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THE EXISTENTIAL CONCEPTS OF TIME, DEATH, AND CHOICE
IN THE POETRY OF PHILIP LARKIN

THESIS

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By

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This thesis examines time, death, and choice in Philip Larkin's poetry, arguing that his approach to these themes is not deterministic, but existential. The argument is based on the similarity between Larkin's views and those of three existential philosophers. Larkin's view of time, like Heidegger's, is that men live not in long stretches of time, but in processions of unconnected yet similar moments. A constant underlying sadness, like Kierkegaard's despair, makes each moment reminiscent of death. Like Sartre, Larkin finds meaning in his choices, and struggles to live authentically without expectation. Although Thomas Hardy influenced Larkin, given these similarities, Larkin's poetry cannot rightly be called deterministic. It is an attempt to preserve experience for its own sake.

L.P.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

It could be argued that all poetry is existential, but Philip Larkin's poetry is existential in a special sense. It is derived from his own experience, but throughout his four volumes of highly personal poetry, some similarities to the philosophies of Heidegger, Kierkegaard, and Sartre are easily discernable.

Like Heidegger, Larkin places important emphasis on time. Man exists in time and he himself is time (4, p. 461). Stressing the newness of each moment, Larkin distrusts the past because its meaning is altered by the present; and he is reluctant to contemplate the future because to do so would be to attempt to determine existence before it happens, before it truly can be known. Larkin believes that spontaneous, original existence takes place only in the present.

We can understand the brevity of time only when we understand that our lives are finite, that we are going to die. Like Kierkegaard, Larkin dwells on the experience of anguish. The underlying despair found in so many of his poems is a constant reminder of death. Larkin's despair serves the same purpose as Kierkegaard's despair, for it points to a truth,

a reality to be grasped (9, p. 338). Because Larkin's despair is a reminder of death, it leads to nothingness, a "desire for oblivion," (8) as it does in Heidegger (4, p. 462).

Larkin is not a Christian existentialist; he is an atheist. Believing in no God, no afterlife, and no assurance that a given action is good or evil, Larkin finds meaning in his life through his choices. Although he sees life's absurdity, like Sartre he accepts full responsibility for his choices (10, p. 291;2, 14), both because they define who he is, and also because he realizes their importance in his struggle with them. He examines his bachelorhood and his quiet, conventional life with great attention to the meanings and the consequences of his decisions. Because he has chosen honestly, he can accept his existence, for though his life seems ordinary, it is original.

This thesis is a study of existentialism in Larkin's poetry, but the question of existence is also significantly the final concern of both his novels. In Jill, John Kemp, the young Oxford scholar who suffers from pneumonia at the end of his first year at college, looks at the blowing trees from his hospital room and does some painful thinking:

For what could it matter? Let him take this course, or this course, but still, behind the mind, on some other level, the way he had rejected was being simultaneously worked out and the same conclusion was being reached. What did it matter which road he took if they both led to the same place? He looked at the tree-tops in the wind. What control could he hope to have over the maddened surface of things (7, p. 243)?

Larkin's statement of his struggle with choices first appears in Jill. John Kemp's question is left unanswered, but its importance is heavily implied, for it forms the inconclusive conclusion of the novel. The answer to the question that Larkin raises in Jill is found in the poems, for in them he comes to terms with the idea that all roads lead to the same place, and he finds final justification for his choices.

The view of time found in Larkin's poems is also found in A Girl in Winter. Snowflakes fall like seconds as Katherine, a foreign girl living in England, and Robin, an Englishman whom she first came to visit there, sleep. In the last paragraph of the novel Larkin describes the fate of dreams:

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 all knowledge, the heart, the will, and all that made for protest could at last sleep (6, p. 248).

The continuousness of time, part of the intrinsic order of nature, offers hope, for when unfulfilled dreams pass, disappointments become dull. New moments of time keep blighted dreams from remaining fresh. As seconds tick by, adversities are given new meaning. This lets us sleep.

These two brief hints of existentialism in Larkin's novels anticipate its greater importance in his poetry. But critics of his poetry have often misunderstood its meaning. Many of them comment on the importance of common, personal experience in Larkin's work (1, p. 156; 11, p. 50; 16, p. 347). They

most often label him as a movement poet who is a "pessimist" (2, p. 14) or a "pacifist" (12, p. 303). M. L. Rosenthal has combined these descriptions: he calls Larkin a man who "finds squalor in his own spirit and fears to liberate himself from it" (13, p. 458). Larkin has even been called a "nihilist" (5, p. 146). But no one has studied the familiar emotions and events that Larkin so intricately details and called him an existentialist. Critics think he is quite the opposite.

Philip Gardner summarizes what is most often said about Larkin:

More recently, instead of praising Larkin's manner, critics have commented adversely on his matter, more particularly on his concern with humdrum "scenes from provincial life," his wariness of commitment to love or marriage, and his pessimistic awareness of the passage of time and the decay of human hopes. They wonder how much his melancholy is conditioned by a willed narrowness of experience: the key phrases are "Little Englandism of the Left" and "lack of nobility" (3, p. 88).

Gardner believes that Larkin is "unable to make the romantic gesture of commitment described in 'Places, Loved Ones' as an abrogation of free choice," He calls choice in Larkin "one of our illusions," and calls Larkin himself a "determinist" (3, p. 97).

But Larkin's own comments indicate that he is not a determinist who is afraid of committing himself. He writes poetry to convey his commitment to his own experience. Timms quotes Larkin from Enright's Poets of the 1950's:

I write poems to preserve things I have seen/thought/
felt (if I may so indicate a composite and complex

experience) both for myself and for others though I feel that my prime responsibility is to experience itself which I am trying to keep from oblivion for its own sake (15, p. 60).

Because Larkin feels that experience is moving towards oblivion, he urgently communicates the precious brevity of each instant. This pattern in his thinking and its similarity to the thoughts of established existential thinkers make an examination of Larkin's own existentialism necessary for a correct understanding of his poetry.

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CHAPTER II

TIME

Philip Larkin's view of time is one of the strongest indications of his existentialism. Larkin advocates a moment by moment existence that is continuously beginning. In "Is it for now or for always" Larkin breaks time down so that the long, difficult stretches that make up "always" become conceivable and livable. To love for always is to love moment by moment:

Shine out, my sudden angel,
Break fear with breast and brow,
I take you now and for always,
For always is always now.
(8, ll. 9-12)

Larkin lives existentially. For him life is an instantaneous experience in which "always" can be brief and continuous at the same time. Because large blocks of time can be broken down into more understandable pieces, life becomes less complicated and, in some ways, less frightening.

In "This is the first thing" Larkin defines time existentially:

This is the first thing
I have understood
Time is the echo of an axe
Within a wood.

The echo of the axe is an unmistakable reminder of the fragile

nature of time. In this poem Larkin gives us a startling picture of his continual awareness of death. Larkin is defining time by death: the axe is killing time. Each moment becomes part of the past, never to be an immediate reality again. But because time is characterized by its closeness to death, it becomes more precious. The echo of the axe marks time in a way that accentuates each moment; the ongoing sound, being heard over and over again as if for the first time, emphasizes the newness and the separate significance of each brief instant.

