offer. Spending money and spending life have 'something to do' with each other; both are there to be spent, not kept. Keeping them in any case raises the question – kept for what? For life can only be spent on life, and money, going by this analogy, on avatars of itself – 'goods and sex'. Ultimately, both money and life can only be exchanged for death – money and life are also other names for death. But death is the opposite of value, that which cannot be transferred or exchanged for anything.

The trouble in the poem is the trouble with money, the equivalences that it puts into operation. Money becomes not only something 'saved' that could be spent, but identified with everything it can be spent on, like 'life'. Money is goods, is sex, is death. In exchange, money changes everything back into itself, as in living everything is changed back into the currency of 'life'. But still, the question of spending remains, the

same must be spent on the same, life on life. Money spent or saved will buy the same thing, too: death, which is free. The poem changes everything it speaks of back into money. The last quatrain presents a view from another high window, not upwards as in 'High Windows', but downwards. This quatrain relates to what has gone before it enigmatically. Osborne comments:

To claim to be able to *hear* money is peculiar enough; to add that the category of noise it emits is that of song is stranger still; to equate this sound with sight adds a touch of synaesthesia to the confusion; while the comparison of the presumably joyous or seductive music with so dismally surreal an urban view is perplexing. (Osborne 123)

Money is singing because it is a singer, an artist who changes everything into its own idiom. 'I listen to money singing' – but, significantly, 'I' does no more than that. The strange simile of money's song being like a view from a 'French windows at a provincial town' is a jarring juxtaposition of seduction with banality. But the poem has been doing that all along: transforming the banality of goods and sex into the all-pervasive, homogenising seduction of money, transforming the car and the wife into all-consuming notions of 'life'.

The speaker of the poem is at a distance from this: he looks and hears; beyond this we have no knowledge of what he might do with his money. But the look through the framed height of seduction and possession into the world of slums and canals encounters something unexpected, and the speaker is a foreign presence to it. The agitation of the simile here – 'The slums, the canal, the churches ornate and mad' – is remarkable. The town seems dangerous, excessive, 'ornate and mad'; anything but dull.

And yet inescapably framed, fixed, provincial, money-minded. This is not quite the provincial town one would expect to see from a window in a provincial town. Again the relation is obvious and puzzling. Money is what you want it to be, says the poem, so why keep what you want elsewhere, in the bank? But the world of money, seen as a provincial town, is not a simple wish fulfilment, a cheque that can be cashed; it is obscurely lyrical, seductive and sad, not quite saying why it is so. By having a 'personality' and a song which is its own but does not derive from the uses the speaker imagines for it, money becomes an intimation of a sadness that has 'something to do with life' but is neither its purpose nor its negation.

In this chapter I have argued that a Romantic subjectivity can indeed be seen in Larkin's own work, but it coexists with a personal register which makes the Romantic forms of subjective expression – self-construction and symbol-making – problematic. Romantic notions of form as being subservient to the creator of the form take on a different aspect when the created form is seen as a realisation of the artist's freedom as well as his prison. The Romantic register is also disrupted when the personless poem that seems 'symbolic' does not offer a clear relation to others, be they objects or readers. The Romantic organicism that Eliot fractured by separating the figure of the artist from the multi-voiced poem is in Larkin disrupted by reoffering the 'poet', an expressive and coherent figure, as an explorer of artistic limitation, and of a *personal* indeterminacy

with respect to the artistic self-evocation. He gives a working statement using the personal as a self-limitation of the Romantic in the brief essay 'Context' (1962). Clearly alluding to Eliot, he observes that

Separating the man who suffers from the man who creates is all right – we separate the petrol from the engine – but the dependence of the second on the first is complete. Again, the imagination is always ready to indulge its fetishes – being classic and austere, or loading every rift with ore – with no responsible basis or rational encouragement. Very little that catches the imagination, in short, can get its clearance from either the intelligence or the moral sense. .. Except for springing from those narrow marches where the two concur... writing veers perpetually between the goody-goody-clever-clever and the silly-shameful-self-indulgent, and there is no point in inclining towards one kind of failure rather than another. (*FR* 15)

The Romantic self exacts the price of limiting the 'man' to the versions of the self the 'poet' creates. The 'personal' self introduces the question of what this self is for, what it does or knows, and whether it is possible to determine what its significations mean in terms of self-fashioning. In doing this the 'personal' introduces the possibility of the Romantic being different from itself; that is, the possibility of intimating, through various poetic strategies, that the man who creates differs from himself by wanting to coincide with man who suffers.

Sent Out of Sight: Larkin on Place

In my introduction I elaborated a view of otherness in literature that does not depend upon its representation within or as form. Otherness, I argued, can appear in responses to literature which are not necessarily enacted by the poem or text itself, and therefore cannot always be accessed through a formal reading. This argument implies that the question of Englishness within Larkin's poetry needs to be re-examined keeping in mind that, though it is full of detail 'evoking an England which is immediately recognisable' (Gardiner 62), in Larkin 'recognisable' Englishness is better not conflated with a set of assumptions about how it functions in the poems or what response it evokes in a reader who finds it recognisable. Images and themes recognised as 'English' do not furnish ground for treating Larkin's poems as a conservative or progressive cipher for 'Englishness' in my discussion. Indeed there are critics, such as Raphaël Ingelbien, David Trotter and John Osborne, who have used Larkin's verse to advance a sense of Englishness that stresses the foreign, the unrepresentable and the multiple in the place to which his poetry gives voice. While I will draw on their work and that of others for insight, I do not wish to read Larkin's poetry as a construct we can use to pin down a version of 'Englishness' and to explain its power. Larkin does think of a place, England, as home, which in the poems and essays I instance below he relates to as that which is inescapably familiar to him; but its familiarity comes wrapped up in the strangeness of

being at home, or, as Jacques Derrida puts it ‘the familiar, but as the unfamiliar; the terribly disquieting of the strange ... but as the intimacy of one’s proper home’ (*Sovereignities in Question*, 124). What I wish to foreground is that acknowledging a home in England, or indeed in any place, is not simply an identification with traits associated with being English; as the poet Sean O’Brien has pointed out in *Journeys to the Interior*:

It is ... probable that if the people of England... were given the opportunity to decide, we should have capital punishment, closed borders, higher wages, lower taxes, an improved NHS funded by moonbeams, no arts funding, and withdrawal from the EU. It begs the question of how useful an idea Englishness actually is. It might be truer to describe it as inescapable, like envy or the weather. (12)

The poetic registration of England is for O’Brien based neither on historical fact nor probability nor even desirability but on inescapability. But naturally the use of the word ‘inescapable’ makes us think of possible avenues of escape, of ways out of Englishness. By thus forcing the admission that Englishness is inescapably there, a writer may enlist an audience’s wish to break out of the trap of this literary or social construct, even those among them who may never have identified themselves as English. The question of identification with a particular place is often asked in the following ways: what does the identity allow the reader to identify with? What is it telling the reader about himself or herself? And is this something that the reader wishes to hear? If it does, it must be flattering a notion of himself that he already possesses, he must be already invested in this notion before he comes to the poem. And what is desirable becomes in the same measure undesirable; Donald Davie, who criticises Larkin’s provincial and insular

influence does this on the basis that ‘we recognise [in Larkin] the seasons of an English soul – the moods he expresses are our moods too... the England in his poems is the England we have inhabited’ (*Thomas Hardy* 64) In this (predominantly modernist) mode of reading, the poem’s significations, even contradictory ones, can all be located within it, and the reader re-enacts what is already shown in the closed circuit of the poem. My argument would be that Larkin does not really offer an idea of what it is like to be English, though he may deliberately work with themes and images that are readily recognised as English.⁶⁰ Rather, he offers poems that mull over an inescapable relation to Englishness; the poems and essays recognise the place they write from as familiar, but they recognise too the familiarity being, paradoxically, something to which they have not habituated themselves. This familiarity is familiar as the look of the vase that is an unremarkable part of the interior in ‘Home is So Sad’—yet, the poem makes its ‘thereness’ visible again; it is aware of the vase’s familiarity as well its lack of domestication, underlined by its being singled out from the poet’s home to carry an enigmatic burden of meaning. The poem counts, in other words, on the sense that the object’s inclusion in ‘home’ has not submerged it into an element from which nothing stands out for its enigmatic excess or lack of meaning. As David Gervais has noted, ‘[t]he poet is both at home in his own country... and yet sees things “all again in different terms”, as if he were a traveller in a foreign land’ (206).

Having bracketed for the moment the question of what Larkin’s Englishness means in the context of Britain’s politics— is it conservative or liberal or nostalgic or

⁶⁰ Or, at any rate, does not predominantly do so; in the late poems ‘Going, Going’ and ‘Homage to a Government’ there does seem to be an attempt to say that this is the England that is disappearing, even if it is, as David Gervais says, a moan over the present ... in accents...weary and inert’ (218).

forward-looking – we can note that articulation of identity usually does involve a detour through otherness to the empowering re-assumption of a self or a voice. Identity returns a person to self, but changed; changed by having to unlearn or create oneself anew in order to assume a given label with a newly-discovered freedom. To take an example, James Kelman has written in *Some Recent Attacks* that the ‘stories I wanted to write would derive from my own background, my own socio-cultural experience. I wanted to write as one of my people, I wanted to write and remain a member of my community’. But soon enough, he says, he discovered that he had a problem getting on the inside of his ‘own’ experience: people of his own background were portrayed in fiction ‘from without, seldom from within. And when you did see them or hear them they never rang true’ (81). He had to rely on foreign models to ‘realise the freedom I had. I mean the freedom other writers seemed to take for granted, the freedom to write from their own experience’ (83). Though Kelman ascribes the absence of communal literary models in his own case to the censorship of working-class writing (83), it is not unusual for writers to search for their own voice by looking outside their cultural and linguistic sphere. In Larkin’s case, the search for his own idiom seems to have led him to a ‘native’ English tradition as the ‘other’ one, truer to his experience than the modernist writers that were his earliest models; having confessed to beginning under the influence of Yeats and Auden, he presents his shift to Hardy as a relapse ‘back into one’s own life’ (*RW* 175). Hardy was the ‘other’ poet who most allowed him to be himself. It is not surprising, then, that this shift in Larkin’s idea of poetic expressiveness did not appear as a desire to free himself into subjective expression as one of a community. It seems more accurate to say, as Gervais has noted, that Larkin positions himself as part of ‘England’ ‘without

being able to relate to it' (190). Larkin may 'ring true' as English, but he does not seem to be interestedness in using Englishness as a subjective power to articulate an experience of dispossession or resistance,⁶¹ which marks 'freedom' for Kelman. Indeed, using identity in this way to claim the power of having a distinct experience of the world at the same time as claiming equality with others who already exercise this power, has understandably been a predominant paradigm of twentieth-century literary politics. This, I think, is not Larkin's preoccupation. His is interested in using Englishness as a relation to the inescapable, as well in reflecting on what this inescapability means to the speakers of the poems. Gervais asks, in his wonderfully insightful chapter on Larkin in *Literary Englands*, 'what prospect of growth was there [for Larkin] in a scenario that placed Englishness firmly in the past'? (191) None, probably, if the self is exclusively re-appropriated through the past, and if the past acts as the other, the familiar-unfamiliar, that returns the poetic speaker to 'himself' with a revived sense of truth and power. Instead, what we see in Larkin, rather than purchase of power through the past or through belonging to England, are reflections of English landscapes, themes and history that are mired in ambiguity and caught in a moment of arrest before they are lost to the unknown change that movement represents.

In this chapter, I will first consider some critical opinions on Larkin's Englishness in an attempt to see more clearly what it has been taken to mean within a critical environment keen to make art an access to a located identity (located in the

⁶¹ Steve Clark, however, contends in 'The Lost Displays: Larkin and Empire' that 'Larkin's anger, bitterness and protest can be read as a form of resistance to an increasingly dominant American culture. His work may be seen not merely as a lament for the demise of the British Empire, also as a stubborn refusal of its transatlantic successor' (179).

‘national’, the ‘cultural tradition’, ‘the communal’ and so on). To understand the complexities of Larkin’s own take on the stakes of identifying with a place, I will read his essays on Auden and Betjeman where he comments on *their* identities as poets that, respectively, alienate themselves and domesticate themselves to England. The essays I cite below show that it is not Englishness per se that Larkin is interested in so much as what the relation to Englishness enables a poetic voice or stance to accomplish. Finally, I will offer readings of poems which have been taken as paradigmatic of Larkin’s Englishness as a poet, to see if they throw light on the troubled relation to the familiar (and not just to an essentialized *familiarity*) that Larkin’s poetry annotates.

Alan Gardiner has summed up the qualities of Larkin’s verse that make it possible to read it as an unproblematic representation of ‘Englishness’:

The landscape of his poetry, a mixture of the urban and the rural, is one we have all observed: wheat fields, city centres thronged with shoppers, canals, hedges, cooling towers. Moreover, the narrative voice in most of Larkin’s poems belongs to somebody who has experiences with which the reader can readily identify and whose attitudes we can easily share. (Gardiner 62)

Gardiner makes this shareability a matter of ‘attitude’ and experience. Seamus Heaney, however, reads this shareability as a matter not simply of observation and identification but of the confirmation of community and sustenance of imaginative inheritance. Larkin has, he says,

a defensive love of ... territory which was once shared only by poets whom we might call colonial...A desire to preserve indigenous traditions, to keep open the imagination’s supply lines to the past... to perceive in the ritual of show Saturdays and race meetings and seaside outings, of church goings and marriages

at Whitsun... to perceive in these the continuity of communal ways, and the confirmation of an identity which is threatened[.] (*Preoccupations* 150-1)

While Heaney sees Larkin's recourse to England as a post-war poet's search for spiritual and communal foundation of his identity, Tom Paulin has read the same as being a search for an origin which is 'tired and lost and out of date' (*Minotaur* 244), not least for being 'entire unto itself' (237). The nation that Larkin speaks for (248) is thus presented by Paulin, analogously to the poetry, as an insular, closed-in nation. Indeed, he echoes in a way John Bayley's observation that 'Englishness in poetry, like the reaction to the poetry itself, is a secret and solitary thing' ('English Equivocation' 4), except that Bayley's sense of Larkin's Englishness is based on his understanding of him as embodying a strain of Romanticism that values the escape that the secret and the solitary represent in the common life. The question is being framed in the familiar form of what English means: whether it is a sign of backward isolation or of possible cultural rejuvenation, or, as Bayley would have it, a private current of feeling that gives compulsion to the public form of the poetry.

In *Misreading England*, Raphaël Ingelbien contests Heaney's portrait of Larkin as 'responding to the tones of his own clan, ill at ease with his environment' (*Preoccupations* 167). He notes that 'the sense of nationhood that Heaney ascribes to his own contemporaries is a copy of his own sense of Irishness' (197). He supplants the self-transcendence in community that Heaney finds in Larkin with an 'absolute negativity of absence... allowing Larkin to develop his nihilistic sublime to the full'

(Ingelbien 214), which is ‘the dazzling emptiness of his negative visions’ (215)⁶² that do not ‘translate any sense of national community into a transcendental level’

(Ingelbien214). Mark Rowe, who in a recent study of Larkin finds that ‘[i]n one sense, emptiness and absence of self is his supreme vision of happiness, liberation and transcendence; in another, it is his overwhelming dread’ (*Philip Larkin: Art and Self* 42), nevertheless finds that Larkin’s right-wing sometimes-xenophobic views, which suggest a conservative if not small-minded sense of England, are not simply an aberration that have no connection with the poetry. The connection he finds is that:

[E]mpathy, sympathy, identification and understanding need to focus on individuals and small groups. As the characteristic power of the arts is to show individuals rather than characterise the mass, dramatize rather than describe conceptually, present an image rather than convey in the abstract, they naturally minister to such emotions. But this causes problems when art has to deal with multitudes. (67)

Rowe thus deals with the problem of conservatism by making it a problem of ‘an approach to the world’ which is ‘imaginative ... concrete, quasi-perceptual and emotional’. Indeed, he goes further and says, ‘it is exactly the disposition of mind we would expect to discover in great creative writers. We can, therefore, no longer think of their political views as aberrations, merely as contingent facts’ (69). Writers, by virtue of their gifts, are cognitively equipped to be conservative, suggests Rowe. Rowe’s treatment of Larkin’s politics, informed by a rather school-masterish use of analytic philosophy, would make the problem of the relation of writing to politics disappear by

⁶²Ingelbien tackles a number of critics’ responses to the question of Larkin’s Englishness in admirable detail, and contextualises them with reference to post-70s identity thinking. Critics discussed in the chapter ‘Neither Here Nor There’ include Donald Davie, Robert Crawford and Stephen Regan.

making conservatism a contingent fact that makes ‘imaginative’ and ‘concrete’ writing possible.