The echoing effect of time is evident in the language of several other Larkin poems. In "Days," he describes days, giving them the same fresh quality as the sound of the axe within the wood: "They come, they wake us/Time and time over" (4, ll. 3,4). For Larkin reality is in the present. Each day we confront our freedom when we realize that our futures are unmade. In "The Trees," the new beginnings in nature give us a picture of how we should live. The message that the trees whisper through the wind is remarkably reminiscent of the echoing axe: "Last year is dead, they seem to say,/Begin afresh, afresh, afresh" (15, ll. 11,12).

In "Going" Larkin gives evening the same character as each brief instant marked by the axe. Each evening is new, and one cannot be like another; each one reminds us of the promise of mornings to come, but this particular evening comes mysteriously: it is a reminder of death.

There is an evening coming in
 Across the fields, one never seen before
 That lights no lamps.

(6, ll. 1-3)

In "Morning has spread again" morning comes into the world
 much like evening:

Morning has spread again
 Through every street,
 And we are strange again;

(12, ll. 1-3)

Morning is so distinctive, so new, that because of it even
 familiar old lovers have to re-establish their relationship
 each day. Larkin closes the poem with the same emphasis on
 the moment that is found in the beginning lines:

Now, watching the red east expand,
 I wonder love can have already set
 In dreams, when we've not met
 More times than I can number in one hand.

(12, ll. 14-16)

In "Whatever Happened?" Larkin again reminds us of the
 new beginning that each day brings:

. . . Remembering each detail
 We toss for half the night, but find the next day
 All's kodak-distant. Easily, then (though pale),

'Perspective brings significance,' we say
 Unhooding our photometers, and snap!
 What can't be printed can be thrown away.

(18, ll. 4-9)

New days make the events of our lives as clear as photographs:
 we can look at how the events relate to one another, but we
 can also view them separately, objectively. Because of the
 instantaneousness of time, our lives can be placed in "per-
 spective." The torments of one day become the disregarded

thoughts of another. The past is assimilated into the present.

In "Winter" the bleak season is a metaphor for a time when Larkin's thoughts and memories torment him. The changes in the imaginary faces represent the changes that the new moments bring. In the first stanza Larkin describes his thoughts:

My thoughts are children
With uneasy faces
That awake and rise
Beneath running skies
From buried places.
(19, ll. 7-11)

As the poem continues Larkin's thoughts become more confused: "memory unlooses/Its brooch of faces--" (19, ll. 20,21). Desperate, dead passion torments him until his thoughts collide: "And shriveled men stand/Crowding like thistles/To one fruitless place" (19, ll. 25-27); but as in "Whatever Happened?" (18) Larkin finds fresh consolation in the possibility of new beginnings. In the third stanza of "Winter" he writes:

Yet still the miracles
Exhume in each face
Strong silken seed,
That to the static
Gold winter sun throws back
Endless and cloudless pride.
(19, ll. 28-33)

Larkin's "endless and cloudless pride" comes from an existential kind of courage, a courage that depends on the belief that a new moment can bring hope, "strong, silken seed," fresh life.

It is these continual, moment by moment changes that make life's possibilities limitless and man's choices boundless;

and because a young man's choices are largely unmade, Larkin associates the time of greatest existential freedom with youth. In "How Distant" Larkin writes of young men who are departing or staying in one place, men who are making their own roads. "This is being young," he says:

Assumption of the startled century

Like new store clothes
The huge decisions printed out by feet
Inventing where they tread,
The random windows conjuring a street.
(7, ll. 19-24)

These young men have a startling kind of freedom; they can pass any windows at random and invent their own roads as they choose.

In "First Sight" Larkin describes newly born lambs who have created no roads. The lambs, a metaphor for all who are young, are just learning to walk, "newly stumbling" (5, l. 5) in a hostile world. They cannot know how they will create their existence. They are unaware of the infinite possibilities that surround them:

As they wait beside the ewe,
Her fleeces wetly caked, there lies
Hidden round them, waiting too,
Earth's immeasurable surprise.
(5, ll. 8-11)

"Earth's immeasurable surprise" is the sequence of unknown circumstances that make for the seemingly boundless choices any new life is faced with; freedom to choose is too awesome to be comprehended at "first sight." But for Larkin, ignorance of this freedom of choice is necessary, for the freedom these

lambs have is a "terrible freedom": it is "hidden" so that the lambs might be protected until they can begin to make choices and, in doing so, control it.

Because earth's surprise is immeasurable, it is also incomprehensible. Larkin writes that the lambs "could not grasp it if they knew,/What so soon will wake and grow/Utterly unlike snow" (5, ll. 12-14). Ignorance is not only a protection, it is also a logical consequence, for the finite lambs (like finite men) live in a world of infinite, and therefore unknowable (hidden) possibilities.

Larkin associates the brief glimpse of the infinite with youth because very quickly the young will "wake and grow"; their lives will begin to take shape. Once this happens they will begin to make choices that will limit their possibilities. Then the quickly passing moments of blank, undecided freedom can only be recaptured in moments of memory and unexpected flashes of past feelings.

In "MCMXIV" Larkin recalls strings of memories that very likely come from his youth. In the first three stanzas he may be trying to see the world through youthful, innocent eyes. Perhaps this is why the images are uncolored, uninterpreted; they are only strung together, placed beside one another at random as if to be seen objectively for the first time:

And the shut shops, the bleached
Established names on the sunblinds,
The farthings and sovereigns,
And the dark-clothed children at play
Called after kings and queens,

The tin advertisements
 For cocoa and twist, and the pubs
 Wide open all day;

(11, ll. 9-16)

The solemn conclusion of the poem explains why these images cannot be colored or interpreted, why they cannot be totally recaptured:

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.

(11, ll. 25-32)

The images are written down at random because Larkin is trying to portray them innocently. Even in this last stanza, two images are strung together as if without forethought. The images are recorded as they would be if a child was seeing them: they are free of the complicated intellectual process that would color and limit them with adult expectation. But in this poem, as in "Winter," (19) Larkin distrusts memory. The "tidy gardens" and the "thousands of marriages" hint at a child-like perception only in the larger than life description indicated in their exaggerated numbers. Like the marriages, Larkin's attempt to recapture innocence lasts "a little while longer," but the final line places these images in perspective and colors them with the present: "Never such innocence again." The images are not the same as they once were: each moment exists individually and none can be recaptured or relived.

In "Bad As a Mile" Larkin tries to recapture the past:

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
 (2)

In the poem time winds backwards: Larkin is grasping for the clean moment before any failure became reality, the moment before the apple missed the basket. Larkin goes back "earlier and earlier" into time in an attempt to recapture the moment of freedom and innocence that his lambs experience in "First Sight" (5), but his attempt is intentionally contrived and only imaginary: this apple has missed the basket. The moment of uncertainty and freedom that Larkin writes about in this poem can only be experienced in a moment that is separate from the moment he is trying to describe. He needs another apple and another try at the basket.