Stephen Regan, in contrast, has consistently pointed to the historical resonance of Larkin’s poetry, but he has avoided speaking of it as a historical fact, contingent or otherwise. Rather, his stress has been on the dialogic and constructed character of Larkin’s poems. Writing in 1992, he reminded readers that though

Larkin has often been portrayed as an arch-conservative, and in an interview with the *Observer* in 1979 he was reported to have said ‘I adore Mrs Thatcher’ ... [i]t would be extremely unwise to read the poems in relation to that flippant remark. All of the poems in *High Windows* were published before Thatcherism was established as a political ideology. (*Philip Larkin* 125-6)

It is not to the conservative but to the liberal humanist tradition that Regan himself ascribes Larkin’s poetry, noting that the ‘idea of the isolated individual surviving in an alien and fragmented society is a well-established liberal sentiment, and Larkin’s characteristic response, like that of E. M. Forster, is to seek “connection”’. However, he sees Larkin poetry as a different response from disenchantment to the ‘economic disarray of the late 1960s and early 1970s’, one that recognises ‘an increasing sense of communal obligation and commitment [and desires] to rebuild and renew a sense of collective life’ (126). In a recent essay, ‘Coming up England by a Different Line’, he continues to trace the historical responsiveness of Larkin’s work, but emphasises that it results in ‘poetry of deracination and uncertain belonging’ (244), a ‘sense of place that is always sensitively alert to its own provisional status and its own imaginative construction’ (255), an ‘immensely creative sense of disengagement from any stable

sense of identity or attachment, a profoundly liberating sense of disavowal' (264). This brings Regan closer to Ingelbien's interpretation of Larkin's nihilistic sublime which carries 'a sense of authenticity and release' and 'is also the point where his work attains to a negative humanism which carries meaning beyond the rejection of English identity, and where England becomes one metaphor among others' (216).

The critics discussed so far treat 'England' as the place which Larkin's work variously transcends, constructs or evokes. But Larkin's work offers more than one site to anchor the native and the domestic. I discussed in chapter two how Larkin propagated the idea of a reader who was not at home with the critical landscape created by modernism. One way of approaching the question of 'home' in Larkin's poetry would be to ask: where is his reader at home? *In The Making of the Reader* David Trotter has intriguingly presented Larkin's reader as wanting reports on 'England' by an eerily authoritative foreign correspondent as if it were a 'foreign capital'. For Trotter, the poems'

sublime indifference to what is going on around them seems remarkable, until you realise that it is in fact the enveloping mayhem which gives their reports such buoyancy. After all, to be the one person reporting back to millions about the state of any nation must involve a strange accession of authority, and perhaps makes more sense when the authority is made to rest on the strangeness. (186)

This makes the estrangement and foreign-ness of Larkin's poetic stance the paradoxical basis for the poetry's familiarity with England – England and nation are the other, but the poet's business is to know them like the back of his hand. The foreign correspondent,

in this deft piece of critical scene-setting, knows everything there is to know about the other place, speaks as if he is in a position to inform others, but he is *there* because his audience wish to have news of ‘another’ place. The foreign here becomes not a point of reference or a form which the poetry is influenced by, but a position which becomes visible in relation to a person who is from somewhere else and yet attempts to identify with a place as if he has always been there.

Other views on the more explicit presence of the foreign in Larkin’s poetry come from Barbara Everett and Edna Longley, who have traced in it specific debts to French symbolism and to the literary culture of Belfast (‘In Philip Larkin and Belfast Literary Culture’) where Larkin lived from 1950-55. I shall address Everett’s persuasive tracing of allusion in Larkin’s poetry below, which she uses to make a case for a modernist sensibility in Larkin.⁶³ But it would be pertinent to note here that Robert Crawford has also made a case for taking Larkin as a modernist – except that, for him, modernism is a phenomenon not of the foreign or of the metropolitan centre but the provincial periphery. Crawford thus turns the usually derogatory epithet ‘provincial’ on its head, arguing that ‘Larkin’s work has been infiltrated by those very un-English forces which, at first sight, he would appear to be resisting...Larkin, like so many of the Modernist writers, is a “provincial”, rather than simply a poet of the cultural centre’ (*Devolving English Literature* 276). Crawford’s argument in general is one of the many contemporary retrievals of modernism that (as I argued in my introduction) by taking modernism as the standard, attempt to graft the particular features of their inquiry on to it, thus finding in this label a permanent opening to whatever is considered the way

⁶³ Also see Andrew Motion’s ‘Philip Larkin and Symbolism’.

forward for criticism. Crawford is thus able to claim that ‘Larkin has become a key figure in the concept of Englishness in modern literature’(273) at the same time as he see this ‘English tradition’ as ‘appropriating and incorporating extra-English elements at exactly the same time as it asserts its English purity’(274-5). The English tradition, which has thus been cleansed of self-identity, is nevertheless made identical to a ‘peripheral’ place. As Crawford writes in *Identifying Poets: Self and Territory in Twentieth Century Poetry*, ‘the poet who constructs an identity which allows that poet to identify with a particular territory is the paradigmatic modern poet, in the Anglophone world at any rate’ (142), qualifying later on in the book that ‘[i]dentity... is not a matter of purity but an amalgam of resources. To pretend differently in this postmodern age is to be guilty of something analogous to racism’ (174). So not only does Larkin become, in this account, a representative of the quiddity called ‘Englishness’, his work also serves as an example of for the impurity and provinciality of that Englishness, without which it would devolve to ‘something analogous to racism’ and thus become unserviceable for a neo-modernist identitarian criticism.⁶⁴

Amit Chaudhuri also employs this strategy of taking the identity of Larkin with ‘England’ to question the latter, but his intention seems to be not so much to subvert as to discover ‘England’ in the gap between myth and locale that Larkin’s poetry makes available. He argues that a study of the ‘Englishness’ itself of this poetry can enable ‘an articulation of the post-colonials’ history’ (195).

⁶⁴ Also see Ingelbien’s *Misreading England* pp. 202-3 and p. 207 for a strong criticism of Crawford’s interpretation of Larkin and of identitarian thinking in recent criticism, respectively.

Larkin is a poet of the discontinuities of English literature in a postcolonial world, and this is a vein in him that needs to be explored... To the colonized and the post-colonial, England is available in its ideal image as much through posters, travel booklets, films, as it is through English Literature. ['Sunny Prestatyn'] is particularly interesting to the post-colonial because in it he witnesses the disruption of that ideal image by a local, vernacular culture that always remains a little outside the domain of posters and 'literature' as taught in colonized, or formerly colonized, countries; a tension between the local and the mythic which exists within England, or the colonial power. (*D.H. Lawrence and Difference* 194-5)

Seeing Larkin as 'English' is here not a sign of resistance to Englishness, but rather a way to access the contradictions in how England sees itself, which allows a shift in perception: the acceptance of Larkin's Englishness as genuine and important changes the perception of the coloniser for the colonised; it thus opens up a difference within the historical experience of the coloniser that makes possible an historical reassessment. Crucially, though, it is an assumption of Larkin's belonging to England that enables this kind of reading; the assumption of his being at home in England, of being in an element that is undeniably his own, is the point of departure for the other, the postcolonial in this case, to articulate the discontinuity of myth and locale.

As I argue in this chapter, it is possible to see Larkin's poetry as acknowledging a 'home' in England and yet not presenting a unified idea of or discourse about England. John Osborne and Raphaël Ingelbien have described very well how the rise of a certain kind of nationalistic thinking in post-war Britain tried to find in Larkin's work an example of a rejuvenated Englishness against which to train their guns or in which to find the equivalent of the nationalisms that could inspire a poetic identity. While their criticisms form necessary correctives to the view of Larkin as straightforwardly 'English', where that view is further enlisted in a polemic of social and cultural anti-

conservatism, they do not account sufficiently for Larkin's provocative owning of England and English poetry as the province of the familiar, as what must be acknowledged as 'home', if home exists. Home, for Larkin, is neither where we start from nor where we return to, but what exists in snapshots of retrospect and observation without annulling a certain expectancy. Knowledge of home, in Larkin, begins to give way to wistful uncertainty at the moment home comes clearly into view: his poetic acknowledges yet struggles with how 'home' changes subtly in itself as it is articulated in accents of inescapability. Home in Larkin demands acknowledgment of its existence but also of the perhaps fruitful indeterminacy of not knowing or not yet knowing what to do with that which one daily inhabits.

In this section I will read essays that show Larkin laying down what he himself found poetically relevant in the idea of belonging to a place; for him, as I show, it is reflected in poetic speech (which he calls dialect without being too linguistically precise; see below) that may strike its readers as recognisable and necessary. Before doing this, though, it might be useful to discuss a critical approach which grants Larkin exemption from the linguistic constraints that come with poetic 'Englishness'. I will then indicate why taking a different path – of looking at what Larkin has to say *about* being English – can shed light on the peculiar feeling for place and the historical protocols which underwrite its appearance in Larkin's poems.

In “‘The Virtues of Good Prose’: Verbal Hygiene and the Movement’, Deborah Cameron exempts Larkin from subscription to the Movement writers’ ‘ideas of language’ on the ground that ‘his published writing... contains a few passing comments, made mainly in reviews of other poets or in answer to questions put to him by interviewers on this subject. He was not one of the Movement writers engaged in ‘linguistic commentary’ (139); therefore he escapes from the

category of metalinguistic discourse and practice which has been called verbal hygiene, an umbrella term denoting all the discourses and practices through which people attempt to ‘clean up’ language and conform to their ideals of what it should be... What these various practices have in common is that they are based on value judgements: they combine common sense beliefs about what languages are and how they work with evaluation of some language varieties or ways of using language as functionally, aesthetically or morally superior to others. (141)

Instead Cameron finds Larkin, once again, closer to modernism than to the Movement in his own practice: ‘... the way Larkin plays obscenity or coarseness off against the gentility of “common” standard English used by some ordinary speaker in some mundane situation... has quite similar functions to, say, the mixing of dialect with higher registers in *Ulysses*.’(114). The article ends by concluding that though the Movement writers were ‘not original or radical’ and ‘defended the language ideologies that were commonplace in their time’, even in them the ‘voice of the poet and the voice of the pundit did not necessarily coincide’ (‘Verbal Hygiene’ 154). Larkin is chosen to exemplify, interestingly, not the conservatism of the Movement writers, but the fissure between what they wanted to do intellectually and what they managed to do poetically. Poetry intervenes to save Larkin from his ideas, which are otherwise, so far as they can

be discovered, not very different from Kingsley Amis's, clearly a more culpable figure in Cameron's eyes. Larkin, then, is a central figure in Cameron's mapping of both the desire for the common and the interruption of the common. By managing to become 'true poetry' his work is claimed to have escaped the 'ideas' that the 'real' poet subscribed to and that, in a lesser artist, may have overwhelmed his work, ideas that subscribe to the superiority of commonly recognised linguistic customs. In this way, poetry has the ability to exceed the common simply by not being identical with it, even when it speaks in its name.

This claim captures the experience of reading poetry, but it also absolves the critic from looking for the key to Larkin's particular horizons of the common. One of the remarkable things about Larkin's poetry is the extent to which it is enlisted on both sides of the debate regarding provincialism and modernism. In wishing to inhabit a language in such a manner that it becomes enabling of a lyric voice, offered from within the comfort and certainty that a common dialect signifies, Larkin may have tapped into a poetic need many of his readers shared. But also, this voice's manner of inhabiting its chosen tones, registers and vocabulary, a manner of ease and assumption, is, I would suggest, a clue to the sense of intimacy which even foreign readers have felt. Without recourse to linguistic purism or the notion of a birthright, Larkin located his poetry in a sense of belonging that he regards as *necessary*, but which nevertheless brings no definitive answer to the dilemmas of living with others, no increase in the power of self against others. This is not to take the emphasis away from the welcome moves to find elements in his work that help him escape narrowness or irrelevance, such as the ones described as being allied with modernism or post-modernism, but to recognise that the

common appears in his work not simply as customary and class-bound convention but as what enables the solitary individual to take its own common measure, to place itself in the dual perspective of being one-as-others and one-without-others. To examine how Larkin saw the necessity of the common that allows the solitary singularity of self (which is also the singularity of poetic gift – of that which *gives* the poetic an occasion to appear) I shall look at his essays dealing with two poets whose work he admired but in distinct ways: Betjeman and Auden. Undoubtedly both influenced him, but they stood for very different artistic investments. Larkin's Auden was the leaver of a (European) England, abandoning not just the island but also a certain voice and a subject. His Betjeman, by contrast, was the dweller, the man who inhabited his own place, travelling not outwards but over the surface; not only did he not leave, but for Betjeman a poetic departure, a severing from habit and habitat, was unimaginable. By looking at Larkin's portrayals of these two poets we can form a picture of what home – writing from, in and as home – meant to Larkin.

The title of the 1960 essay that Larkin wrote about Auden, 'What's Become of Wystan?', is not an innocent one; it recalls the reader to the poet's first name, so singular and so Anglo-Saxon, and phonetically evocative of 'wistful'. It distances Auden from the clinical-sounding and impersonal 'W.H.' Before there was W. H., Larkin seems to say, there was Wystan, and between the two there has intervened a grave process of becoming. 'A mystifying gap would open up', he writes, between someone discussing Auden's pre-1940 output and someone who only knew the post-1940 work, 'as one spoke of a tremendously exciting English social poet full of energetic unliterary knock-about and unique lucidity of phrase, and the other of an engaging, bookish, American

talent, too verbose to be memorable and too intellectual to be moving' (*RW* 123). This is the opening shot in a series of characterisations that cast the earlier 'English' Auden as a creature rooted in a certain environment, not, as one might imagine, an English environment, but the climate of European anxiety. In writing a eulogy of the virtues of 'Wystan', Larkin offers his 'time' as the clue to what allowed him to be Wystan. 'Dominant and ubiquitous unease', 'the Struggle' and impending 'disaster' (*RW* 124) were Wystan's element. But at his departure for America in 1939, 'he lost his key subject and emotion – Europe and the fear of war – and abandoned his audience with their common dialect and concerns. For a different sort of poet this might have been less important. For Auden it seems to have been irreparable' (*RW* 125). Auden's business as a poet after his arrival in America, Larkin continues, should have been to 'take root again in the life surrounding him rather than in his reading'. But 'Auden has not, in fact, gone in the direction one hoped: he has not adopted America or taken root, but has taken an individual and cosmopolitan path which has precluded the kind of identification that seemed so much a part of his previous successes'. The 'dialect' that Auden has gained as a result is an 'extraordinarily jarring one' (*RW* 127): 'Are there people who talk in this dialect, or is this how Auden talks to himself?' (*RW* 128).

It could seem from Larkin's account that Wystan was fated to lose his original dialect by historical accident – it happened to happen to poor Wystan. But there is a certain animus in the essay which goes beyond Larkin's faux-analysis of Wystan's historical impasse. Why did Auden not elect to inhabit his chosen place in such a manner that his absorption in it would have freed up a common voice, an un-English common voice, in his poetry? For, to extrapolate from Larkin's essay, the common voice

is the voice that is rooted in a time, is given pressure and urgency by a habitat that is not merely *accidental*. The poet rooted in his place and audience, Larkin implies, is able to speak in a way that others can recognise or share, but in identifying ‘Wystan’s’ ‘subject and emotion’ as the fear-ridden Europe between the wars he also implies that such recognition is not always a consequence of espousing a national or traditional identity.⁶⁵

Larkin’s reasons for opposing poetic unrootedness can help us understand his ire at a lapse he diagnoses in the later Auden’s views on poetry:

One cannot escape the conclusion that in some way Auden, never a pompous poet, has now become an unserious one. For some time he has insisted that poetry is a game, with the elements of a crossword puzzle: it is ‘the luck of verbal playing’. One need not be a romantic to suspect that this attitude will produce poetry exactly answering to that description. Here again it seems that Auden was happier when his work had an extraneous social function, and if he feels that poetry is fundamentally unserious otherwise, it is a pity he parted from it, for lack of serious intention often means lack of serious effect. (*RW* 128)

Seamus Perry points out that, for Auden, ‘in a career in which much did indeed change, a concern with the place of accident in the good life remained remarkably constant, its expression in a highly individual poetry moved by the thought of chance and the counting of blessings’ (‘Auden Unparadized’ 89). Perry’s observation shows Auden’s poetry in a different light than Larkin casts upon it: Larkin’s essay portrays Auden’s earlier poetry as having little to do with ‘luck’ and everything to do with a compelling,

⁶⁵ Nicolas Jenkins has contended that ‘[a]t issue in Larkin’s loathing of later Auden, as in the manner in which the Auden’s later poetry migrates beyond the “common dialect” of his English audience, is the question of national affiliation’ (‘The Truth of Skies’ 57). I am suggesting, however, that the question of national affiliation is secondary to the question of a ‘dialect’ in which poems can convince of their emotional truth.

mysterious malaise, with sharing ‘not only the age’s properties but also its obsessions’ (*RW* 124). The turn to the later kind of poetry was an abandonment of a ‘social function’; it was an abandonment of a compulsion—European anxiety—for an accidental impulse—verbal playing—as the source of poetry. But as Larkin’s work in general does not say much about the ‘social function’ of poetry,⁶⁶ it would appear that he saw the loss of place as not so much a betrayal of native land as a betrayal of art.