In "Love Songs in Age" (10), "Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album" (9), and "Coming" (3) Larkin is reminded of his past in sudden, unexpected bursts. But these glimpses of the past are not fresh, as were the original moments: they are colored by the experiences that have followed them. In "Love Songs in Age" a woman is reminded of a tiny moment of her youth when she finds some old pieces of sheet music and hears the love songs she has kept:

She found them, looking for something else, and stood
 Relearning how each frank, submissive chord
 Had ushered in
 Word after sprawling hyphenated word,
 And the unfailing sense of being young
 Spread out like a spring-woken tree, wherein
 That hidden freshness, sung,
 That certainty of time laid up in store
 As when she played them first. . . .
 (10, 11. 8-16)

The woman does feel as though she is reliving her past for a moment, but the love songs she is hearing sound different, for they are heard "in age." As the title emphasizes, the moment that the woman experiences is separate from the one that she remembers. She is reminded of the naive, all-satisfying love that the songs once promised her, but the poem ends acknowledging the experiences that have made up the present, the experiences that put past experiences into perspective. Knowing that love is not what the songs had promised, the woman is forced to admit her romantic delusions as she puts them back:

To pile them back, to cry,
 Was hard, without lamely admitting how
 It had not done so then, and could not now.
 (10, 11. 22-24)

But for Larkin memories of the past are not always completely sad; they can be pleasantly preserved. In "Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album," Larkin again distrusts the past; he doubts his first impression, that the pictures he looks at are empirical realities, and concludes that they might be "just the past":

. . . Those flowers, that gate,
 These misty parks and motors, lacerate

Simply by being over; you
Contract my heart by looking out of date.

Yes, true; but in the end, surely, we cry
Not only at exclusion, but because
It leaves us free to cry. We know what was
Won't call on us to justify
Our grief, however hard we yowl across

The gap from eye to page.
(9, ll. 27-36)

The moments recorded in the photographs do bring some sadness; they do "lacerate," but the tears that come of the wound are not evidence of the power of the past, they are evidence of freedom. We are "free to cry" because we needn't "justify our grief." We mourn "without chance of consequence" (9, l. 37).

In the concluding stanza, Larkin's pictures of the past are untouchable moments of memory that are protected and preserved although they cannot be recaptured:

In short, a past that no one can share;
No matter whose your future; calm and dry,
It [the picture] holds you like a heaven, and you lie
Invariably lovely there,
Smaller and clearer as the years go by.
(9, ll. 41-45)

In "Coming" the advent of spring surprises Larkin, and he is unexpectedly overwhelmed by a feeling reminiscent of his childhood:

It will be spring soon,
It will be spring soon--
And I, whose childhood
Is a forgotten boredom,
Feel like a child
Who comes on a scene
Of adult reconciling
And can understand nothing
But the unusual laughter
And starts to be happy.
(3, ll. 10-19)

The moments in the poem that resemble the past, like the poignant remembrances in "Loves Songs in Age" (10), are colored by the present. In "Coming" (3) Larkin is always aware of his age: he is never lost in his childhood: he is an older man who feels "like a child."

In "Sad Steps" Larkin says in a seemingly definitive manner what his other poems so elegantly express. While looking out a window at night on his way back to bed, he looks up at the sky and observes that

The hardness and brightness and the plain
Far-reaching singleness of that wide stare

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

(14, ll. 14-18)

In "Age" Larkin writes of what it has meant to lose his youth. In the first line he says that his age has "fallen like white swaddling" (1). But the tone of the poem is not remorseful: Larkin is describing a condition, stating a fact. His age "becomes an inhabited cloud" (1, l. 3), a cloud perhaps inhabited by the choices he has made, the people he has known, the way he has lived. In the next few lines, Larkin gives an impressionistic glimpse of the business of his life: "I bend closer, discern/A lighted tenement scuttling with voices" (1, ll. 3,4). But in the remaining lines Larkin describes a calmer life, a life characterized by what his age has taught him:

O you tall game I tired myself with joining!
 Now I wade through like knee-level weeds,

And they attend me, dear translucent bergs:
 Silence and space. By now so much has flown
 From the nest here of my head that I needs must turn
 To know what prints I leave, whether of feet,
 Or spoor of pads, or a bird's adept splay.

(1, ll. 5-11)

Larkin once tired himself by trying to join all of the events of his life together, but his existential view of life has given him freedom--the past now has no power over him. The once insurmountable weeds are now "knee-level." Larkin no longer fears the future: the once ominous bergs are now "translucent." Larkin has learned to make choices without regret. He is constantly looking forward, and he must willfully turn around to look back ("I needs must turn/To know what prints I leave,"). Larkin is free from self-consciousness. Age has given him the unworried confidence of birds and animals.

In "Reference Back" Larkin's comments on time are existential:

Truly, though our element is time,
 We are not suited to long perspectives
 Open at each instant of our lives.

(13, ll. 16-18)

Like Heidegger, Larkin believes that we exist in time, even that we are time, and that in time there is freedom. But in "Reference Back" he implies that youth's boundless freedom is lost with good reason, for the freedom to look too far ahead is as dangerous as the tendency to regret one's choices when looking back. Larkin warns against this tendency in the last

four lines of the poem:

They [the long perspectives] 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.
 (13, ll. 19-22)

It is perhaps in "Triple Time" that Larkin most intentionally presents a soundly existential view of time:

This empty street, this sky to blandness scoured,
 This air, a little indistinct with autumn
 Like a reflection, constitute the present--
 A time traditionally soured,
 A time unrecommended by event.

But equally they make up something else:
 This is the future furthest childhood saw
 Between long houses, under travelling skies,
 Heard in contending bells--
 An air lambent with adult enterprise,

And on another day will be the past,
 A valley cropped by fat neglected chances
 That we insensately forbore to fleece.
 On this we blame our last
 Threadbare perspectives, seasonal decrease.
 (17)

In the first two stanzas Larkin puts the present in future tense. He describes the present with brief, instantaneous impressions in the first stanza; then in the second stanza he speaks deliberately of the future. In the third stanza Larkin is no longer concentrating on the future as future; he is looking ahead even further to the time when the future becomes past. Time in stanza three is not spreading out endlessly; it is finite, momentary. In this last stanza, Larkin's view of time is the most far-reaching, for he is describing the progression towards death, "seasonal decrease," the moment

when every event has passed and we take a last longing glimpse at our lives.

Because Larkin writes "we blame our last/Threadbare perspectives," this poem could easily be read as a poem of regret, a poem overpowered by the past. But in the last few lines Larkin is giving quick impressions of death, just as he gives quick impressions of the present in the first few lines. He is describing the past as it will briefly look at the moment of death. Larkin is honest about the human tendency to regret; he does not avoid it; he confronts it, not in anguish, but in acceptance. The last phrase of the poem seems added almost as an afterthought. Death is natural, something to be expected, simply a "seasonal decrease." Larkin is not a bitter man who regrets his life; he is an existentialist in love with time, quite naturally looking back over every moment that he has lived, wondering if he has made the right choices.

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CHAPTER III

DEATH

Larkin's poetry is true to his experience. In it he recalls his exact, almost photographic impressions of ordinary life. There is joy, irony, struggle and resolution, but there is also a constant anguish that colors each impression. This underlying despair in much of Larkin's poetry is existential. It is not caused by anything he can identify: it is a result of his acute awareness of death, an awareness that forces him to acknowledge life's uncertainty. Death and despair are not always linked in Larkin's poetry, but they are remarkably similar: despair, inspired by his awareness of death, is a part of all that Larkin experiences, but its cause is beyond what he can see and understand. Hopelessness and an aching reminder of death make Larkin's poetry poignant, for they make passing moments infinitely precious.