It is surprising, at first, to find that Wystan the unliterary English poet whose subject was once Europe is counterpointed in Larkin’s other essays by T. S. Eliot the too-literary American poet whose subject became England. Arguably, early Eliot is similarly rooted in a transnational intellectual climate rather than a nation. Larkin does not bring the same charge of loss of dialect against Eliot, yet Eliot’s requirement of the possession of a literature and a tradition as a precondition of having a common world is one that Larkin does not share. Eliot’s sense of tradition cannot be compelling without the acknowledgement of an atavistic bond between ‘literature’ and ‘mind’: ‘... the mind of Europe—the mind of his own country—a mind which he learns in time to be much more important than his own private mind—is a mind which changes, and that this change is a development which abandons nothing *en route*, which does not superannuate either Shakespeare, or Homer, or the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsmen’ (‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, Kermode 39). This sense of tradition requires

⁶⁶Some critics have argued that Larkin does take a position on cultural issues: Daniel Weston argues that the ‘structure of balance in Larkin’s poetry might be characterised as an attempt to resist this communicative divide [between literary and mass popular culture] and to maintain consensus across social boundaries’ (325). David Trotter also sees a correlation between cultural shifts and the tone of Larkin’s poetry: ‘It seems to me that between *The Whitsun Weddings* and *High Windows* 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 voice the authority of conscious and unequivocal dissent’ (186).

subsumption in a collective literary mind that annuls receptivity to the ‘merely’ personal which, for Larkin, is the element in which historical may appear in the perception and notation of the non-literary. In this way, I think, Larkin does posit an element of necessity to what strikes the eye and the ear as poetry; already existing poetry may underwrite what can be heard as poetic, but Larkin also allows that what is formally presented as poetical should, in the enigmatic zone of reception, change or vanish into forms of life that are *not* preserved in art. The same may be true of ‘history’. For Larkin a dialect acquired *through* literature is a coin without currency because it attempts no transaction between the poetic and unpoetic, and represents nothing but self-validating literary value. So, dialect is perhaps not best regarded, for Larkin, as property, enabling entitlement; but rather as the condition of ownership of a voice that wants to be heard in accents of the common without specifying the derivation of this ‘commonness’. The primary nexus is not between inclusion and dialect, but emotion and dialect. The immediacy of emotion requires rootedness not in a soil but in a manner of address, but not one that comes from a literary tradition, for a literary tradition is, in Larkin’s book, intellectual, inhibiting and exclusionary.⁶⁷

John Osborne has argued for ‘an entirely revisionist prospectus in which Larkin is, in a precise sense, a Postmodernist, absorbing and moving on from Modernism – rather than, like Betjeman, pretending that it had never happened’ (53). ‘Larkin effects a

⁶⁷ It should be noted the apparent populism of Larkin’s aesthetic – ‘[a]s for whom you write, well, you write for everybody. Or anybody who will listen (RW 58-9) – still depends on a reliance on recognition by others. This can be seen as exclusionary on its own terms: the ‘anybody who will listen’ is still an anybody who can listen and recognise. In the same interview with the *Paris Review* (1982) that I cited above, Larkin also says that ‘poets write for people with the same background and experiences as themselves, which might be taken as a compelling argument in support of provincialism’ (69). This stress on ‘the same’ makes the principle of exclusion shift from poetic difficulty and inaccessibility to the poetic creation of voice and self that can be recognised by others.

democratization of Modernist allusion and shifts literary practice towards a postmodernist poetics' (79); he '...annexes a popular audience with its shared world of reference', and 'with no loss of profundity' (Osborne 80). However, I would argue that fitting Larkin to the bill of modernism or post-modernism can be done only if we ignore how Larkin was more interested in showing that writing that wasn't modernist could still share some of the prescriptive specifications of modernism. In particular, apropos Betjeman, Larkin claims that his (Betjeman's) poetic practice illustrates some of Eliot's modernist *obiter dicta* in an entirely different form, without themselves being recognisably modernist; further, he suggests that this is the way *forward* for poetry. For Larkin, this seems to count not only as a desire for a 'democratization of allusion' but as preference for a language that permits the feeling self to take on 'vivacity'. Larkin's commitment to this way of thinking comes across forcefully in his praise of Betjeman's poetry. 'The Blending of Betjeman' was written in the same year as the Auden essay, 1960. The essay is a comment not only on Betjeman himself, but on what he means to English poetry 'now'. A nuanced, and not always oppositional, dialogue with Eliot seems to be quietly at work in this essay. Larkin takes as his point of departure a verse of Betjeman's in which he presents his verses to 'The American master, Mr Eliot'. Taking the opportunity afforded by citation, Larkin reminds the reader that the 'American master' is famous for ruling that poets must be difficult, but that his disciple, Betjeman, was able to bypass the whole 'light industry of exegesis that had grown up around this fatal phrase', and establish a 'direct relation with the reading public'. But, Larkin goes on to complicate this: there are, he says, other ways in which Betjeman did not so much bypass as *fulfil* Eliot's brief:

It is ironic that, up to a point, the poetry of Betjeman (and also that of his contemporary W. H. Auden) is precisely the kind Mr Eliot foresaw. 'Our civilisation', the passage continues, 'comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results.' And so it has! (*RW* 129)

Larkin lets drop this particular yarn here in this essay, but writing on Betjeman again in 1971, this time as an introduction to an American edition of Betjeman's *Collected Poems*, he reproduces Eliot's remark, and continues:

Why should a poet bother himself with this complexity? Because: 'there is an aspect in which we can see the *whole way of life* of a people, from birth to the grave, from morning to night and even in sleep, and that way of life is also its culture.'

And what is this 'whole' way of life that a poet should (presumably) concern himself with expressing? Eliot was obliging enough to leave us a list of properties: 'Derby Day, Henley Regatta, Cowes, the twelfth of August, a cup final, the dog races, the pin table, the dart board, Wensleydale cheese, boiled cabbage cut in sections, beetroot in vinegar, nineteenth-century gothic churches, and the music of Elgar.'

Now if this passage reminds us of anyone's poetry, it is of Betjeman's rather than Eliot's or of anyone else's. But over and above this, what kind of response is Eliot adumbrating, if not the one I have already quoted from Betjeman? '...how much is embraced by the word culture. It includes all the characteristic activities and interests of a people.' '... not a house, or a single building or a church, but your surroundings; not a town or a street, but your whole overpopulated island.'

It is, to say the least of it, notable that both writers should have chosen to emphasise the identical element of cultural inclusiveness in describing what they most value; perhaps it is a coincidence, like the fact that both of them, by their different ways, were led to Anglicanism and the Church of England. (*RW* 217-218)

This passage has the relish of the devil quoting scripture; but equally it shows that Larkin was not naïve about the cultural politics of poetry. Larkin's words are informed

by the sense that the cultural views of Betjeman and Eliot tend in the same direction, though the first is an ‘accepter, not a rejecter, of his time’ (*RW* 214), and the second occupies a place closer in English poetry to an ‘avant garde’. However, Larkin is also not afraid to point out, somewhat at the expense of his portrait of Betjeman, that he fulfils ‘one of our critical criteria in an unexpected and not entirely acceptable way’ (*RW* 218). Betjeman’s easy embrace of the idea of ‘a whole culture’ in all its quotidian manifestations fulfils a key modernist strategy, that of including the ‘variety and complexity’ of modern life, but the lack of difficulty in the resulting poems does not exemplify a modernist poetic. In other words, similar desires are not expressed in similar forms. Larkin is being disingenuous, of course, in posing his initial question from Eliot’s ‘The Metaphysical Poets’ (1921) and finding its solution in *Notes Towards the Definition of a Culture* (1948); nevertheless, the ‘wholeness’ of culture which art held together in its broken fragments *was* one of Eliot’s concerns, and Larkin’s recognition of the elements of this modernity in one who is supposedly a ‘retrogressive’ talent is effective in undermining the solidity of the distinction between progressive and non-progressive forms of poetry.

In my view Larkin’s comments are not interpretations of the writers’ work: they are concerned with attitudes towards Auden and Betjeman and not with readings of either. As I argued in chapter two, one of Larkin’s most controversial critical positions was that not resistance, but the accepting reception of art by the consumer was what made it capable of autonomous transmission, made it independent of the crutch of exegesis and of institutional support. Here we can sketch in another mutation of the same line of thought: the acceptance and not rejection of a *given* idiom or dialect of

language is what allows variety and complexity to be expressed. And acceptance of it is, concurrently, acceptance of a putative emotional world in which speech and writing is at home. For (and here perhaps is an assumption that Larkin's work and critical writings constantly bank on) the sense of time and complexity in human life can poetically be processed only through a personal, feeling and felt, voice. The Betjeman essays offer further evidence that this is indeed Larkin's view:

Betjeman's poems, however trivial or lighthearted their subject, always carry a kind of primitive vivacity that sets them apart from those of their contemporaries, and captures the reader's attention without his intellectual consent... There is in Betjeman someone to whom every Betjeman poem seems to *matter* in a rare refreshing way. For Betjeman's poetry is nothing if not personal: it is exclusively about the things that impress, amuse, excite, anger or attract him, and – this is most important – once a subject has established its claim on his attention, he never questions the legitimacy of his interest. Energy that most modern poets put into screening their impulses for security Betjeman puts into the poem. (*FR* 207-8)

He became the living contradiction of Eliot's dictum that the better the poet, the more complete the separation between the man who suffers and the mind which creates. (*RW* 217)

The at-homeness of Betjeman's poetry comes from his acceptance of his world, and his vivacious and unquestioning interest in it; and his acceptance is, at the same time, not intellectualised, or cerebrally processed. It depends on acceptance not just of beliefs but of historical accidents that those beliefs are entwined with. Some readers of Betjeman, Larkin writes, mind that his poetry appears

... as if it would not exist outside the Betjeman scene. Religious feeling should be more free of the sentiments of time and place if it is to sound natural; it should not seem to require Tortoise stoves and box pews, nor be distracted by the wiring

of a public address system. But the whole strength of Betjeman's poetry is that it is written from his feelings and no one else's: his kind of religion has a right to be accepted in the same kind of way as his kind of girl. (*FR* 212)

Betjeman is a true heir of Thomas Hardy, who found clouds, mists and mountains 'unimportant beside the wear on a threshold, or the print of a hand': his poems are about the threshold, but they and it would be nothing without the wear... It isn't surprising, therefore, that his poems should be about people as well as places, nor that, just as places cannot be separated from people, so the people cannot be separated from their places. (*RW* 211-212)

There is something of an exchange with Eliot going on here as well, in Larkin's observation that Betjeman's 'feeling for the present is at least as his feeling towards the past' (*FR* 214), which would seem to echo Eliot's 'historical sense' that 'involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence'. But the Eliot essay goes on to gloss this 'presence' as 'a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order'; a sense of the 'timeless as well as the temporal and of the timeless and temporal together' (Kermode 38). Betjeman's past as glossed by Larkin is more a sense of the temporal in the temporal, of 'vanished societies made up of such people as ourselves, who will in turn vanish as they did' (*FR* 215). The 'people as ourselves' lived in vanished configurations that we can 'read' in our own material environments; the timelessness consists in the vanishing, the loss, which is the unspoken medium of history. The 'presence of the past' seems to entail two different kinds of awareness in the two writers. Betjeman's is the awareness of the past as past, existing as 'shadowy perspectives' (*FR* 215) cast *behind* observable objects, whereas Eliot's seems to disappear, without perspective, into the present, an

addition that creates no depth of field but the synthetic aura of simultaneity, the model for which is 'literature'. Betjeman's past is an accumulation of accidents of feeling and response that create a background of 'compulsions' in which the voice of feeling finds, or ought to find, its source. However, in itemising the elements that make up this context of direct feeling, we have seen that it nevertheless does involve a relocation from one ground to another: an uprooting from a twentieth-century lineage that is characterised as bookish, synthetic, and cerebral to a deliberate resettlement in a 'here' which requires an anchoring within the a recognisable common that has no basis except the poetic address itself.

Larkin's poems often gesture to things without naming them: what is *there*, or *here*, or to *that*, underlining that an observer is essential to all apprehension of place. If we are looking to Larkin's work for a clarification of a sense of 'Englishness', then perhaps a good place to begin is to recognise that he looks from the inside outwards, that he does not seek to create an sense of being English so much as to register in his poems his sense of the place where he lives, which happens to be both England and somewhere. Poet Sean O' Brien has offered a description of this way of enquiring about a relation to one's own place:

It could be objected that 'England' and 'Englishness' are not in themselves helpful ideas, that they resist clarification and contain too many internal contradictions, that the best way to understand a maze is not to go into it in the first place. But as I say, I am already in the maze, imaginatively speaking, and

have been since first I began to read and write poetry... My concern is with the workings of the imagination, which is not quite the same thing as the facts.
(*Journeys* 7)

Larkin never turned such a searching gaze to the sense of belonging in his own work; but we can helpfully see his as inhabiting a similar position within the maze, which need not amount to a comprehensive 'identity'. I would argue that in Larkin's work what commands recognition and circumscribes possibility in a place inscribes itself upon the sight and on the page as if by a poetic compulsion; apropos 'The Whitsun Weddings' he remarked that 'it only needed writing down. Anybody could have done it' (*FR* 57). In writing poetry that foregrounds this sense of compulsion, Larkin's verse achieves the opposite of nostalgia – home is no longer what the poet seeks with a longing akin to sickness, but where he is, that from within which he sees and writes. Whether this acknowledgement of home allows for desire of another, another place, person or self, is the question Larkin's poetry meditates on.

See in this light, Larkin's major poem, 'The Whitsun Weddings', no longer looks securely anchored to any communal vision or vision of its absence. Stephen Regan has discussed the poem as:

a quest for a unified vision and a shared system of belief in a desacralised world, but it is also a quest for social integration. The closing stanza acquires an articulate energy as the acceleration of the train and the tightening of brakes convey both the impulse towards a shared sense of endeavour and its gradual dissolution. The final image of 'an arrow-shower / Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain' keeps open the possibility of fulfilment, allowing sacramental suggestions to linger alongside the more secular associations of rain with disappointment and desolation' (Regan 'Philip Larkin: a late modern poet' 155)

Here Regan reiterates a view that he proffered in the earlier *Philip Larkin: The Critics' Debate* and in 'Larkin's Reputation'. Raphaël Ingelbien, however, finds in the poem 'another apprehension of his levelling, nihilistic sublime'.

The journey of the 'The Whitsun Weddings' offers a glimpse of it: 'The river's drifting breadth began / Where sky and Lincolnshire and water meet'. The poem progressively leaves this solitude to accumulate a near comprehensive catalogue of England, but all the while Larkin's growing impulse to celebrate a sense of community remains checked by his awkward sense of social superiority, the singleness that haunts him and the alienation that he still shares with the unEnglish and withdrawn protagonist of *A Girl in Winter*. When he reaches London, the fulfilment that he has looked forward to becomes mingled with a sense of dissolution and nothingness. Larkin's most direct use of wartime English iconography... dissolves in a sense of separation, a fall into an unknown 'somewhere'. (Ingelbien 213)

So while Regan reads the final image as allowing for the 'possibility of fulfilment' – in community presumably, as 'social integration' suggests—Ingelbien sees the same image as cancelling out the building sense of fulfilment in the poem to give way to separation and anonymity. It seems that Larkin is only allowed the choice between fulfilment and lack thereof, between community or separation. I do not wish to align myself with either of these directions of reading. Instead, in what follows, rather than look at 'The Whitsun Weddings' as a journey towards hopeful immersion in community or a self-annihilating alienation from it, I will suspend these assumptions of what the journey is for, to focus on what happens during it.

It should be said, first of all, that 'The Whitsun Weddings' is a deeply puzzling poem. It is lyrical, dramatic and narrative; it also works in the mythical and symbolic registers. But the readings cited above show that the privileging of one of these elements

over the other is always possible precisely because not necessary. The poem begins with a description of landscape, and then moves into the re-viewing of a detail of the passing scene. There is a hiatus in the journey and a novelistic section that describes people as if at a quasi-ritual – the sending off of newly-married couples –and then a resumption of travel, more viewed landscape, and the imminence of arrival in London. If there is a story in the poem, it is the story of an accident, the accident of being somewhere and seeing something; but we cannot be sure that this is, after all, *the* story. There seems to be little point in the telling of it, especially as the only image which provides a kind of *telos* for the poem, the image of the arrow shower, yields neither moral nor conclusion. TWW is a poem adrift; and it is perhaps no coincidence that its ‘frail / Travelling coincidence’ should be echoed in the ‘frail’ grass of ‘Cut Grass’ (CP 95), a poem of travelling clouds that seem to go nowhere and are suspended in a June that drifts on in inconclusive death and in aimless survival.

Much attention has been paid to the shifting pronouns in this poem; indeed, much of the evidence for intimations of community or separation from it, and the inclusion or exclusion of the speaker/observer in the events he describes, is based on the ‘we’ that is privileged in the poem as not solely a grammatically necessary plural self-reference but an index of communal meaning and yearning. Concomitantly, the ‘I’ in the poem represents the opposite pole of the ‘we’ – the pole of unyearning singularity. But this reading of the ‘we’ begins to appear simplistic if we note, first, that the first instance of the ‘we’ occurs in the first stanza, where the ‘we’ refers not just to the people on the train, but also to the train itself:

That Whitsun, I was late getting away:
Not till about
One-twenty on the sunlit Saturday
Did my three-quarters-empty train pull out,
All windows down, all cushions hot, all sense
Of being in a hurry gone. We ran
Behind the backs of houses, crossed a street
Of blinding windscreens, smelt the fish-dock; thence
The river's level drifting breadth began,
Where sky and Lincolnshire and water meet
(CP 56)

The journey to come, as seen at the beginning of the story, is a journey taken *within* a train and across a landscape as well as *with* others on the train; the narrator is being carried, part of an indefinite cargo that composes the 'we' of the train. The river, when it is encountered, itself 'drifts', even as it is the point where 'sky and Lincolnshire and water' are anchored to each other. 'We' is not just a community of people, but also a pronoun indicating accompaniment with inanimate things.

The weddings, when they are noticed, take the narrator's attention away from the landscape. The first two stanzas of the poem, with their even, calm progress, are scenes of passive but sensate observance – 'sense / of being in a hurry gone'; 'we smelt the fish-docks', the 'smell of grass / displaced the reek of buttoned carriage cloth'. The weddings have been there throughout this presentation of the passing landscape, but the narrator has been absorbed by the things pressed into sight by the sun – the 'blinding windscreens', the 'hothouse' that 'flashed uniquely' – but the noticing of the weddings coincides with a return to 'the interest of what's happening in the shade' (57). The weddings, then, happen in the shade of what is a sun-day – but oddly enough, as if to foreshadow what is about to happen in the poem as a whole, this Whitsun is actually a

Saturday, as the second line tells us: this is as sun-day which is not a Sunday. The narrator's 'now' sees what he had missed before – but this reminds us that the landscape that has been expansively described in the first two stanzas, that seems to absorb the narrator's gaze and sometimes displaces it in seamless, unseen vision, was at the same time seen patchily, distractedly, in the pauses between reading. 'Once we started, though, / We passed them...' (57). So, this scene had existed before, but not for the sun-entranced observer, along with the vistas of sky and sun and countryside and town, 'All posed irresolutely, watching us go', observing the indefinite 'we' that moved past them.

At first, I didn't notice what a noise
The weddings made
Each station that we stopped at: sun destroys
The interest of what's happening in the shade,
And down the long cool platforms whoops and skirls
I took for porters larking with the mails,
And went on reading. Once we started, though,
We passed them, grinning and pomaded, girls
In parodies of fashion, heels and veils,
All posed irresolutely, watching us go,
(CP 57)

For the next two stanzas, what had been passed over before is now re-passed. But here it should be noted that the focus on the wedding parties comes through the sight of the others who were previously invisible: the narrator sees 'them' (the people on the platform) seeing 'them', the people in the train.

As if out on the end of an event
Waving goodbye
To something that survived it. Struck, I leant
More promptly out next time, more curiously,

And saw it all again in different terms:

(CP 57)

The 'we' of the train intersects with 'them', not just at any point in a marriage celebration, but at the end, where the newly-married couples had to be taken away. Possibly Larkin's description of 'them' on the platform 'waving goodbye/ to something that survived' is an echo of Stevie Smith's 'Not Waving but Drowning'. Larkin was an admirer of Smith's poems, and reviewed her *Selected Poems* in 1962, quoting this poem in full (RW 156). 'The Whitsun Weddings' was finished in 1958, and Smith's *Not Waving but Drowning* appeared in 1957.

Oh, no no no, it was too cold always
(Still the dead one lay moaning)
I was much too far out all my life
And not waving but drowning.
(RW 156)

It may have struck Larkin⁶⁸ that the ones the 'dead man' was waving to had survived him; his words in 'The Whitsun Weddings', too, suggest that something in the assemblage on the platform is not going to survive; this event this is now being witnessed for the last time before being annulled, like the photographic stills of England in 'MCMXIV'. But this suggestion is undermined, at the same time, by the waving hands of the about-to-pass-away people on the platform, like the moaning dead man's insistent, alive deadness.

⁶⁸Poor chap, he always loved larking/ And now he's dead', says the first line of Smith's second quatrain, striking an innocent-ominous note that Larkin admitted to not being able to forget; the near-homophone of his name, 'larking', recurs just a few lines above in Larkin's poem.

In what follows, this and the next stanza, Larkin's description takes on a manufactured, syncopated quality; he is observing not just what is there to be seen or seen anew: he has changed his 'terms'. He now notices not just the landscape but people – the poem becomes one of 'social observation' and 'character drawing'. The social description is limited to those who 'stood around', and does not include the 'fresh couples' who 'climbed abroad', having just removed themselves from the death-picture on the platform. John Osborne, attempting to defend Larkin from charges of class prejudice, says about this stanza that:

it is possible to argue to challenge the idea that 'The Whitsun Weddings' institutionalises the power of the middle-class gaze, reducing the working class to the condition of anthropological exotics. That a degree of distancing is involved is not under dispute, but rather to what we ascribe that partial detachment. The pronominal fluctuations usually parsed as the mixed identification and disdain of a socially superior perceiving subject might as readily be taken as an index of racial, religious ethnic, sexual or age related outsiderdom: *stanza one*, I-my-we, *stanza two*, we; *stanza three*, I-we-I-we-we-us; *stanza four*, I; *stanza five*, we; *stanza six*, we; *stanza seven*, I; *stanza eight*, we-we-we. Is this not the precise lexical register of a person with one foot caught inside the culture and the other caught outside? (Osborne 65)

The 'precise lexical register' does not seem to me to prove this assertion one way or the other; but it seems that Osborne has missed out one pronoun from his catalogue: *they*. He notes that 'their' observations are, like the narrator's, 'relative to the point of view'. 'Just as none of these positions can be said to be definitive, so the narrator's point of view, though it has the advantage of comprehending theirs, is far from omniscient'. Thus Osborne, to save the poem from class reductivism, reduces it to a realist tableau in which

all points of view are relative and the narrator does not push his advantage of 'omniscience'. While he is certainly right to rescue the poem in this way from 'bourgeois judgementalism' (Osborne 65), he misses the unrelative position of the 'they'. 'They' are not just like the narrator, for they do not view and review, correct or assimilate: they 'define', they stay fixed and observe the survivors. 'They' look at the wedded couples; and unlike the narrator and the bridal couples, who when they see remain unseen, it is their *looking* which is being looked at. So 'they', the ones left behind, the ones who do not survive the event, seem to compose a picture of 'what is seen departing', a gallery of looks and gestures.

The other 'they' in the poem are the couple who escape this picture of departure: 'they' climb into the train.

... Free at last,
And loaded with the sum of all they saw,
We hurried towards London, shuffling gouts of steam.
Now fields were building-plots, and poplars cast
Long shadows over major roads, and for
Some fifty minutes, that in time would seem

Just long enough to settle hats and say
I nearly died,
A dozen marriages got under way.
They watched the landscape, sitting side by side
- An Odeon went past, a cooling tower, And
someone running up to bowl - and none
Thought of the others they would never meet
Or how their lives would all contain this hour.
I thought of London spread out in the sun,
Its postal districts packed like squares of wheat:
(CP 58)

The casually-slipped-in '*I nearly died*' confirms the suggestion of the trainload as survivors; their survival consists of movement itself. To be married, in this poem, is more than anything to get 'under way'.

'They watched the landscape', that is, did what the narrator was doing before he noticed them, before 'they' interrupted his seen-unseen absorption in the landscape; 'Or how their lives would all contain this hour' – the landscape is, in a way, what makes thought unnecessary. It belongs to the sun, to an easy, expansive presence that 'destroys the interest of what's happening in the shade', from which the shades of 'them' watch the travellers depart. The descriptions of the watchers, that commentators have rightly observed is an elaboration of stereotypes, is not part of the landscape; its function is to define the departing and the departed, like the home in 'Home is So Sad' is shaped according to the one who has just left.

What of the narrator? What is he 'one' with and separate from? It seems to me a false opposition to leave the choice between one or the other; the narrator's eye is the eye of the poem, which ranges through all the pronouns. What is common to the narrator and the couples is not so much participation in community as participation in the 'frail/ Travelling coincidence', the coincidence that comes from travel and the coincidence that itself travels, the happening-together that itself seems to be in movement in this poem.

The image of the arrow shower has been mostly glossed after a hint Larkin himself dropped to Jean Hartley in *Philip Larkin and the Marvell Press*, as referring to the arrow-shower at Agincourt in Laurence Olivier's wartime *Henry V* (119). But a suggestion, conscious or unconscious, may also persist in it of another famous literary

arrow, the 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune' (III. i. 58).⁶⁹ Regan, roughly in agreement with Osborne and Ingelbien, holds that:

The powerful momentum with which 'The Whitsun Weddings' closes is generated by the tension between contingency – the idea of the journey as 'a frail/ Travelling coincidence' – and the continuing desire for lasting significance: 'how their lives would all contain this hour'. It is the absence of any such transcendental meaning that shapes the final outlook of the poem, as it does in 'Here' and 'High Windows'. Larkin's habitual method is to close that seeming gap with a spatial metaphor – in this case an 'arrow shower' – while leaving its location sufficiently vague ('somewhere') to allow for the possibility of fulfilment. (Regan *Philip Larkin*, 117)

Regan places 'coincidence' and 'significance' at opposite poles, but it is difficult to see why coincidence cannot itself be of lasting significance, and not 'in tension' with 'transcendental meaning'. The imprecision of the image of the arrow shower is of a special kind: on the one hand we know that it falls in London, and not just in a vague 'somewhere'; on the other hand, it is 'Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain'. The whole poem, the train, the 'I' and the 'they', were aimed at London – aimed by travel itself, in its incarnation as Train – and not somewhere indefinite or nameless; but the momentum of movement takes the arrows 'out of sight' into a place where the name does not seem to reach; they fall in London but they also fall somewhere unknown. The image of the arrows does not so much closes the gap as make explicit the movement of the poem, which has the quality of going on even after it stops. Stopping – of the poem,

⁶⁹ Significantly in the same scene where, at line 120, Ophelia says, 'I was the more deceived'. Possibly significant, too, is the occurrence of the word 'shuffled' – 'when we have shuffled off this mortal coil' – in line 67.

of the train in London –is inevitable, a necessity, but like the clouds in ‘Cut Grass’, it does not happen here. Here, for a moment, exists at a distance from necessity.

My reading of the poem sees the ‘here’ of the poem to be itself in movement for the ones who travel through – they may be going to London but for the poem they are also being sent out of sight, being made unknown. The fixed are the ones whose presence defines only departure. The poem gives us not so much a tension between common and singular, but between those who are seen in fixity and those who are in movement. In keeping with the movement of the poem as both terminal and interminable, the watcher’s absorption in the landscape is presented in the poem as being of two kinds: a slow unwilled seeing-unseeing, and then a seeing solicited, willed and modified – seeing ‘in different terms’. At the end of the poem both these forms of seeing are underscored in the image of the arrow-shower: its aim is both within reach and not known.

To bring out the contrast of this sense of movement from another in Larkin that does not exceed its terminus, we can put it beside another poem in *The Whitsun Weddings* which is about aiming and missing – the much neglected ‘As Bad as a Mile’.

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

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

(CP 63)

Falling is failing in this wittily pessimistic poem: failure is the origin read back from the event. The *fait accompli* allows no forward movement but ‘spreads back up’, changing the series of motions that preceded it to itself. The momentum of ‘The Whitsun Weddings’ is the opposite: it exceeds and modifies this absolute terminus of ‘what happens to happen’. The train is aimed at London, but ‘the sense of falling’ that marks its arrival is simultaneously a sense of propulsion, of not knowing where the end of this event is which hasn’t yet come to an end. It is not shared, though, by the non-survivors who do not fall out of sight, who are excluded by being ‘out on the end of an event’. The poem moves on from them and what their ‘defining’ faces see departing to a somewhere which is still becoming.

‘Larkin’s poems’, writes Nicholas Jenkins in ‘The Truth of Skies: Auden, Larkin and the English Question’, a fascinating essay on Larkin’s skies and their connection with Auden’s poetry and poetic loyalties, ‘like little worlds, insist on strongly articulating their metaphysical and metaphorical borders’ (59). We have seen how, in ‘The Whitsun Weddings’, an arrival takes place at a destination, but movement still goes on. This does not happen in all of Larkin’s poems. ‘Here’, another Larkin poem aggressively mined on the ‘English question’, does present ‘here’ as ‘isolate’ and defined, but it also does two other interesting things: it complicates the nature of the boundary, and it presents ‘here’, again, in terms of movement. This has been remarked upon by commentators.

... ‘Here’ actually swings towards, through and then out the other side of Kingston upon Hull in a continuous cinematic panning action (more than three quarters of the poem are comprised of a single sweeping sentence) that moves

ceaselessly forward till the land and the action gives out. The poem pauses in Hull, where Larkin died, scarcely longer than 'I Remember, I Remember' pauses in Coventry, where he was born. Like so many of Larkin's travelogues, both poems accept deracination as a predicate of the human condition in the era of modernity. This is what is signified by the repetitious syntax of 'Here', which might more fittingly (if less euphoniously) be retitled 'Here and now Here and now Here and now Here'. (Osborne 157-158)

Regan, too, stresses that the poem is built on movement: 'The main verb "gathers" is delayed until the beginning of stanza two, and what precedes it is the experience of "swerving" ... The poem seems to be working in a straightforwardly mimetic and descriptive way'. This mimetic intent of the poem is not seen by Regan to be in contradiction with or complicated by the elements in the poem that are not working within the conceit or figure of a swerving movement, for instance what he himself calls the 'clever optical illusion' of 'ships up streets' (Regan *Philip Larkin*, 103).

Jenkins, on the other hand, sees the poem as already having arrived at the end of its very first sentence 'at the place to which the title refers': 'here' is Hull. The point of difference between his view of the poems and that of Osborne and Regan is movement and the termini of movement. To be specific: Jenkins sees 'Here', and poems about England in Larkin's work more generally, as being in movement for the sake of spatially defining 'England'; Osborne sees the same movement as an argument for the suspension of racial and national identities in Larkin, and therefore does not make much of 'England' as spatial location and point of arrival; Regan sees the 'mimetic' intent of the movement to be to draw a picture of England as '*urban pastoral*: a holding on to an older agricultural or seafaring image of England from within its urban and industrial

present' (104). So the spatial image seems to be developing, from within itself, into an historical one.