In an ironic poem called "Nursery Tale," Larkin makes a close connection between his constant despair and death:

So every journey I begin foretells
A weariness of daybreak, spread
With carrion kisses, carrion farewells.
(8, ll. 14-16)

Every journey is uncertain and therefore characterized by a dread of the unknown. Larkin's continual dread, his misery,

is his way of anticipating and confronting death: the "weariness of daybreak" is "spread/With carrion kisses, carrion farewells." Larkin's despair comes from his awareness of death. Even kisses and farewells are vile and deathlike.

In "Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel" this invisible agony becomes a part of concrete reality:

Through open doors the dining-room declares
A larger loneliness of knives and glass
And silence laid like carpet.

(4, ll. 4-6)

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.

(4, ll. 10-14)

The knives, the writing paper, even the hotel itself become carriers of constant anguish. They are concrete, but they are reminders of a part of existence that though abstract and incomprehensible is real. In the last two lines of the poem, Larkin makes a connection between the isolation he feels and death (night), so it is clear that this constant, lonely awareness in Larkin's poetry is often intended to foreshadow death.

In "Talking in Bed" an ordinary situation is characterized by the same despair, the same feeling of isolation.

Talking in bed ought to be easiest,
Lying together there goes back so far,
An emblem of two people being honest.

Yet more and more time passes silently.
Outside, the wind's incomplete unrest

Builds and disperses clouds about the sky,
 And the 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.
 (10)

The tone of the poem is despondent: "time passes silently," the restless wind "disperses clouds;" the dark towns are "heaped" (no single one of them matters), and all of visible reality is indifferent ("None of this cares for us"). Inside, at "a unique distance from isolation," isolation exists: communication is difficult and broken; right words cannot be found.

In "Climbing the hill within the deafening wind," Larkin is sorrowful after he realizes the exuberant beauty of nature:

How to recall such music, when the street
 Darkens. Among the rain and stone places
 I find an ancient sadness falling,
 Only hurrying and troubled faces,
 The walking of girls' vulnerable feet,
 The heart in its own endless silence kneeling.
 (2, ll. 9-14)

Larkin suffers deeply and writes with poignant awareness. Sorrow is ever-present in his surrounding, a part of simple, everyday tasks, and a part of Larkin's more dramatic perceptions of life. It colors Larkin's whole existence.

In "Wants" (12) and in "Going" (5), Larkin tries to give substance to his constant distress, but it remains invisible and mysterious:

Wants

Beyond all this, the wish to be alone:
 However the sky grows dark with invitation-cards
 However we follow the printed directions of sex
 However the family is photographed under the flagstaff--
 Beyond all this, the wish to be alone.

Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs:
 Despite the artful tensions of the calendar,
 The life insurance, the tabled fertility rites,
 The costly aversion of the eyes from death--
 Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs.

(12)

In "Wants" Larkin contrasts the reality of despair with more immediately recognizable realities. The invitation cards, sex, family pictures, crowded calendars, life insurance, sex again, and finally denial of death are all acknowledged parts of life that he hopes can mask his misery; but in this poem Larkin is saying that however hard we try not to acknowledge it, a deep, mental suffering is a genuine part of existence. In "Wants" Larkin approaches this agony indirectly--he writes around it; and when he writes of his futile attempt to avoid it, he makes it somehow painfully understandable.

In "Going" Larkin imagines himself dead, but though he approaches death directly, his description of it is heavy and problematical.

There is an evening coming in
 Across the fields, one never seen before,
 That lights no lamps.

Silken it seems at a distance, yet
 When it is drawn up over the knees and breast
 It brings no comfort.

Where has the tree gone, that locked
 Earth to sky? What is under my hands,

That I cannot feel? .

What loads my hands down?
(5)

Death unhinges the realities that we more willingly acknowledge. It causes us anguish. It forces its way into our awareness because it unravels our expectations: though the evening seems like a silver blanket, it "brings no comfort." Even the security of earth and the sky is deceptive: they unlock, and all of fragile existence comes undone. Death is all that is left. Larkin is aware of something "under his hands" that he "cannot feel." Perhaps he is imagining his own burial. Perhaps it is dirt that loads his hands down. In any case death is a cause for despair, a constant reminder that all we know is mutable.

In "Cut Grass" Larkin describes grass that is ready to die:

Cut grass lies frail:
Brief is the breath
Mown stalks exhale.
(3, ll. 1-3)

The grass is "frail," and its death seems long, for it begins to die the moment it begins to grow:

Long, long the death
It dies in the white hours
Of young-leafed June
(3, ll. 4-6)

Larkin goes on to describe the grass as a "high-builded cloud/
Moving at a summer's pace." (10, ll. 11,12). Death is the unseen reality in the hot, slow moving summer air.

In "Nothing To Be Said," men are as helpless as the cut grass when they are faced with death. They too begin dying the moment they are born:

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

So are their separate ways
 Of building, benediction,
 Measuring love and money
 Ways of slow dying.
 The day spent hunting pig
 Or holding a garden party,

Hours giving evidence
 Or birth, advance
 On death equally slowly.
 And saying so to some
 Means nothing; others it leaves
 Nothing to be said.

(7)

For Larkin, death, like despair, is long and expected, a harsh fact that colors every moment of life.

In "Ambulances" (1), Larkin's awareness of death is more personal, but the relationship between death and time is the same as in "Nothing to Be Said" (7): death is the futhermost moment of Larkin's future, and when the common sight of an ambulance makes death's presence seem visible, Larkin is reminded that his life is uncertain, his future unknowable:

. . . Far
 From the exchange of love to lie
 Unreachable inside a room
 The traffic parts to let go by
 Brings closer what is left to come,
 And dulls to distance all we are.

(1, ll. 25-30)

Even youth, as strong and confident as it appears, should not overlook the harsh presence of death. The young "counterfeit eternity." They live as if they will never die, so Larkin believes that one should consider his own death early in life:

XXIX

Pour away that youth
That overflows the heart
Into hair and mouth;
Take the grave's part,
Tell the bone's truth.

Throw away that youth
That jewel in the head
That bronze in the breath;
Walk with the dead
For fear of death.

(9)

When Larkin advises youth to "Walk with the dead/For fear of death," he is making a concise statement of his own philosophy: because death is ominous and fearful, to walk with it is to exist with a constant awareness of it and therefore to live realistically, without the illusion that vitality and strength are ageless.

Larkin observes that even unseen realities are dying. In "Heaviest of flowers, the head" he describes the death of memory:

And all the memories that best
Run back beyond this season of unrest
Shall lie upon the earth
That gave them birth.
Like fallen apples, they will lose
Their sweetness at the bruise
And then decay.

(6, ll. 8-14)

Larkin's distrust of memories of the past is well founded,

for not only does time change their meaning, but they die completely: their decay reminds us that nothing tangible or intangible survives.