I would argue, not contrary to but in conjunction with all this, that 'here' is itself in movement in the poem; 'here' is not exactly a stable point of historical or spatial arrival or departure, but any 'now' the poem presents is a moving one that both presents a terminus and exceeds it. The first word of the poem, 'swerving', is not only a present-tense verb without a noun, but is a verb of some violence. Regan notes that the 'absence of any obvious subject or personal pronoun in the opening stanza gives the poem a curiously disembodied effect (1992, 103), but one could say equally that this divestment of person makes the poem itself embodied, like a self. 'Here' comes to replace 'swerving' in the fourth stanza (where Jenkins surmises that Hull has physically begun). In a manner analogous to 'The Whitsun Weddings', the poem, when it arrives at 'here', 'stands', apparently at a destination, and then the movement continues – 'leaves unnoticed thicken/ Hidden weeds flower, neglected waters quicken'. This effect of stopping and starting again is present throughout the poem's movement. The poem 'swerves' through 'solitude/ of skies and scarecrows' in the first stanza, through '... the widening river's slow presence/ The piled gold clouds, the shining gull marked mud' – where, if solitude was the terminus, the poem could have come to an end. But it 'gathers to the surprise of a large town' (CP 49). The movement is continuously 'past' –

... past the poppies bluish neutral distance
Ends the land suddenly beyond a beach
Of shapes and shingle. Here is unfenced existence:
Facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach.
(CP 49)

Again, the poem ends not at 'Ends the land', a trochaic beginning of a line that forms another kind of stop, apparently the last one. But the poem goes on, to linger over and then go past the 'shapes and shingle' that composes the stuff of this 'End', and to 'unfenced existence', what lies outside the boundary and gives it its shape and intactness. 'Unfenced existence' is not described as composed of sky or sea, air or water, although presumably it is both; it is named as the distance that composes a nearness, that makes 'here' seem like here.

Is distance a clearly articulated boundary? Is it empty, can it be identified with a denuded sky, or a complete absence that Ingelbien has dubbed the 'nihilistic sublime'? Ingelbien writes: 'Transcendence would henceforth [after 'The Whitsun Weddings'] revert to the absolute negativity of absence, thus allowing Larkin to develop his nihilistic sublime to the full'; it is 'emptied... of all cultural content' (Ingelbien 214). Absolute negativity, however, seems belied by Larkin's identification of 'distance' with 'existence', its rhyme-word and substitute. Distance occurs in other poems where it is not simply an absence of 'cultural content', if this means the objects and thoughts of daily life. In 'Broadcast', distance is the obstacle between a speaker and a 'someone' on the other side of it, who can be 'picked out', heard and seen, only if the distance in between does not obscure her.

... Behind

The glowing wavebands, rabid storms of chording
By being distant overpower my mind
All the more shamelessly, their cut-off shout
Leaving me desperate to pick out
Your hands, tiny in all that air, applauding.

(CP 53)

The hands of this ‘someone’ at the concert are beyond the ‘cut-off shout’ of ‘rabid storms of chording’. What could be near is made distant by the loudness of this chorded distance; but, also, nothing could be closer than the same ‘glowing wavebands’ that compose the distance, whose touch encompasses both hearer and the one he strives to perceive behind the music. Distance is both a separation and a connection. In ‘Talking in Bed’, the couple who cannot find words are said to be ‘at a unique distance from isolation’. (‘Broadcast’ was finished in 1961, and the ‘Talking in Bed’ in 1960). Isolation is figured together by sky and town; the horizon marks its boundary, and the couple watch isolation from a distance. The poem does not quite say whether it is troubled by the couple’s kinship with isolation – it does not care for them as they do not care for each other – or by their otherness to it:

...the wind's incomplete unrest
builds and disperses clouds about the sky.

And dark towns heap up on the horizon.
None of this cares for us. Nothing shows why
At this unique distance from isolation

It becomes still more difficult to find
Words at once true and kind
Or not untrue and not unkind.

(CP 61)

Their dilemma – since the couple represents intimacy and distance is elsewhere, why can’t their words be true or kind? – shows again that distance is not necessarily the

opposite of nearness. 'Distance' marks the ambivalence of what is contrasted to the couple; it does not show the counter-posed horizon and towns to offer a perfect contrast. This would be an instance of what O'Brien has called 'the anxiety which animates [Larkin's poetry] and which may ... offer the reader a fruitful inconclusiveness' (*Deregulated Muse* 25).

In the light of this I would argue that contrasts like distance and nearness should not be taken in Larkin as simply a negation of community. We can establish the enabling function of indistinction by looking at 'The Importance of Elsewhere' where being in Ireland makes the distinction between home and not home absolute. The lack of distance, and therefore the unambiguous inhabitation of home (the 'not elsewhere') 'proves' the speaker 'unworkable'. The acknowledgement of possession – 'my customs and my establishments' – and therefore, it can be said, of community, is unhesitating; but the 'elsewhere' that composes the boundary of that existence, the elsewhere that allows for refusal of the very same 'customs and establishments', is absent. Refusal then takes on a completely different connotation – not spelt out exactly but called 'more serious', whereas in the elsewhere it was made possible by a physical receptiveness to the poetic apprehension of Ireland. 'Here no elsewhere underwrites my existence' (*CP* 64). Unlike the distance composing the border of 'Here', in this other 'here' existence is not fenced off and so cannot be unfenced. The speaker himself becomes the zone in need of a border, in need of distance from home. But the poetic refusal which would establish distance between himself and home is characterised as 'much more serious'. Again the sense of 'here' is adverbial: in this place, there is no other place, no elsewhere that can

allow otherness to self; in another place, 'Ireland' in this poem, there was such an 'other' place, and, by implication, could be again.

Finally, distance without distinctness is at work in Larkin's sense of the past. Commentators have seen Larkin's past as both pragmatic and nostalgic at the same time, marked by both desire for the past and a clear-headed sense of its own anachronism. Regan has described Larkin's poem 'MCMXIV' as creating 'an effect of impressions gathered second-hand from a sepia photograph', and he glosses this as 'not so much nostalgia as an awareness of the desirability and yet fallibility of national ideals' (Regan *Philip Larkin*, 121). In *English Poetry Since 1940*, Neil Corcoran argues that it is set in a 'pastoral no-time'; its title that 'freezes the date of the beginning of the First World War also freezes the organic ideal into a participial stasis' (Corcoran 92). Osborne does not take on this sense of stasis directly, but notes the 'impending social disaster', the intimations of catastrophe in the poem, and remarks perceptively that 'it combines in a complex simultaneity two different views of the scene, theirs and ours' (193). The still-life quality of the poem is, I think, unmistakable, and so is the sense of it being posed to an eye which is not of its time, which is at a historical distance. But going further than this, we can ask: what is the purpose of this frozen picture? To whose eye is it being offered?

Patrick Wright has alluded to a perhaps similar sense of separation and stasis in *On Living in an Old Country*. He writes:

In order to become spectacular – something separate with which the public can commune in regular acts of appreciation – history must in one sense be something that is over and done with. In its stately connection, history becomes

‘timeless’ when it has been frozen solid, closed down and limited to what can be exhibited as a fully accomplished ‘historical past’[.] (78)

Is this Larkin’s poem’s sense of the past? It does present history as something that is ‘over and done with’, but it works not just to freeze history or even to present a snapshot of stilled urgency. The past is also, I would argue, a *mode* of presentation that ‘changes... to past/ without a word’ everything that it presents as itself; everything in this poem becomes past as we read it in the present, without saying so.

Never such innocence,
Never before or since,
As changed itself to past
Without a word--the men
Leaving the gardens tidy,
The thousands of marriages
Lasting a little while longer:
Never such innocence again.

(CP 61)

The whole poem but the last stanza is in the present tense, until the point where it is said, in words, that this is the ‘past’. But we know the words that make up the past – the Roman numerals and Domesday lines – without bothering to verify it or orientate ourselves. This is the intimacy of history and custom, the intimacy also of language, open only to those who can see the change happening ‘without a word’. ‘*As changed itself to past*’: the scene seems to effect its translation to past almost in being described. Steve Clark has noticed that this poem ‘presents a world which can never be directly experienced, but which has always been mediated beforehand. The men depart “without a word” of explanation... but it is that very silence that allows Larkin to comment

obliquely on the process of mythicization that the poem itself performs' (176). The text performs, or suffers, a curious and yet utterly banal action: a series of words appear and are changed to *history*. The reader who recognises this silent change also recognises *himself* as the present, as the one who makes the past, past. The 'past' appears as the reader recognises it as another time, without it telling him so.

David Gervais's argument that Larkin's England is primarily, if problematically, nostalgic is, in my view, problematic. He diagnoses in Larkin's work 'a sense of something that was absent: a sense of what was left when the older England was "gone"' (200). This sense of absence, I think, is not ideally pinned on to 'England', since to speak from within a place, from within the 'maze' of Englishness (as O'Brien puts it), does not involve being present in it as a whole. Gervais's idea of nostalgia is clarified when he comments that, 'far from being the option of a sentimentalist, nostalgia has become a living part of our culture ... It is in this sense that it is possible to think of our England as "'the aftermath of England"' (196). Sean O'Brien has also remarked that 'Englishness in poetry, it almost goes without saying, is often elegiac, its affirmations at their most powerful at the point of leavetaking. It may even have a death-wish secretly and pre-emptively inscribed within it' (Journeys 17). But in his earlier essay on Larkin in *The Deregulated Muse*, O'Brien makes assertions about Larkin which point to productive contradictions in his poetry. 'Larkin's historical sense ... leaves history out ... history means not here, not now' (24). Yet he adds that there are poems in Larkin that speak 'with an accurate sense of "ordinary" i.e. working class lives; more, they speak from the same streets, with the same underlying preoccupations' (28). 'He produces mythologies, to which others then refer... his observations serve as our archetypes' (29).

'Historical sense' here, it seems, would convey a sense of the present, which some of Larkin's poems do achieve in their portrayal of the ordinary. The portrayal of the present as past in English poetry is a fraught topic, which goes beyond Larkin's poetry. I only wish to note here that if 'Englishness' is the search for being fully present in the now or within a present moment's sense of the future (on which the ability to become part of a commonality, if not a community, that empowers depends) then Larkin's poetry does not provide this.⁷⁰ Neither does it provide, I think, a dis-identification from Englishness, as that would involve a similar presence of an alternative sense of the present. However, the poetry does allow us to reflect on how images and words come to represent a past just by being recognised, by being translated inescapably, as O'Brien says, into meanings that readers are perhaps too familiar with; it further allows us to reflect how this experience is imaginatively compelling without always translating into a basis in fact, or yielding to political calculations in predictable ways. The familiar images are 'innocent' because they are not aware of 'being' history themselves. In 'Arrival' Larkin says that 'this ignorance of me / Seems a kind of innocence / Fast enough I shall wound it'. The reader or the observer who becomes aware of history, who gives is a 'being' and a presence, can always wound the innocence of any image or description, question this particular 'style of dying' (*CP* 277) while recognising which style it is. This, too, is a style of questioning the inescapability of belonging to a place – with a recognition that at the same time signals that someone has placed oneself at a remove from it, is not perceiving with the eye of a community but placing herself or himself at a distance from it or to a point within it – that ought to be placed beside others. It depends, above all, on

⁷⁰ See also Swarbrick pp.123-4.

recognising that even if some poems draw our gaze as if by force of compulsion, shifts in one's angle of perception are possible, and sometimes these shifts can be suggested by poems themselves, poetry itself urging us to differ from poetry. In this light, we can question Jonathan Powell Ward's very suggestive observation in *The English Line* that 'the source' of this 'strength of inner compulsion' is 'a non-source; an absence of that landscape of that landscape and that seemingly natural community where such poetry of the inner sadness had been written before. Without root in community sex and self are left stranded. Loss now is nearly total' (179). Specifically with regard to 'Aubade', he further asserts that it is 'the blackest reversal of the personal poetry of any rooted human when the sense of that community [that is, of the dead] has gone, and it is difficult to see the English line surviving it' (183). As I discuss in the next chapter, poems in Larkin's work that speak of death are a reflection on survival: not survival as the life-beyond-life of community that bestows on us the power to be ourselves in return for our reimagining its totality; but as the death-in-life that is baffled by a pervasive double-sense of loss and desire of others. If not claiming the power to write as if in community with others has been a loss, to paraphrase Larkin himself, the poems about this loss are a gain.

Unresting Death: The Sense of Death in Larkin's Poems

In this chapter I will look at several poems of Larkin's that allude to death. Of all Larkin's poems, 'Aubade' in particular has been both championed and reviled for its unflinching, no-holds-barred encounter with death. As the writers I discuss below indicate, it has been taken as an exemplarily steady gaze upon the reality of death, a steadiness that unsteadies Larkin's reader. It is the poem in which an 'I' encounters that which makes it 'I': its extinction, which no one else can suffer in its place. At the same time, the refusal to look away from death or to rework or transcend the personal extinction that it represents has also been seen as yet another glaring instance of the refusal of Larkin's poetry to transcend the negative, not to say the regressive, that which refuses all hope of transformation, secular, poetic or religious.

As I elaborated in chapter three, with 'Deceptions' Larkin made an early experiment in the poetry of 'other people's experience'. 'Larkin' took on the persona of a girl he had read about in a book. He tasted her grief, he saw and heard what she would have seen and heard. The experiment ended in dizziness. The poem implies that when the 'I' becomes another, it does not necessarily have to become the victim; it can become the one who inflicts suffering as well, and just as well. Considered as a poetic

experiment in using the novelistic technique of interrelated subjectivities, 'Deceptions' showed that sustaining an other subjectivity within one's own made the act of imagination break down in favour of judgement about who is closer to the truth. Sustaining the novelistic engagement with otherness in Larkin becomes difficult because another's subjectivity brings about recoil into questions of misjudgement or lying, rather than a fictional elaboration of truth-through-response between protagonists. My argument in this chapter will be that death, as that which is at the same time most intimate and most alien to the self, brings forth in Larkin's last poems both an acute realisation of the individuality of the mortal self and the representation of the incomprehensible and unmastered in human life which elicits a baffled response to the mortality of others. The poems about death represent an encounter with otherness which itself has no subjectivity (that is, death, unlike the living, is without otherness-in-self) but nevertheless confers subjectivity. The otherness of death, which cannot be known or questioned in itself, leads to an interrogation of what others experience of it as well as how 'Larkin' experiences it; and 'experience' in this case is of a death, as Jacques Derrida has said,

that has already arrived according to the inescapable: an encounter between what is going to arrive and what has already arrived... What has arrived has arrived insofar as it announces itself as what must inescapably arrive. Death has just come from the instant it is going to come. It has come to pass insofar as it comes; it has come as soon as it is going to come. *It has just finished coming*. Death encounters itself. (*Demeure* 64-65)

Derrida calls this 'unexperienced experience'; if it were only experienced, dying would become possible in life, which is impossible; if it were just unexperienced, then death

could never be perceived as 'having arrived' from the moment it is apprehended as the inescapable. The structure of experienced death that Derrida has elaborated (and which I shall consider in greater detail in what follows) is one that specifies something that cannot be happening now and yet is always happening in the now when it is remembered.

To turn first to 'Aubade'. There is a temptation to read 'Aubade' as the *telos* of Larkin's oeuvre, to see it as Larkin's last major poem about the last thing. James Booth writes in *The Poet's Plight* "'Aubade" is virtually the last poem of any importance that he wrote. It is not simply an elegy for life, it is an elegy for poetry' (199). According to this line of thinking, because of its status as one of Larkin's last published poems (1977) 'Aubade' sums up all the other reflections and attitudes, dramatizations and statements, on death offered in his work. I would like, however, to follow Larkin in suspending, for the moment, what he called the Ford-car view of poetry, in which each poem is a development of the one before it, and look at 'Aubade' as one of the many poems, the last but not the final in the sense of a summation, where he says something about death. Not that what he said before was radically different from the point of view of what is called 'content'. But 'Aubade' has distinguished itself, for many, by its singular, dogmatic vehemence. 'No matter how much or how little readers may, at the outset, be in sympathy with its views', says Seamus Heaney, 'they still arrive at the poem's conclusion a little surprised at how far it has carried them on the lip of its rhetorical wave. It leaves them like unwary surfers hung over a great emptiness, transported further into the void than they might have expected to go' ('Joy or Night', *Finders Keepers* 325). The metaphor of the wave-poem that sweeps the reader unexpectedly far into

emptiness is a powerful one, one fundamentally in accord with the poem. For in it the narrator moves towards death as death comes forward to meet him; and once it is seen that the traveller and the destination are both death, the place of travel, here, this place, becomes as if no place at all, giving on to nowhere. What is a wave without a shore, a limit with nothing on the outside? It is the dizzying apprehension of a life taking place in emptiness, a life that sees itself defined as self by this emptiness. It is not, as is sometimes said, identical to meaninglessness. The meaning *is* that life takes place here, which death makes nowhere, and in a place that death makes no place. And it takes place once; 'Larkin' lives though that 'once' in one night, from which he is separated by dawn. It is the single person in the grip of his singleness.

The antipathy that Heaney displays to 'Aubade', an antipathy that recognises in the poem an almost perfect statement of an attitude towards death which is almost insupportable, is not difficult to understand. Heaney is objecting, as Michael Cavanagh has said in 'Fighting off Larkin: Seamus Heaney and "Aubade"', to '...not ["Aubade's"] soul-denying atheism alone but its relentless monorail discursiveness, its callous straightforwardness, its sheer plain-sense explicability... "Aubade" is anything but prosaic, but it features the sensibility of prose' (204). Heaney envies as well the confident assertiveness of Larkin's tone, a mode of address that is so sure of its reader that it manages to forget him or her. In a version of a criticism of Larkin we are now familiar with, Heaney accuses him of transforming nothing, of appearing to leave everything as it is. This is what makes Larkin's astonishing statement of the singleness and finitude of life appear to come from the heart of the common world. His affirmation of the asociality of life – the necessity and incontrovertibility of solitude is perversely

social in nature. It seems to be, perhaps is, life 'as it is'. But this is, for Heaney, a betrayal of poetry:

It is essential that the vision of reality which poetry offers should be transformative, more than just a printout of the given circumstances of its time and place. The poet who would be most the poet has to attempt an act of writing that outstrips the conditions even as it observes them. The truly creative writer, by interposing his or her perception or expression, will transfigure the conditions[.] (*Finders Keepers* 327)

At a stroke then, we come, with this poem and Heaney's objection to it, to what has made Larkin at once the most acceptable and unacceptable of poets for us today. The objection is that he says what is the case, and says it too well. He is a radical empiricist, which is perhaps the same as a benign nihilist. He makes what is appear necessary, and in doing so sweeps the (unsuspecting?) reader, who cannot help but understand him, far into the void, where there exists nothing, no hope for transformation. His poetry is thus a fabrication of necessity, a fabrication of death. And in 'Aubade', by offering no glimmer of transformation for the experience of death, he has poetically created death.

Not all critics have taken the poem so much at face value. There have been critics who have tried to redeem the poem somewhat from its unredemptive extremity.

William Kerrigan, for instance, in 'Larkin and the Difficult Subject' argues that:

In the conventional aubade, the lover bids a reluctant farewell to his beloved after a night of pleasure. Thus Larkin enumerates the pleasures he must, in oblivion, be forever without ... Shakespeare's 'Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything' rewritten for the sake of an improved inclusiveness. What 'flashes afresh' in 'Aubade' is not just the terror of death, but its dialectical companion, the love of life. (303)

M. W. Rowe takes a different approach. He offers an extended close reading of 'Aubade' in a book of essays on philosophy and literature, making clear that it shows 'a major poet tackling a philosophical theme', and my commentary is intended to show that the poem exemplifies all the features of correctly handled poetic thought sketched in the previous essay – in which he had tried to show that 'abstract thought in poetry is entirely legitimate', but must 'be treated in a different fashion from the way it is approached in philosophy' (x). Though his intent is nothing but laudatory, he agrees, in effect, with the substance of the charge that Heaney makes against Larkin. "'Aubade" is the poem where death is clearly and unequivocally confronted for the first time: death is not screened by the process of dying, or merely glanced at, or called by soft names' (214). Larkin's poem about death is deathly: this, presumably, is its correctness or propriety as poetic thought, in which abstractions are lived through and as the line of the verse. Rowe's exegesis is meticulous and admirable. So is his synopsis of how the poem works:

Larkin does not begin with the first stirrings of life, but with soundless dark; he is alone with his thoughts. The lack of sight, sound, and movement already make him seem partially anaesthetized; they act as a potent analogue for the oblivion to come. Even when some light does appear, the fear of death is so overwhelming and paralysing that it has bleached all life and colour from the sensory world; no sounds, textures, tastes or smells are noticed; no colours are mentioned but 'dark' and 'white'... He fears death because it will eliminate his senses; and yet the fear of death has virtually done this already. Similarly, he wants the coming day, but is quite incapable of enjoying it because the fear of death has so shrunken and reduced it that it now serves only as a sign that death is one day closer. (*Philosophy and Literature* 190)

However, both Heaney and Rowe are leading us to see Larkin's confrontation with death as a confrontation with the thing itself, exact, unadorned, unadulterated. In this story 'Aubade' is the bleakest sketch that exists in English poetry of a certain attitude towards death: an attitude modern and post-Christian, which refuses to see death other than as it *is*. Heaney would have Larkin transform the 'given', that is, death itself, its necessity and finality; Rowe salutes him for handling the same without flinching or embellishment. For these writers, the poem not merely states but shows an extremity that poetry has the choice to either transform or leave as it is. 'Death' functions as the paradigm of necessity, that which cannot be other than it is, and the various forms of necessity that recur in Larkin's poetry may be called versions of death.

I want to steer clear, to a large extent, of this discourse of death-as-the-ultimate-realism, and the corresponding dilemmas about whether the 'real' should be faced or resisted, and look at this poem in another way. My reading will assume that the thought of death, experienced death, which is the paradox of this poem, happens to Larkin not as the end of his poetic or human development, but in time and place – in one night, in one room. The meaning of the death that he experiences is also the meaning of being in this place and time, which become *as if* no place and time. Death is, in this poem, Larkin's death and no other's. It is death's being 'his' death that forces Larkin to experience it, to own it as what will happen to him. Yet, as the narrator speaks of his death, it becomes not only his own, but an 'I's' death: in being experienced only as 'I' can experience it, it becomes anyone's, any 'I's' death. Death and the 'I' are made by each other, they are co-creators. Death happens to each one once, and to each one as a 'self', and it happens to each one *as* what happens to each *one*. 'Larkin's death' is not shareable by anyone,

but it is being experienced in the time and place of the poem; it is a 'poem' because it is or can be anyone's death, and anyone's in the same way as Larkin's.

What I hope to show is that this is a narrative not only of facing or accepting what 'is' the case, what must happen and happen only in this way, but something slightly different: the illumination of a self shaped by death-as-necessity. The meaning of being this kind of self can only be explicated by a narration this sort of necessity represents; death (as experienced by the living) necessarily strips the self of all the attributes that it perceives it requires to be itself. The poem's theme, the one that I shall try to bring out in my reading, is how the self's experience of death makes it unique *as* one among others.

In the last chapter we saw that 'Whitsun Weddings' is a poem about various people joined necessarily and randomly in movement, and this movement, though projected towards a definite place and time – London, the end of this journey – becomes at the same time a progress towards an unknown somewhere, a transformation of movement into rain – an ambiguous image that can be read as both depressing or promising. There is a sense, then, of a movement towards a fixed end, a terminus, and, at the same time, of what is beyond the terminus, what falls just outside the known and anticipated end. One might begin by saying that in 'Aubade' this sense of movement overreaching the end is absent. There is no movement beyond death. Death is the final horizon, the frontier of all sensitive and sensuous perception.

Except that in this poem, this frontier that circumscribes the self is itself not fixed. There are two kinds of movement in the poem – the movement of the narrator's life, his narrative so to speak, that is travelling, which each passing moment and word,

towards death. And there is the movement of death itself. 'Unresting death': death is not passive, it comes, it moves away and moves near. The narrator describes it as 'what's really always there', then calls it 'unresting' just a line later. This should alert us to the unfixed fixity of this death. It is the narrator who is fixed by death, in a room, one of the many that we find in Larkin's poems.

I work all day, and get half drunk at night.
Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare.
In time the curtain edges will grow light.
Till then I see what's really always there:
Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,
Making all thought impossible but how
And where and when I shall myself die.
Arid interrogation: yet the dread
Of dying, and being dead,
Flashes afresh to hold and horrify.
(CP 115)

Death is what the narrator sees when there is *nothing* to be seen, in the interval of seeing that is night. But what is revealed in this dark is also *seen*, seen as the invisible suddenly revealed – as death is life revealed in a certain aspect. Life revealed as 'how/ And where and when I myself shall die'; and so, in the same instant, how and where and when I myself am alive. Death, in the poem, is a present non-presence, something whose not yet being there activates work and thought. On the one hand, death is what 'Larkin' must undergo, a process that advances with his life, is identical to it – so that one can say that *his* death does not so much happen to him as happens as him and through him. On the other hand, death comes towards him as if with the force and intent of an other; it has something unknown to show and impart, which is 'nothing' in the terms of life which the poem still has as its only means of thinking and working. This 'nothing' makes the

‘how and where and when’ seem also to be unfolding against nothing, deriving their meaning from this nothing. So death, the cessation of all work, is in fact the unknown other that sets the self the work of dying.

William Kerrigan has argued in ‘Larkin and the Difficult Subject’ that Larkin’s horror of death shows, in inverse proportion, his love of life: ‘What ‘flashes afresh’ in ‘Aubade’ is not just the terror of death, but its dialectical companion, the love of life’ (303). Larkin is afraid to lose what he loves. Yet it is more than fear of ‘losing’ that death presents so blatantly in the poem. If ‘life’ belonged to Larkin, then death would also belong to him; it would be his death, not perceived by him to be wholly other, coming from a distance at him, depriving him of what is most intimate to ‘himself’ – his ‘senses’. His fear, as the narrator says, is not of losing something, but of having no means through which the phenomena of ‘keeping’ and ‘losing’ would make sense.

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

(CP 115-16)

There are two ways that he ‘tried’ to dispel the fear of death in this stanza, and it is unclear if both are being included in ‘religion’. There is, first, religion as a sensuous image, ‘vast moth-eaten musical brocade’, in which dimension and decay, sound and

sumptuousness, complexity and unity, all combine in one apprehension. The other is ‘the specious stuff’ – still stuff, but vague, unmaterialised, unlike the woven brocade of religion – that offers a way of overcoming fear by presenting it as something unrelated to the senses, outside their grasp and so not an object of feeling, and presenting the subject fit for this ‘stuff’ as the rational being. This ‘rational being’ cannot ‘see’ what the fear of not seeing, of not having anything to sense, can be; he maintains that you cannot ‘feel’ death, but what he does not feel is *death in life*, which entails apprehending with sense ‘no sight, no sound / No touch or taste or smell’. The rational being does not sense the absence of sense. But both ways, rational and sensuous, are ‘created to pretend’; sense misleads here as much as the sensed absence of sense.

The emphasis on death in this poem being a last and final model of death as presented in Larkin’s poetry has obscured a very real kinship between it and moments in other poems when something like an apprehension of finality happens. One of them occurs in ‘Reference Back’:

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 68)

This reference back is not simply to a memory; it’s a bridge to ‘what we have as it once was’ – a double perspective. The two preceding stanzas are a Chinese-box of references

back, in and also to time. There is the present, in which 'I' idly plays records in his room, and someone calls out in appreciation. This moment, we learn, had been looked forward to, in some other anonymous moment 'back' somewhere, which now comes to be counted in this narrative. In a 'now' that is also ambiguously situated – is it the now of the poem, or is this 'now' the same now in which the music plays, Oliver's 'Riverside Blues' and no other, between the two listeners? – the 'I' admits that he will 'always remember'. And what he will always remember now, after the music-playing is over, is notes blown into a 'huge remembering pre-electric horn / The year after I was born'. 'Pre-electric' could describe both the object and its effect: it was not an electrifying experience, a frisson or a thrill that was being recorded, nor was the mode of recording 'electric' pulses transformed into sound. Nevertheless, its being played again, reappearing as sound, allows a 'sudden bridge' to appear between different sets of 'nows' – the now in which the music was first played and recorded, the now when it was played when the speaker was 'wasting his time at home' (another home that at the moment of presence seems to be characterised by a lack of sense or use), and the now in which it was heard, the now of the two hearers' 'unsatisfactory age' and 'unsatisfactory prime'. It is dated, if not outdated, unsatisfactory, but it still comes to the speaker 'blindingly undiminished' and 'sudden'. Time is electric, but the things memory preserves are pre-electric, not capable of being transmitted by it. These immediate connections are 'long perspectives' and 'open at each instant'; and what they link us to, 'our losses', are also 'what we have as it once was'. The loss is of what 'once was', once and once only in time; what we 'have' is different from this sudden apprehension, this electric connection between now and the other 'now' that opens up, brilliantly vivid in

loss, in this link made by time. This is a memory that escapes possession, as does any memory that is not itself recollected as ‘memory’, doubled and distanced in becoming ‘past’. Hence the puzzlement of the speaker, which is not just simple regret. ‘Our element is time’, says the speaker, and time seems to be this business of long perspectives that are electric connections to lost moments, ‘open at each instant of our lives’. Each instant is vulnerable to this opening up of a link, but we are not suited to this. Why? There is a finality, a sense of unmastered immediacy to the apprehension of these lost moments. They seem to be the telos-in-reverse of what can be claimed as ‘the present’ – its end is to change into the past. This ‘now’ is overwhelmed by the perception of *what once was*, as if that *is* what this moment ought to have been. The ‘now’ appears compulsively as a ‘then’. ‘By acting differently, we could have kept it so.’ The moment that is remembered in this way is not remembered but experienced, or experienced as well as not experienced, in the way the present cannot be ‘experienced’. The illusion of the ‘long perspective’ is that it seems to offer this lost moment as somehow within the power of action, of acquirement. The ‘blindingly undiminished’ moment, the moment seen so truly that it is not seen at all, that (contrary to the usual function of perspective) it eliminates all distance, is impervious to the vagaries of acting. It is fated to become memory, suffer transformation into non-instantaneity. To be in time is to be vulnerable to these openings towards blinding moments. The long perspectives seem to assert our power not just to ‘see’ but to ‘keep’ such experiences, even as time, which is our ‘element’, can only access them in the form of involuntary links, uncontrollable openings.

This phenomenon of unexperienced experience is Derrida's theme in the short but immense *Demeure: The Instant of My Death*. The 'experience of death' recounted there is very different from the one in 'Aubade', but there is a similarity in encountering death as what has just arrived:

Perhaps it is the encounter of death, which is only ever an imminence, only ever an instance, only ever a suspension, an anticipation, the encounter of death as anticipation with death itself, with a death that has already arrived according to the inescapable: an encounter between what is going to arrive and what has already arrived. Between what is on the point of arriving and what has just arrived, between what is going to come [*va venir*] and what just finished coming [*veint de venir*], between what goes and comes. But as the same. Both virtual and real, real as virtual. What has arrived has arrived insofar as it announces itself as what must inescapably arrive. Death has just come from the instant it is going to come. It has come to pass insofar as it comes; it has come as soon as it is going to come. *It has just finished coming*. Death encounters itself. The moment death encounters *itself*, going to the encounter with itself, at this moment both inescapable and improbable, the arrival of death at itself, this arrival of a death that never arrived and never happens to me – at this instant, lightness, elation, beatitude remain the only affects that can take the measure of this 'unexperienced experience.' What can an unexperienced feeling signify? How would one experience it? Dying will finally become possible – as prohibition. All living beings have an impossible relation to death; at the instant death, the impossible, will become possible as impossible. (64-65)

The apprehension of a moment in time as 'blindingly undiminished', inescapable, experienced but not *as* 'experience', can happen as past as well as future. In 'Aubade' it is not the experienced that returns as unexperienced, but the unexperienced that happens as experience. That is, death, which hasn't yet happened, 'flashes afresh' from its non-

presence. It is not there, though it is felt as the thing that is ‘really always there’. The absence of sense is sensed as presence.⁷¹

There exists a kinship between ‘Aubade’ and ‘Reference Back’. One speaks of the past as completely lost, and the other of the future as completely alien, imposed by an incomprehensible necessity, which is here an inexorable advancing on death. To exist in time, in ‘Reference Back’, is to be vulnerable to seeing what is as what it ‘once’ was, and as one sees (even the past) ‘now’, it is to be vulnerable to seeing what *once* was as still intactly present, a reverse imminence in the present moment. In ‘Aubade’, there is a reference forward, and the moment that is now, is seen as the moment that is in the future, or that is the future – the moment of being nothing. Death is the unexperienced future, and the ‘I’s’ present experience of death is the loss of all experience. Time links to loss in both cases. And both past and future, understood in this sense, are testament to the impotence of action.