In "The Building" Larkin describes a place much like a hospital (though this identity is never definite). In the poem Larkin sets up a powerful contrast: for those outside the building, life is characterized by a "self-protecting ignorance" (11, l. 48) that "collapses" if they enter the building, a place where death is keenly realized. "The Building" is one of Larkin's most existential poems: each moment time is seen as both fragile and significant because death is constantly present. Larkin describes the morbid anticipation of each person living in the building:

. . . See the time,
 And these picked out of it; see, as they climb
 To their appointed levels, how their eyes
 Go to each other, guessing; on the way
 Someone's wheeled past, in washed-to-rags ward clothes:
 They see him too. They're quiet. To realize
 This new thing held in common makes them quiet,
 For past these doors are rooms, and rooms past those,
 And more rooms yet, each one further off

And harder to return from; and who knows
 Which he will see and when?

(11, ll. 26-37)

People in this building are acutely aware of the uncertainty of life because they live in the presence of death every moment. They are forced to live existentially while people on the outside are protected by the freshness of their environment. They are not as close to reality as the former.

The somber, yet frightening tone of the poem and the power of Larkin's concluding stanza indicate his strong belief that everyone must realize that he is going to die. People outside live comfortably, but the false security of more pleasant surroundings collapses for all of them if they are "called to the corridors" (18, l. 50) of the building:

. . . Each gets up and goes
 At last. Some will be out by lunch, or four;
 Others, not knowing it, have come to join
 The unseen congregations whose white rows
 Lie set apart above--women, men;
 Old, young; crude facets of the only coin

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

With wasteful, weak, propitiatory flowers.

(11, ll. 51-64)

In this piece, perhaps more markedly than in any other of Larkin's poems, death is the most awesome reality of life--any effort to ward it off is lame or useless: the flowers are "weak" and "wasteful."

Those inside the building are attempting to transcend death; they are trying to imagine an uncertainty beyond the certainty that they will die; for unless they can do this, they have no hope. To "struggle to transcend/The thought of dying," to guess at the uncertainty beyond death is the only hope Larkin can point to.

Death is the great clarifier that gives every moment of life significance. The constant undercurrent of despair that characterizes much of Larkin's representation of life is born of a continuous awareness of our final though uncertain reality, death.

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CHAPTER IV

CHOICE

The existential thought which forms the logical framework in Larkin's poetry is easily discernible. For him, death is life's only certainty. There is no God to define a morality, to give good or bad connotations to choices, to people, or to events. So life is a painful absurdity, for without God, or hope of an afterlife, whatever is done is necessarily absurd. Since we all must die, nothing can be meaningful: from a cosmic point of view, everything is meaningless. Whatever meaning we find in life must therefore be created by men when they make choices. Choice is life-giving, for choosing is creating. There is no human being, there is instead human becoming, and this implies the importance of time, for men's choices are made continuously, and choices are like time in that they are momentary and unconnected. Human becoming also implies the importance of freedom, for men who are creating themselves in a valueless world must accept nothing that determines meaning for them: existential freedom is the freedom to create both value and meaning in a world devoid of both.

Larkin's "Church Going," for example, though not a religious poem, does present a kind of religion, the religion

of a man who believes that a church is void of any comfort,
yet represents man's need to hope and search for it:

Once I am sure there's nothing going on
I step inside, letting the door thud shut.
Another church: matting, seats, and stone
And little books; sprawlings of flowers, cut
For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff
Up at the holy end; the small, neat organ;
And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,
Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off
My cycle clips in awkward reverence,
Move forward, run my hand around the font.
(2, ll. 1-10)

Larkin observes most prominently that there is "a tense, musty, unignorable silence." For him this silence implies that there is no life here, but the quest for it speaks from that silence. In the next few stanzas he speculates about what will be done with the relic-filled churches such as the one he has entered, since "supersition, like belief, must die" (2, l. 34). Truly the church is vanishing in all respects: even the shape of the physical church is becoming "less recognizable each week," its purpose "more obscure" (2, ll. 37-8). Larkin wonders who will be the last to visit churches. He wonders if churches will become like museums, yet he is surprised at the effect this church has on him. In spite of his bewilderment, he "often stops at churches" (2, l. 11), and he is pleased to stand in the silence that this church offers (2, l. 54). So in the conclusion of the poem, he synthesizes the external facts of church going as he understands them, and his own perplexing response:

A serious house on a serious earth it is,
 In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
 Are recognized, and robed as destinies.
 And that much never can be obsolete,
 Since someone will forever be surprising
 A hunger in himself to be more serious,
 And gravitating with it to this ground,
 Which he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,
 If only that so many dead lie round.

(2, 11. 55-63)

For Larkin, church going does not come about because of a love for God or because of a belief in Him. It expresses a puzzling compulsion to find truth that must be recognized and acted on. It is not God; rather, it is this curious desire in man that keeps a tiny flicker of life in the death-filled church; for because such drives in men have life, they can "never be obsolete" (2, l. 58).

Because Larkin cannot affirm that there is a God, he can find no absolute values by which to judge good or evil. Consequently, all of life seems absurd, and common events become ridiculous. But he most angrily attacks the meaninglessness of ordinary life in "Vers de Societe:"

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

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

Straight into nothingness by being filled
 With forks and faces, rather than repaid

Under a lamp, hearing the noise of the wind,
 And looking out to see the moon thinned
 To an air-sharpened blade.
 A life, and yet how sternly it's instilled

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

Virtue is social. Are then, these routines

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

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

(13)

Larkin finds futility in filling each evening "with forks and faces," so he decides to decline the dinner invitation. But his alternative to the empty, chattering company he would endure at the Warlock-Williams' house offers no relief. It is hard to be alone, and although Larkin is as attracted to silence in "Vers de Societe," as he is in "Church Going," he resigns himself to the vacant experience of it. With God gone and no one to talk to, solitude is only a poignant reminder of the continual hopelessness that colors all of life ("And sitting by a lamp more often brings/Not peace, but other things") (13, ll. 33-4). For this reason society firmly declares that "All solitude is selfish" (13, l. 19). But

Larkin attacks this platitude: in "Vers de Societe" to face the void requires courage. To be alone is somehow more authentic. Alone, one cannot run from oneself. People seek each other's company to escape themselves. They tell themselves that "virtue is social," and they spend their lives acting out the boring, insincere routines that keeping each other's company demands. When Larkin graciously accepts the inane dinner invitation, he accepts meaninglessness and calls attention to the overwhelming absurdity of life, a fact he can do little about.

If there is meaning in life, Larkin can find it only in the choices he makes. He takes responsibility for them, and in so doing he becomes a creator; he is making himself. In "Mr. Bleaney," he writes that "how we live measures our own nature" (5, l. 25). So Larkin's agonizing preoccupation with choice is understandable, because for him choice is existence itself.

This is why choice is unique, often melodramatic, and always vitally important in Larkin's poetry. In "Poetry of Departures" choices are strongly accentuated. Larkin italicizes them, giving them a powerful, intentionally melodramatic quality:

He chucked up everything
And just cleared off
 (9, ll. 3,4)

He walked out on the whole crowd
 (9, l. 17)

Then she undid her dress
(9, 1. 19)

Take that you bastard
(9, 1. 20)

All of these are energetic choices that change the meaning of existence the very second they are made, and for that reason they are melodramatic. Larkin emphasizes these choices because they give form and shape to life. In the moment it takes to make a single choice, a new present is created and the future altered from what it would have been.