‘.[N]othing to think with / Nothing to love or link with’. Death, time’s other, is anaesthetic, is the anaesthetic. It nullifies the ‘with’, leaving the speaker with nothing. There is then, in this singularising and singling-out that death performs – for that is its work, its activity – a peculiar deployment of the senses, or more precisely the idea of the sense. Music makes vision happen in ‘Reference Back’; it is the bridge of time between times. The electric link to the lost past comes richly nested in sight and sound. It can be said that the situation is just the reverse in ‘Aubade’, that it is characterised by the nullity of the senses. But reading with attention to the sensual register in the poem, we shall see

⁷¹ In another context, this is what Phillipe Lacoue-Lebarthe has perhaps drawn attention to in *Poetry as Experience* when he says, ‘In the end, if there is no such thing as “poetic experience” it is because “experience” marks the absence of what is “lived”’ (20).

that the anaesthetic of death, experienced aesthetically, is a sensuously apprehended senselessness. The 'I' feels its placeless-ness, its finitude, its unstoppable drift into a future which is emptiness. This, too, is a link to loss, but the loss comes wrapped up in the sensual register of sensory deprivation, and not the sensual register of musically evoked sight.

This is reinforced in the next stanza where death is described as 'on the edge of vision / A small unfocused blur, a standing chill'. Another reminder of the double character or face of death in this poem: death the process that is as unfelt as the passing of life, and death that becomes experience, a thing that appears and overwhelms. It will happen; it is happening. It is the future; it is the future in the present. The 'I' as it speaks in the poem, is the 'self' of this future, the self that exists by virtue of this future. As John Osborne has aptly summed up: 'The death that nihilates selfhood first constructs it. In one of Larkin's more veiled puns, the "Aubade" of the title involves selfhood's morning and (oh, bad) its mourning' (256).

It is true that the diction of Larkin's poem is prosaic, soberly and intently horrified, eloquent of his own fear and no other's; but the 'I' is animated by the fear at a moment 'when we're caught without / People or drink'. That is, in a moment of darkness and solitude, without intoxication but also without day-lit percipience. Furthermore, while the fear of death makes one alone and happens to one as 'one' – I, this, that, will come to an end, and all that is ceded to death in such a moment becomes a 'one', that is, singular and irreplaceable – death does not, cannot, happen to one who is alone in the sense of always having considered himself as one of a kind. As Jean-Luc Nancy writes in *Being Singular Plural*:

Death is the very signature of the 'with': the dead are those who are no longer with and are, at the same time, those who take their places according to an exact measure, an incommensurable measure, of the 'with' ... If it is true, as Heidegger says, that I cannot die in place of the other, then it is also true, and true in the same way, that the other dies insofar as the other is with me and that we are born and die to one another, exposing ourselves to one another and, each time, exposing the inexposable singularity of the origin. (89)

This point is reinforced by the last stanza of the poem. It affirms not so much hope or the lack thereof, but the conditions under which the room and its inhabitant experience the fear and anticipation of death – death in life.

Slowly light strengthens, and the room takes shape.
It stands plain as a wardrobe, what we know,
Have always known, know that we can't escape
Yet can't accept. One side will have to go.
Meanwhile telephones crouch, getting ready to ring
In locked-up offices, and all the uncaring
Intricate rented world begins to rouse.
The sky is white as clay, with no sun.
Work has to be done.
Postmen like doctors go from house to house.
(CP 116)

'Slowly light strengthens, and the room takes shape'; the inside and outside of the confined space of the reflection become apparent. 'It stands as plain as a wardrobe'. Rowe has argued that 'it' is death – 'the arrival of day does not disperse his fears; they still stand in front of him more clearly than what he actually sees' (213). To amend this reading slightly, 'it' stands in front of him, not *more* clearly, but *as* clearly, as what he sees. This does confirm that it was 'really always there'. And 'it' here is not precisely death; it is 'what we know./ Have always known, know that we can't escape, / Yet can't

accept'. And this is death as knowledge of death— and knowledge, too, is compulsion, a kind of fate. Death cannot be escaped, and the knowledge of death, which makes death inescapable in life – ‘Death has just come from the instant it is going to come’ – cannot be wished away, or forgotten, because to forget it is to forget not just the knowledge that ‘I’ will die but the knowledge, ‘virtual as real’, as Derrida says, of what death is. It is what makes me ‘I’ and no other, by making me experience that which makes me a singular, unrepeatable existence. This statement is followed by ‘One side will have to go’, which Rowe remarks is ‘slightly obscure (213). It is clearer if we take the two sides to be ‘can’t escape’ or ‘can’t accept’ – one of these ‘can’ts’ will have to go. Rowe interprets the two sides as ‘death’ and ‘Larkin’, as if they were flip sides of the same coin. Whereas the poem says that either thoughts of acceptance of death or thoughts of escape of death will have to go. But it immediately situates this predicament as taking place while a ‘meanwhile’ is still unfolding. *While* this is happening in a room, while knowledge of death has erupted in a night, while death became present, came alive, and while this knowledge has withstood the light of day, the world has changed around the scene of knowledge. All the images here, the ‘telephones’ the ‘postmen’, the ‘doctors’ that go from ‘house to house’, all are images that connect the room with communications and functions of the outside world. ‘Postmen like doctors’ deliver and collect. Doctors on their morning visits pronounce on the dead and dying; they bring care and communication, take and bring ‘letters of exile’. They are figures of the intricacy, the entangling of the world, messengers to and from room and houses. ‘Work has to be done’ – work perhaps on transforming this world of ‘sky white as clay, with no sun’, the failure Heaney accused the poem of reserved as a task to be carried on in life

after poem; or the work of sending and deciphering messages, of connecting the room where 'it' stands 'plain as a wardrobe' with other houses and others' deaths. Telephones, too, bring voices from elsewhere close; it is not so much that death is banished but that other things are getting ready to come near, to enter and impose. Death is always there, but now death is not alone.

Rowe reads the last stanza as withholding consolation, still withholding it, though time has changed and night has altered to day. Surely, if this were a momentary fear, then it would give way now, allow some image or glimmer of hope. But, instead,

the action of the poem is implied to continue long after the poem is finished. The postmen will continue their task after the poet's death glance has left them, and one has a sense of death gradually spreading itself out through the city and into the countryside beyond. The final stanza's deadly chill seeps out through the membrane of the final line and into our lives. (*Philosophy and Literature* 212)

Rowe is situating his reading against 'hope' and 'optimism' in the face of death. Death is infectious and the postmen are its vectors. This may be the effect the poem has on the reader, on many readers; but the stanza seems to emphasise not so much, or not only, the persistence of nocturnal knowledge into daylight – the moment survives, survives with the 'I', for its knowledge of death is its consciousness of self – as the experience of the moment when death 'flashes afresh' in the 'vast uncaring/ Intricate rented world'. This moment of the approach of death was a *meanwhile*, for the world 'outside' that hadn't stopped existing while he was prey to death.

The likening of postmen to doctors harks back to another of Larkin's poems, 'Days', from *The Whitsun Weddings*:

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 60)

The image of priest and doctor 'running over the field' is comic as the poem's question is wistful; but it finds its counter-echo in the room and the night that are the scene of 'Aubade'. In 'Days' there is a question, a space not limited by a boundary. In 'Aubade', there is enclosure, the question of 'where' is just as urgent but utterly circumscribed. 'Life' is contracted to 'here' and here is a nowhere, not a night that is placed outside day but a night that somehow makes day surround it, leaving it intact. Day comes not to wake 'Larkin' from night but to affirm and continue his wakefulness. The narrator 'lived', in his room in his separate house, at night, when he felt his death come near him, close in on him. And now he will live in day, in work. The doctors that aimlessly run around in the fields in 'Days' go 'from house to house', that is, from one to the other, in this poem. But the aubade, meant to be sung at dawn outside a room to the one inside, is now spoken from the inside outwards. Dawn does not separate anyone, nor did night join anyone, but it does bring the messengers that go between, the doctors and postmen.

There is no 'lightness and sovereign elation' in Larkin's poems, which according to Derrida are the 'only affects' of death survived, if I am right to call that the central experience of 'Aubade'. In my reading the poem does not seep death into the world like a septic wound; nor does it affirm life in inverse proportion to its fear of death, as Kerrigan says. In saying that it illuminates 'death' as a moment within a world of rooms and 'sky white... with no sun', I mean to point out both the continuity of the 'experience' of death in the day that follows the night, and a change, a distinction, between death experienced and other workings of death. The last image is not about hope or lack thereof, but about the link of the death-fearer that waits for the messengers to go 'house to house' and room to room. It is about the linked, qualified isolation of the 'I' who feels death. This lends him a horizon of selfhood, as well as placing this death-fearing self within a world of selves. The presence of these others, seemingly elided in 'Aubade' and perhaps elsewhere in Larkin's poems, is actually a condition of the self's isolation. The knowledge of death, not just in the form of 'unexperienced experience' that I outline above, but in the form of the experience of the 'self' given to a being capable of dying, is nontransferrable. From the singularity of the mortal self, it is not difficult to make the argument for the self-concern of the mortal self, one development of which may be, for example, the liberal-rational ideal of the rightful pursuit of self-interest. But even self-interest is assumed of *mortal* selves, and so necessarily of selves that are other than oneself. Insofar as they are mortal other selves whose own death is unique to them, they have the right to remain free of harm incurred by my actions. The uniqueness of death is central to the idea of the liberal individual.

Larkin's poems, rather than simply affirming or denying a 'community' whose life and death are collective, puzzle over the relation that the dying have to each other, as individuals whose lives are unrepeatable and irreplaceable, and yet whose experience of being irreplaceable is limited to themselves alone. Furthermore, the experience of death is an experience of nothing, which means that it does not manage to relate itself to another. This certainty, the greatest – 'nothing more terrible, nothing more true'—is one that cannot be repeated, verified, made into an object in any way. Death makes a self, but the self is unshareable because of death. As Simon Critchley has said in his study *Very Little... Almost Nothing*:

[Death] is not the object or meaningful fulfilment of an intentional act. Death, or, rather, dying, is by definition ungraspable; it is that which exceeds intentionality and the noetico-noematic correlative structures of phenomenology. There can thus be no phenomenology of dying, because it is a state of affairs about which one could neither have an adequate intention nor find intuitive fulfilment. The ultimate meaning of human finitude is that we cannot find meaningful fulfilment for the finite. (73)

From here Critchley sketches two different attitudes towards this unknowable death.

One, he says, is the Heideggerian one, in which:

To conceive of death as possibility is to conceive of it as *my* possibility; that is, the relation with death is always a relation with *my* death. As Heidegger famously points out in *Sein und Zeit*, my relation with the death of others cannot substitute for my relation with my own death, death is in each case *mine*. In this sense, death is a self-relation or even self-reflection that permits the totality of *Dasein* to be grasped. Death is like a mirror in which I achieve narcissistic self-communion; it is the event in relation to which I am constituted as a subject. Being-towards-death permits the achievement of authentic selfhood, which...

repeats the traditional structure of autarchy or autonomy, allowing the self to assume its fate and the community its destiny. (74)

The other attitude towards death does not see the relation between death and myself as personal destiny; death is not what structures the horizon of life, but the loss of all ability and so of power to orientate oneself towards any horizon of self or other. Death is not *my death* because it marks the loss of subjectivity; in death, *I* lose my ability to think and act, I lose 'I'. The suicide has the power to bring about death, but does not possess the power to *die*, in the present tense. Critchley teases out this strand of thinking about death from Levinas's thought as worked through by Blanchot:

The radicality of the thought of dying in Blanchot is that death becomes impossible and ungraspable. It is metaphenomenological... Dying transgresses the boundaries of the self's jurisdiction. This is why suicide is impossible for Blanchot: I cannot *want* to die, death is not an object of the will. Thus, the thought of the impossibility of death introduces the thought of an encounter with some aspect of experience or some state of affairs that is not reducible to the self and which does not relate or return to self; that is to say, something other. (74)

Derrida has described a moment in Blanchot when he survives his death, leading to 'sovereign elation' (65), the sense of overpowering the ultimate other. Death the unexperience-able, has been experienced. Death and the self become double, always deferred and always accomplished. It will be seen from what I have been saying about Larkin that death in his poems is also survived but without 'elation'; the moment of death presents itself as alien, irrevocably other, but its power remains unmastered even as virtual. The physical process of dying happens even where there is no experience, its happening is the happening of life, its process identical, not to experience, but to living,

which makes the self living out the mortal event beyond knowledge and mastery, imposed from beyond the sphere of intention and desire, and yet intimate. The self in this sense is not artistic creation but necessary for art as its other; it '[d]ulls to distance all that we are' (*CP* 64). This, I would argue, goes some way towards clarifying the dynamic of the self in Larkin's poems, viz., it is for the self that all action is undertaken, for the self's desires, for its fulfilment, to protect its sense of freedom and intactness; but at the same time, the self betrays all the projects undertaken for it by not being its own, by being called into being by a death which is not its faculty or property.

Let us return briefly to the poem 'Money'— money, the equivalent for life and therefore the equivalent for death, is 'all you can have of goods and sex'. It is yours, you can have it; and yet it is not money but money's song that pervades life, suggesting the sense of looking at a 'provincial town' through 'French windows', again an image of alien-ness and otherness, which makes the familiar 'ornate and mad' (*CP* 94). Larkin's poems are like money's song, their tones apparently measured and reasonable, but their echoes and resonances making nil the equivalencies that they speak of.

The same question of repetition and singularity plays out in 'Continuing to Live'.

Continuing to live — that is, repeat
A habit formed to get necessities —
Is nearly always losing, or going without.
It varies.

This loss of interest, hair, and enterprise —
Ah, if the game were poker, yes,
You might discard them, draw a full house!
But it's chess.

And once you have walked the length of your mind, what
You command is clear as a lading-list.
Anything else must not, for you, be thought
To exist.

And what's the profit? Only that, in time,
We half-identify the blind impress
All our behavings bear, may trace it home.
But to confess,

On that green evening when our death begins,
Just what it was, is hardly satisfying,
Since it applied only to one man once,
And that one dying. (*CP* 113-114)

The first line ends in a simultaneous caesura and enjambment. The sentence runs on, but it stops at 'repeat', too. Continuing is repeating. Getting necessities is not a 'habit formed' for the sake of living, but the other way round. Living is repetitions which seek out necessities. And this seeking of necessities is not, as one would imagine, 'instinct', with its pre-programmed connotations of necessity, but a habit. Living is a habit which gives itself the object of necessity. The habit of life' can be broken if the end is renounced. The getting of the necessities is, in another inversion, 'always losing, or doing without'. What profit does this habit of life accrue? The poem's provisional answer is 'self-knowledge' of an incomplete kind: 'half-identify the blind impress / All our behavings bear, may trace it home'; but it immediately questions the value of this knowledge which applies to 'one man once'. Knowledge is by definition repeatable, like life. This unrepeatable life, unshareable knowledge, is sheer repetition. The dying man, the 'one man once', knows his life as impressed blindly upon him by external forces,

and this knowledge is of no use to another – so, strictly speaking, is not even knowledge.

Dying drives the ‘blind impress’ upon him, makes it useless to him.

This, I would argue, is the Larkinian mode of speaking of death – the register of puzzlement that sees the death as both intimate and alien, the self as an other.

‘Ignorance’ hits precisely this note:

Strange to know nothing, never to be sure
Of what is true or right or real,
But forced to qualify *or so I feel*,
Or *Well, it does seem so*:
Someone must know.

Strange to be ignorant of the way things work:
Their skill at finding what they need,
Their sense of shape, and punctual spread of seed,
And willingness to change;
Yes, it is strange,

Even to wear such knowledge - for our flesh
Surrounds us with its own decisions -
And yet spend all our life on imprecisions,
That when we start to die
Have no idea why. (*CP* 67)

There is no first-person speaker in this poem who finds this state of affairs strange, only a ‘their’ and an ‘our’ who feel its effect, and the reference of both pronouns is unclear.

There is, then, no fixed referent for the ‘they’ who possess ‘skill’ and ‘shape’ and ‘willingness to change’: they are humans, ways, things, one or many. ‘Even to wear such knowledge’— wearing, with Larkin, is a measure of nearness and distance; what we wear nearest to us, and yet seems separate, dispensable, capable of divestment without subtraction. This knowledge, even if it is more distant than flesh and more explicable,

leaves its wearers without knowledge of the 'why' of death. The whole poem evades the question of 'whose' ignorance is being spoken of. 'The way things work', 'our flesh' (implying as well the flesh that multiplies), 'imprecision', all have a logic, a momentum internal to them, that that their subjects cannot decipher. In 'Nothing to be Said' this mysterious indifference with which dying continues to advance – yet another instance of its moving back from the yet undetermined moment when it arrives – through the events of human life ('Hours giving evidence /Or birth, advance / On death equally slowly') is held to be either meaningless or meaning-depriving – depending on who receives this message.

And saying so to some
Means nothing; others it leaves
Nothing to be said.
(CP 51)

Others' deaths, the subject of 'The Old Fools', 'Ambulances' and 'The Building', similarly open up vistas of ignorance which are exposed with a surprising contempt and urgency. Especially 'The Old Fools' treats its subjects with a direct hostility which appears to be motivated by the fact that they are old and engrossed in the experience of death: the gap between the death they are living and the death that awaits them is closing fast.

Or do they fancy there's really been no change,
And they've always behaved as if they were crippled or tight,
Or sat through days of thin continuous dreaming

Watching the light move? If they don't (and they can't), it's strange;
Why aren't they screaming?
(CP 81)

What bothers the speaker (and not the observed old people) is how much 'they' understand of their predicament. Their lack of resistance seems to indicate that there has been no real change, at least *for* them; but this *can't* be true, the strength of the speaker's denial revealing his fear. The stanza dealing with the reveries of the old speaks of them as being able to recapture people and places, each '[I]ike a deep loss restored, from known doors turning', in other words, of bridging the gap between here and elsewhere.

...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 81-2)

Absence of self recurs as an achievement in many of Larkin's poems, although ambiguously, whether it is in John's compulsive writing-up of Jill in *Jill* or in 'Larkin's' thrill at seeing a landscape from which he has absented himself; or even in the cherishing of a photograph which leaves its subjects' past self intact for the speaker to relish, her present self being engaged elsewhere ('Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album'). Here absence from self is seen as a continuum with extinction as its 'alp'; the old are so near the peak, almost there, that they do not see its height, but by implication everyone is somewhere on the same gradient. Absence, recapture of loss, is no longer an

achievement of art, but the peaking of everyday unconsciousness in death, 'the solving emptiness / That lies just under all we do'.

...Can they never tell
What is dragging them back, and how it will end? Not at night?
Not when the strangers come? Never, throughout
The whole hideous inverted childhood? Well,
We shall find out.

(CP 82)

The question at the end, as David Trotter says, is 'properly vicious, full of menace', characterising it as an instance of 'where the poet suddenly speaks to us rather than for us' (186). However, the speaking to us of this urgent threat is not perhaps so much a reminder of the common lot but a question about knowledge. Similarly, in 'The Building' the world is the place where 'self-protecting ignorance congeals / To carry life' (CP 85). The question in Larkin's death poem is if death is a continuum of the normal loss of consciousness, the normal striving to be there instead of here, rather than a real change. This is why the old fools are such a subject of fascination – can they, or can they (still) not, answer this question?

There is one poem where Larkin writes about something which approaches a forgetting of death, which means a forgetting of the strangeness of dying all the time. In 'Forget What Did' the speaker charts the course of life after 'stopping the diary' – which is, we recall, the form from which art begins in *Jill*, and also a humanly temporised account of time, unlike the 'celestial occurrences' that take its place at the end of the poem.

Stopping the diary
Was a stun to memory,
Was a blank starting,

One no longer cicatrized

By such Words, such actions
As bleakened waking.

I wanted them over.
Hurried to burial
And looked back on

Like the wars and winters
Missing behind the Windows
of an opaque childhood.

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

Celestial recurrences,
The day the flowers come.
And when the birds go. (*CP* 79)

This stopping of daily record represents a desire to stop the ‘cicatrized’ pain of ‘bleakened waking’ and revert to a blankness in which, presumably, the wound of memory is never healed. Word and the actions they perform knit a protective scar over memory, but what the speaker seems to want is ‘burial’, that is, an accomplished death that no longer temporizes between life and death. Keeping memory alive keeps the remembering one from ‘looking back’: letting the record come to an end makes it possible to make the reference back without linking to a loss. To look back on life and not feel the backward thrust of death, to offer no counter to celestial time by retelling it in words – this, I think, is a more complete death longing than that of ‘Aubade’. After forgetting death the speaker no longer suffers a ‘bleakened waking’ from ‘blankness’. Blankness, then, is the form of the wound. It is significant that the speaker likens the blankness that comes after forgetting to ‘wars and winters / missing behind the Windows / of an opaque childhood’. Childhood is the exemplary place of blankness, unacted and unwritten, which the diary-less life can finally come to approximate.⁷²

⁷² This is another reference in Larkin to childhood in shockingly negative terms: others include the poems ‘Love Again’ (‘...violence / A long way back’ 320); ‘How’ (‘children / With their shallow violent eyes’, 113),

To conclude: Larkin's death poems show death as 'unresting'. It moves back from its place as the terminus of life to meet the death-anticipating human and remind him of the various vestiges of dying in life. In speaking of death, Larkin does present a structuring inevitability to which his poems respond through an acute realisation of mortality which is carried over into daily living as work and as the brutal questioning of other's people's knowledge and ignorance of death. It is a questioning of a life that seems to be locked into itself and so into individuality by death, so that its self-searchings are useless to others, and in which the desire to forget death in the passing of time is a surer sign of death than fearing it. It is this sense of uselessness to others that Larkin brings to his others, his readers, as an address that will surely elicit more than one response, and different responses at different times.

Larkin's 'Aubade' has in one notable instance been referred to in a text that does not see the poem as a testament to death's finality but as a response to finality that makes it possible to meditate on other senses of it. Seamus Heaney has already noted the 'vindictive force' of the adjective 'unresting', employed previously in 'The Trees' 'to revivify'; in 'Aubade', though, in Heaney's memorable words, 'it has the rangy hungry speed and relentlessness of a death hound ... it beats the bounds of our mortality, forcing its borders to shrink farther and farther away from any contact with consoling beliefs' (*Finders Keepers* 324). Julian Barnes in *The Sense of an Ending* also places the unmistakably Larkinian word 'unrest', extracted from a poem about life beginning 'afresh' to 'revivify' death in 'Aubade', both at the beginning and the end of the novel. In the first instance, the unrest is that of boys who do not know how to talk about history, about what happened and why: as one of them says, '[t]here is one line of thought according to which all you can truly say of any historical event is that

'The Old Fools' ('... the whole hideous inverted childhood', 82); and the portrait of the aggressive treatment of a frightened schoolboy in *Jill*, who, as a not much older adult, fixes his sexual fantasies upon a adolescent girl who is still in school.

“something happened” (5). The novel is told by a man whose life is an addendum to various ends that he recounts: the end of a passionate youthful relationship, the end of a close friend’s life by suicide, the end of his marriage and also the end of work through retirement. After all these endings his life seems to have come to a point from which they can be looked back on; it can be narrated as a suspended death. But another death (that of his former lover’s mother) that seems to have very little to do with his own life sets off a train of events that shatters the sense that he has given to his various endings, and makes him revisit his past relationships with a dawning realisation that far from coming to the end of them, he had not even begun to understand them or his own self in them. In short, the endings continue to evolve; death flashes afresh from its place to shake his deathful suspension, and leaves him, though still as mortal as before, in a state of where he can only reiterate that ‘there is great unrest’ (150).

Conclusion

In this dissertation I have tried to read Larkin's work in way that highlights its distance from a version of modernism. This version uses 'form' to delineate a space of meaning in which disparate elements can be signified, and through which they can be decoded into a discursive reading that locates its equivalent (its 'object') in the poem, even if it happens to focus on dissonances and fissures in that object. The popularity of this type of modernist reading in English literary studies is not hard to understand. Literary critical procedures depend on finding what is 'in' the poem. Social meaning, resistance, radical indeterminacy – the fabrication of much literary writing (by which I do not mean to impute falsity) depends on these being figured by the poem, and this fiction has been substantially formed in dialogue with modernism; not least because the establishment of a full-blown 'academic' literary criticism that bases its authority on the literary text coincides with the early twentieth century period when modernism rose to prominence.

Rather than reassert that Larkin's work, too, is formally complex and amenable to modernist readings, I have chosen to emphasise aspects of his work that adumbrate a relation to others that cannot be figured by poems, but that poems can only move or gesture towards. I do not contend that the reader 'completes' the work by reading it, or that he or she simply recognises a relationship that is played out in a 'work', but rather

concentrate on instances in Larkin's work that offer openings for reflection on 'my ... self-relation mediated by the self-relation of the other' (75), as Gillian Rose has put it, which is always partly unknown, secret, amenable to being changed, in turn, by change in the other, in modes that range from suggestion to aggression but are not predictable. John Kemp begins to create a fictional girl out of the depths of self-absorption and social isolation, but the more he imagines her into existence, the more unknown she becomes, until he identifies a 'real girl' he meets in a bookshop, without a shadow of doubt, as his imaginary love-object. He meets what is in his head 'outside'; a product of autonomous self-fictionalisation appears as another human being, but it acquires its own reality and its own alterity in reappearing as another. I have tried to show that this movement can be detected in other places in Larkin's work. So Larkin's idiosyncratic 'pleasure principle', which bears little relation with Freud's, at first blush appears to be a complacent assertion that the reader should stick to what he knows; but it can be read differently as a recognition that no one is really content with just knowing, and, by extension, no one is content with the knowing work that lays claim to be the sole centre of agency, which promises to impart knowledge on condition that it is read as the possessor of a meaning which the 'serious' reader may re-enact in agreement with certain agreed-upon protocols of reading. Larkin's position implies that in the invitation to please herself or himself the reader can discern the promise of going beyond both what he or she knows and what the work 'knows', because reading investigates without fixing the gap between response and the work -- or investigates the otherness of the reader himself or herself to the work, as well as the otherness to himself or herself that the work can reveal to the reader. In this exchange, the literary objects that occasion 'pleasure' are in a sense anonymous and

passive, because they suffer a radical exposure to others in the process of relating and changing to themselves and the world around them. But then, readers undergo a similar exposure to works. Larkin indicates the possibility that art offered him (and by implication, other readers) a way of being different from himself; whether or not he managed to achieve self-difference through his work, the imprint of this desire is eloquent in it.

This way of speaking, however, can become identified with pessimism about what literature can do, or rather, what it can't do. It may seem that literature can do nothing for us; our participation in the rituals of learning to read through the no doubt valuable conventions that exist in the academy, and in communities that share these protocols of reading, can seem futile. Larkin's work, I think, should at least make us aware of the risk of futility, but I do not think that this is the only thing that it offers. One way in which it can contribute to the debate about the politics of art is to make us think differently about critical procedures that use the poem to map the political efficacy of lyric address. That lyric poetry is not unworldly, disinterested and politically neutral is an idea that that has been reiterated by many critics.⁷³ But criticisms that use Larkin's work to show that the lyrical voice is not one that communes with itself and is overheard by others, but can be equated with a particular social meaning (as in, for instance, Tom Paulin's 'Into the Heart Of Englishness') have given way to those that acknowledge that the lyrical voice does have a relation with others, but use it as the key to decipher it and

⁷³ For a revisiting of the history of Romantic lyricism in the twentieth century, see Sarah Zimmerman's *Romanticism, Lyricism and History*, chapter one. Two recent works which touch on the history of and possibilities of lyric writing are Robert von Halberg's *Lyric Powers* and William Waters' *Poetry's Touch: On Lyric Address*.

so to discover how the lyrical composition represents this relation with the other. So Natalie Pollard writes in *Speaking to You: Contemporary Poetry and Lyric Address* (2012), that Larkin's

you is part of an implied 'us'. The audience is hailed as one of his kind ... *I* speaks for us, in a shared verbal currency and a set of easily acknowledged, common values: the poem brooks no dissent. Larkin's speaker addresses us as a persona he hopes we will recognise as an ordinary chap, a companionable everyman[.] 32

Pollard uses this reading of Larkin's addressive stance, once again, to make a generalisation about the 'Movement' poem and, further, about poems that want to free themselves of 'the political':

... certain poems, often in the Movement vein, create a relationship with you that appears, for some reason, to free itself from the political. The everyday, unacademic poet makes out to be 'one of us', his address innocent of pretension or conceit, and of concealed highbrow manipulations of 'difficult' writing ... Part of the problem with Larkin's rejection of difficulty is that it paradoxically ends up distorting lived experience. Difficulty is also a part of the ordinary public world; a part of our daily verbal and social struggle with others. In barring this from the public space, a poem falsely suggests that quotidian language is 'really' straightforward and transparent. The poet cannot be straightforwardly at one with his addressee, as if art were a mere vehicle for sharing meanings with a *you*. Rather, *I* and *you* engage in confused, confusing, and sometimes hostile relations. (33, 34)

This comment is important because it shows that at a moment when the claims of address are being acknowledged, they are at the same time being neutralised by reading the address as wholly accessible from a reading of the poem itself. The quest for 'confused... hostile relations' still restricts Pollard to a dialogue between the poem and

an implied 'you' which must be read from within the poem, 'immanently'. The absence of 'difficulty' – the benchmark for truth to experience – is read familiarly as enabling a straightforward presentation of the 'I', the 'persona' that becomes 'at one' with its addressee by doing nothing to complicate or disrupt the relationship *in the poem itself*. I do not wish to underestimate the force of this conundrum, to which most literary writing (including mine) is vulnerable, even if it seeks to escape it. However, the political corollary of limiting the social meaning and addressive stance of Larkin's poems in this way is not, as Pollard says, the renewed establishment of lyric address as a 'far from private contact [but] embedded in the *polis*. Poetic address is public action, engaging in, and taking shape from, a shared history of voicings resounding in contemporary discourse' (34). It gestures, rather, towards the wish to discover politics from within formally delineated spaces for which the poem serves as a model. Hostility and confusion are found to be immanent to the poem; they are voiced there and read there, and the reality of social change is similarly immanently discovered in the poem, even if be in the form of Adornian non-reconciliation.

A different politics of the poem would call for the reader who wants to change the world rather than interpreting it to realise that the world also changes him or her, and that this mobile relation that allows for the virtual exchange of role of agent from work to self and vice versa, changing both in the process, is insufficiently captured by giving poetic address the status of an action with a definite source and efficacy. A different kind of politics would involve a different gesture: that of paying attention to how the poem addresses the reader and the reader addresses the poem as two heterogeneous movements that do not always unite and can be intermittent, that may be separated by

time and cannot always be graphed on the other's grid. Paul Celan recognises this clearly in 'The Meridian' when he says that the 'the poem becomes -- under what conditions -- the poem of a person who still perceives, still turns towards phenomena, addressing and questioning them. The poem becomes conversation, often desperate conversation. Only the space of this conversation can establish what is addressed, can gather into a "you" around a naming and speaking I.' But, in addition to the space of the 'I' that allows the gathering and establishing of a 'you', he points to the *other* presence of the other, that which remains heterogeneous to the I's address and which address *also* opens up: '... this you, come about by dint of being named and addressed, brings its otherness into the present. Even in the here and now of the poem – and the poem has only this one, unique, momentary present – even in this immediacy and nearness, the otherness gives voice to what is most its own: its time' (*Selections* 165). Acknowledging the heterogeneity of the other that address gestures towards but cannot represent would involve acknowledging that critical or readerly performance, even in the act of paying the closest attention to the poem, can recognise the poem's otherness to its own procedures. At the same time, a poem strikes readers with the force of address because it speaks to them not necessarily about what they are in agreement with, but about what they do not necessarily know about themselves but nevertheless speaks to them with urgency. As Monique David-Ménard says:

... unknown aspects constitute us but we have no direct access to them. We only discover them as ours – often in situations of revolt and contestation – because it is this particular 'object' and not another which arouses our passion. The effect of contingency turns here upon the way that a certain revelation of yourself can

only come from the other, the other who crystallises that aspect of yourself that eludes you. (145)

It is not necessary for this to happen that the work itself be passionate, or politically committed, or indeed even difficult enough to enable the mimetic positing of a response that is similarly complex. It is not necessary, indeed, that there be any response. But if a reader or critic chooses to voice a response, then what is being called ‘the poem’s address’ would form part of a story he thinks the poem read for or as ‘form’ seems to be telling, which intersects unpredictably with one he is telling himself about the poem, and power would ideally be located neither in the reader nor in the work. As Jacques Rancière has said, such a gesture of reading would not want to ‘transform representation into presence and passivity into activity[;] it proposes instead to revoke the privilege of vitality and communitarian power ... so as to restore it to an equal power with the telling of a story, the reading of a book, or the gaze focused on the image’ (*The Emancipated Spectator* 22). This amendment to how address is read, which makes performativity important and yet not performative solely of the poem, remains one which is underexplored in literary studies; to investigate what sort of readings it can give rise to, and identify instances of readings that already show an awareness of it in their theory and practice, is, I would suggest, a prospect that holds both interest and promise.

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