When the lines are read in their context, they point out Larkin's struggle: he feels incapacitated, he is overpowered by the amazing significance of these choices, yet, like Kierkegaard, he suffers the agony of choice since every choice excludes another. He implies that all choice is futile and that these melodramatic choices are oversimple and will lead one back to where one began:

Sometimes you hear, fifth-hand,
As epitaph:
He chucked up everything
And just cleared off,
And always the voice will sound
Certain you approve
This audacious, purifying,
Elemental move.

And they are right, I think.
We all hate home
And having to be there:
I detest my room,
Its specially chosen junk,
The good books, the good bed,
And my life in perfect order:
So to hear it said

He walked out on the whole crowd
 Leaves me flushed and stirred,
 Like Then she undid her dress
 Or Take that you Bastard;
 Surely I can if he did?
 And that helps me to stay
 Sober and industrious
 But I'd go today,
 Yes swagger the nut-strewn roads,
 Crouch in the fo'c'sle
 Stubby with goodness if
 It weren't so artificial,
 Such a deliberate step backwards
 To create an object:
 Books; china; a life
 Reprehensibly perfect.

(9)

Larkin detests the "artificial" quality of his own existence--his room, its "specially chosen junk," the "good books," the "good bed," a perfectly ordered life. However, he stays "sober and industrious" hoping that he might be capable of more dramatic choices ("Surely I can, if he did?"). But the question mark indicates that Larkin is not sure if he can "chuck up everything." The freedom and the responsibility involved in choice are overwhelming because he realizes that a choice could change his life instantly. Even though he feels that he is ordinary, Larkin favors an unpredictable life: a life created artificially is "reprehensible" because it is a determined life that lacks the spontaneous quality that existentialism demands. And yet even those who "swagger the nut-strewn roads" have to bear life's built-in tedium. Their melodramatic attempts at new beginnings bring them full circle in the same way that more conventional choices would. So their lives can be "artificial" too, despite vivacious,

authentic appearances. Larkin is struggling with freedom's inevitable limitations.

In "A Study of Reading Habits" (1) Larkin is writing from the viewpoint of himself as an older man, so the tone of the poem is somewhat regretful, but the choices are melodramatic as in "Poetry of Departures" (9):

When getting my nose in a book
Cured most things short of school,
It was worth ruining my eyes
To know I could still keep cool,
And deal out the old right hook
To dirty dogs twice my size.

Later, with inch-thick specs,
Evil was just my lark:
Me and my cloak and fangs
Had ripping times in the dark.
The women I clubbed with sex!
I broke them up like meringues.

Don't read much now: the dude
Who lets the girl down before
The hero arrives, the chap
Who's yellow and keeps the store,
Seem far too familiar. Get stewed:
Books are a load of crap.

(1)

Choice incapacitates Larkin, so he retreats into fiction because reading offers a vicarious solution to his problem: he can escape his own identity when he assumes the identity of characters in books. Fiction offers him a certainty that reality cannot assure him. In "Study of Reading Habits" Larkin is saying that the passion of the man who creates characters that can "keep cool" and "deal out the old right hook" is the same as the passion of the man who looks for certainty in the hollow solitude of a church. Both want a way of making sense

out of life. But the church brings no comfort, and Larkin recognizes clearly that even fiction cannot fill this void, for the difference between fiction and life unmistakably shows that art feeds on our absurd longing for truth, for justice, for a hero who arrives just in time. Real men fail and feel the consequences, and so any comfort books offer is insubstantial--it disappears as we experience each new disappointment. In light of each shattering experience, the books themselves seem absurd, and this is why Larkin abandons them.

When he rejects the books he has fled to for years, he makes a daring choice, for what could be more dramatic than for the librarian at the University of Hull to write "Get stewed/Books are a load of crap" (1, l. 18)? Larkin accepts the dullness of reality so that he can come to terms with existence as it is.

In "I see a girl dragged by the wrists," (4) Larkin watches a spirited girl with two men in a heavy snow. The field of snow is "dazzling" (4, l. 2), and the girl "laughs and struggles, and pretends to fight" (4, l. 12). But Larkin chooses not to join them. Instead he watches without jealousy or regret:

And still I have no regret;
 Nothing so wild, nothing so glad as she
 Rears up in me,
 And would not, though I watched an hour yet.

So I walk on. Perhaps what I desired
 --That long and sickly hope, someday to be
 As she is--gave a flicker and expired;
 For the first time I'm content to see
 What poor mortar and bricks
 I have to build with, knowing that I can

Never in seventy years be more a man
 Than now--a sack of meal upon two sticks.
 (4, ll. 13-24)

Larkin chooses to take no action and merely to look on at those who live more compelling lives. He says he is made of different stuff, that he lacks the energy of the girl in the snow. Yet in spite of this conclusion, he does have a trace of her spirit:

So I walk on. And yet the first brick's laid.
 Else how should two old ragged men
 Clearing the drifts with shovels and a spade
 Bring up my mind to fever pitch again?
 How should they sweep the girl clean from my heart,
 With no more done
 Than to stand coughing in the sun,
 Than to stoop and shovel snow onto a cart?

The beauty dries my throat.
 Now they express
 All that's content to wear a worn-out coat,
 All actions done in patient hopelessness,
 All that ignores the silences of death,
 Thinking no further than the hand can hold,
 All that grows old,
 Yet works on uselessly with shortened breath.

Damn all explanatory rhymes!
 To be that girl!--but that's impossible;
 For me the task's to learn the many times
 When I must stoop, and throw a shovelful:
 (4, ll. 25-44)

Even the powerful moment when Larkin realizes that he does wish that he could be like the reckless girl is not enough to change his perception that he must live a calmer life. Larkin struggles with the choice to live an ordinary life or an extraordinary one because he realizes its significance. He wants to make choices that show power, but ultimately he realizes that quiet choices too create life. Though they lack

flamboyance, they have the same impact; they are equally a part of existence:

I must repeat until I live the fact
 That everything's remade
 With shovel and spade;
 That each dull day and each despairing act

Builds up the crags from which the spirit leaps
 --The beast most innocent
 That is so fabulous it never sleeps;
 If I can keep against all argument
 Such image of a snow-white unicorn,
 Then as I pray it may for sanctuary
 Descend at last to me,
 And put into my hand its golden horn.
 (4, ll. 45-56)

The image of the girl in the snow gives us a precise idea of the strenuous, physical life that Larkin sometimes envies. But though Larkin's life is not as energetic as the girl's, it is a life lived existentially. Out of "each dull day and each despairing act" Larkin creates his life and his art. When "the spirit leaps" in Larkin, it is the spirit of creation, art itself. And though Larkin is not undomesticated like the girl he watches, the beast in him "is so fabulous it never sleeps." The dull, repetitive events, so characteristic of Larkin's experience are significant because they give him the only possible material out of which he can make art. Even though the moments he preserves in poetry will change with time, by preserving them he is calling attention to their fragile and extraordinary quality. His art is evidence that he has taken responsibility for each perception, each experience.

Larkin's struggle with choice, his rejection of romantic, melodramatic choices, and his final acceptance of how he lives culminate in "Toads" (11) and "Toads Revisited" (12), for in these poems Larkin blatantly questions his decision to lead an ordinary working life and then accepts it. "Toads" begins with his question:

Why should I let the toad work
 Squat on my life?
 Can't I use my wit as a pitchfork
 And drive the brute off?
 (11, ll. 1-4)

His tone is desperate in the second stanza. He is a man in a rage:

Six days a week it soils
 With its sickening poison--
 Just for paying a few bills!
 That's out of proportion.
 (11, ll. 5-8)

But in the third stanza Larkin's irony is evident in his humorous catalogue of those who don't work. They are the lazy people who "live on their wits:/lecturers, lispers,/losels, loblolly-men, louts" (11, ll. 9-11). All of these men are losers who don't do particularly well, but "don't end up as paupers" (11, l. 12). Larkin's unflattering description implies the uselessness of their lives.

In stanza six Larkin continues the joke: he uses proper rhyme and melodrama because these are the best devices that he has to communicate the foolishness he sees in the lives of these people and in any momentary desire to be like them:

Ah, were I courageous enough
 To shout Stuff your pension:
 But I know all too well, that's the stuff
 That dreams are made on:

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

And will never allow me to blarney
 My way to getting
 The fame and the girl and the money
 All at one sitting.

(11, ll. 21-32)

Larkin justifies his tedious, plodding, routine life in "Toads," for the exciting life he says he desires is a caricature. He does want a less ordinary life, but his tone is evidence of his understanding that although those who appear to get "the fame and the girl and the money" may do so, they too must live with their choices. The concluding stanza is pseudo-philosophical (probably intentionally so), but it shows Larkin's tolerance for both of the ways of life he describes:

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.

(11, ll. 33-36)

In "Toads Revisited" (12) Larkin answers the question that he asked in the first stanza of "Toads": (11) he finds the reason that he works when he describes the lives of those who don't work in an existential context instead of a romantic one: their lives are not peaceful, but meaningless, absurd:

Walking around in the park
 Should feel better than work:
 The lake, the sunshine,
 The grass to lie on,

Blurred playground noises
 Beyond black-stockinged nurses--
 Not a bad place to be.
 Yet it doesn't suit me,

Being one of the men
 You meet in an afternoon:
 Palsied old step-takers,
 Hare-eyed clerks with the jitters,

Waxed-fleshed out-patients
 Still vague from accidents,
 And characters in long coats
 Deep in the litter-baskets--

All dodging the toad work
 By being stupid or weak.
 Think of being them!
 Hearing the hours chime,

Watching the bread delivered,
 The sun by clouds covered,
 The children going home;
 Think of being them,

Thinking over their failures
 By some bed of lobelias,
 Nowhere to go but indoors,
 No friends but empty chairs--
 (12, ll. 1-28)

When Larkin describes those who are "dodging the toad work" as "stupid or weak" he is not downgrading them; he is writing about the despairing consequences of the choices they have made. They are the opposite of the lucky few who can "blarney their way" to a pleasurable existence. They have nothing to do, nothing to distract them; so they spend their lives "turning over their failures." They have "nowhere to go but indoors,/no friends but empty chairs--."

Larkin sees that even a loafer's life is sad and nonsensical and no less absurd than any other, and this is why he

can justify his own decision to lead a working life. But he does not choose a working life only because it is as good or bad as any other kind of life; he implies that those who don't work are trying to disguise life's monotony, and that by working, he is acknowledging a part of reality that they too experience but are afraid to admit. His is the more responsible choice, an affirmation of experience as it is:

No give me my in-tray
 My loaf-haired secretary,
 My shall-I-keep-the-call-in-Sir:
 What else can I answer,

When the lights come on at four
 At the end of another year?
 Give me your arm old toad:
 Help me down Cemetery Road.
 (13, ll. 29-36)

Although work leads to death, it gives life its only real meaning. Those who work actively face life's absurdity daily. They are not cowards, quietists, or escapists.

In "Self's the Man" (10) Larkin explores the idea that the single unmarried life is basically selfish (just as he attacked the idea that "All solitude is selfish" in "Vers de Societe") (13). Arnold, the married man, does appear less selfish than Larkin, but in the last few stanzas, Larkin explains that because each man is concerned with creating his own existence, each is equally selfish. He defends the individual's right to a personal choice because each man must choose. In each distinctive case, "self's the man:"

To compare his life and mine
 Makes me feel like a swine:

Oh, no one can deny
That Arnold is less selfish than I.

But wait, not so fast:
Is there such a contrast?
He was out for his own ends
Not just pleasing his friends;

And if it was such a mistake
He still did it for his own sake,
Playing his own game.
So he and I are the same.

Only I'm the better hand
At knowing what I can stand
Without sending a van--
Or suppose I can.

(10, 11. 17-32)

Larkin believes that though he and Arnold have made different choices, they both have chosen well, for both men are choosing for their own sake. But he implies that he is superior to Arnold because he is making the more difficult choice. His choice does not get society's approval so easily. It is more authentic.

Larkin reaches a similar conclusion in "Dockery and Son" (3). Here he attacks another popular idea, that progeny increases one. Dockery accepts the idea, but for Larkin, having a son means "dilution" (3, l. 35). Larkin concludes that the choices of all men are equally valid because each man is responsible for his own decisions and because all life is the same. Children cannot offer salvation from the common fate:

Convinced he was he should be added to!
Why did he think adding meant increase?
To me it was dilution. Where do these
Innate assumptions come from? Not from what
We think truest, or most want to do:
Those warp tight-shut, like doors. They're more a style

Our lives bring with them: habit for a while,
Suddenly they harden into all we've got

And how we got it; looked back on, they rear
Like sand-clouds, thick and close, embodying
For Dockery a son, for me nothing,
Nothing with all a son's harsh patronage.
Life is first a boredom, then fear.
Whether or not we use it, it goes,
And leaves what something hidden from us chose,
And age, and then the only end of age.
(3, ll. 33-48)

Larkin does not acknowledge any of the absolute moral standards that guide men in their actions. He says that our assumptions make one alternative seem more attractive than another. Larkin writes about choices in the same way that he writes about moments of time: both are invisible and fleeting, and the meaning of both is constantly changing. Our assumptions change the meaning of our choices. They soon "harden into all we've got"; then suddenly they become the "something hidden" that made us choose as we did. In the end this undetermined something (perhaps temperament or circumstance) and age and death are all we have.

In "No Road" Larkin describes the kind of existence he most desires:

To watch the world come up like a cold sun,
Rewarding others is my liberty.
Not to prevent it is my will's fulfilment.
Willing it, my ailment.
(7, ll. 15-18)

Larkin wants to accept life on its own terms, not only for himself, but for others. He understands that other people are in the world just as he is. Their purpose is to exist,

to define themselves, and he has no desire to interfere with that. His liberty comes from his universal understanding of existence, his own and that of others.

"Not to prevent" ongoing existence is his "will's fulfillment." So for Larkin to will means to accept, not to prefer. Larkin's only expectation is that his life will go on until death. He acknowledges his responsibility to choose, but he also acknowledges that he has little control over the whole of life and, consequently, little control over what his choices will come to mean. So to interfere with life, to try to manipulate it in order to make it fit a predetermined desire is the kind of expectant willing that becomes "an ailment."

In "Places, Loved Ones" Larkin makes his strongest statement about man's responsibility to choose. Not to choose but to wish instead that life would fall neatly and conveniently into place is to avoid an authentic existence. But to accept choice, to actively acknowledge life's uncertainty, is to accept life with toughness and optimistic realism:

No, I have never found
 The place where I could say
This is my proper ground,
Here I shall stay;
 Nor met that special one
 Who has an instant claim
 On everything I own
 Down to my name;

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

You off irrevocably,
 So that it's not your fault
 Should the town turn dreary,
 The girl a dolt.

Yet, having missed them, you're
 Bound, none the less, to act
 As if what you settled for
 Mashed you, in fact;
 And wiser to keep away
 From the thinking you still might trace
 Uncalled for to this day
 Your person, your place.
 (8)

To look for "proper ground" and a "special one" is to deny existential freedom and to prefer a determined or even a fated existence instead. Larkin favors an existence that is unencumbered by such entangling wishes. Because he believes that we have no real way of defining what is best, he points out that "your person," "your place" soon becomes "what you settled for," and this is why the courage to make choices and to accept their consequences is so vitally important. This is why Larkin's problematical attempt to justify his own inclinations is necessary, for it is only when Larkin can accept his decisions and the responsibility for them that he can accept his existential freedom. And with an acceptance of existential freedom, choice becomes action, life itself.

"Next, Please" is probably Larkin's definitive statement about existence. It is his credo. In it he describes how to live with the somber knowledge of death and the unpredictability of life:

Always too eager for the future, we
 Pick up bad habits of expectancy.

Something is always approaching; every day
Till then we say,

Watching from a bluff the tiny, clear,
 Sparkling armada of promises draw near.
 How slow they are! And how much time they waste,
 Refusing to make haste!

Yet still they leave us holding wretched stalks
 Of disappointment, for, though nothing balks
 Each big approach, leaning with brasswork prinked,
 Each rope distinct,

Flagged, and the figurehead with its golden tits
 Arching our way, it never anchors; it's
 No sooner present than it turns to past.
 Right to the last

We think each one will heave to and unload
 All good into our lives, all we are owed
 For waiting so devoutly and so long.
 But we are wrong:

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

(6)

The calm, indifferent ships drifting through the ocean form a "sparkling armada," Larkin's metaphor for our idle hopes and wishes. The ships sparkle because of what we expect them to bring and not because of what they hold. Their glittering appearance comes from the mist in our eyes, a fresh dew that gives evidence of our naivete, our false hope in the good we so mistakenly think we deserve. If the "sparkling armada" seems to promise us anything, it is only because we have imagined that the promise exists. We have determined for ourselves what the ships contain although we can see them only from a distance. Our "bad habits of expectancy" have no connection with reality and are doomed to end in disappointment.

Larkin is saying that a person who waits for his ship to come in misses the boat. The ships move heedlessly with no regard for human wishes. Expectation only complicates existence. Only if we free ourselves of fanciful wishes and accept the inevitability of death (the one ship certain to come for us), can we become more than disappointed people who spend their time waiting and watching life unravel their desires.

Larkin's seemingly pessimistic poem is really an optimistic challenge to live existentially, to free ourselves of expectation, and to live in accordance with the quick fluctuations of life, for an understanding of life's propulsive quality is the basis for freedom and for our consequent acceptance of choice, our only way of creating our lives and giving them meaning.

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CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Larkin's existentialism is clearly inseparable from his poetry. Even if he has not read Heidegger, Sartre, or Kierkegaard, given his dates (1922-) it is unlikely that he was not aware of the developments in existential thought in the late 40's and 50's. The Less Deceived, the first volume in which Larkin truly trusts his own perceptions and considers them valid subjects for his poems, was published in 1955, a time when existentialism was prominent in European thought.

At that time, Larkin was associated with Kingsley Amis, Donald Davie, and other writers who formed a group that was eventually called 'the Movement.' All of the Movement writers came from "professional middle class backgrounds" (9, p. 3), but other than a work ethic of sorts, they had no common ideology. Thom Gunn, for example, is an existential thinker, and he might have influenced Larkin, but Elizabeth Jennings was a Roman Catholic. Realism, or at least a revolt against Romanticism, was perhaps the only unifying characteristic of these poets, and this disposition was possibly what encouraged Larkin's interest in the poetry of Thomas Hardy.

In the preface to the North Ship, Larkin speaks of Yeats' influence on his early work and of his later decision to abandon Yeats for Hardy:

When reaction [to Yeats's influence] came, it was undramatic, complete, and permanent. In early 1946 I had some new digs in which the bedroom faced east, so that the sun woke me inconveniently early. I used to read. One book I had at my bedside was the little blue Chosen Poems of Thomas Hardy: Hardy I knew as a novelist, but as regards his verse I shared Lytton Strachey's verdict that 'the gloom is not even relieved by a little elegance of diction'. This opinion did not last long; if I were asked to date its disappearance, I should guess it was the morning I first read 'Thoughts of Phena At News of Her Death'. Many years later, Vernon [Watkins] surprised me by saying that Dylan Thomas had admired Hardy above all poets of this century. 'He thought Yeats was the greatest by miles', he said. 'But Hardy was his favorite' (6, p. 10).

Unlike Yeats, Hardy wrote without professing a mystical awareness of what he saw. He understood his experience empirically; even his language is so natural that it often becomes rough and, in places, clumsy. But it was from Hardy that Larkin learned to say exactly what he meant; for after the North Ship, Larkin's most Yeatsian volume, Larkin demonstrates more regularly the same ability that Hardy had to be objectively clear.

Larkin's own comments about Hardy's work are illuminating:

When Hardy says that a bower is 'roof-wrecked,' I don't know whether 'roof-wrecked' is thought to be quaint but it means precisely that a roof is wrecked. It's a kind of telescoping of a couple of images. I think people are a little unfair to Hardy in that. He can often be extremely direct. 'I should go with them in the gloom hoping it might be so.' 'Not a line of her writing have I, not a thread of her hair.' Donne couldn't be more direct than that (5, p. 111).

Though Larkin's language is more graceful, he learned his "directness," his uncompromising precision, from Hardy.

But Hardy's influence goes beyond the use of direct language. Hardy gave Larkin the confidence to trust his own experience:

. . . it happened that I had Hardy's own selection of his poems, and I was immediately struck by them. I was struck by their tunefulness and their feeling, and the sense that here was somebody writing about things that I was beginning to feel myself. I don't think Hardy, as a poet, is a poet for young people. I know it sounds ridiculous to say that I wasn't young at 25 or 26, but at least I was beginning to find out what life was all about, and that's precisely what I found in Hardy. In other words, I'm saying that what I like about him primarily is his temperament and the way he sees life. He's not a transcendental writer, he's not a Yeats, he's not an Eliot; his subjects are men, the life of men, time, the passing of time, love, the fading of love (5, p. 111).

Larkin's partiality for Hardy came out of an admiration of "his temperament and the way he sees life," and this may be the primary encouragement for Larkin's existentialism. Hardy was describing life as he saw it and experienced it, and Larkin does the same.

The two poets draw many of the same conclusions about life, but Larkin uses Hardy's philosophical position merely as a point of departure. Hardy was a naturalist. He held the deterministic view that man is helpless in a chaotic universe and that nature is amoral and predatory. Hardy acknowledged a God, but his God was the cruel "Immanent Will" who prepared an iceberg to "mate" with the Titanic in his

famous poem, "Convergence of the Twain" (1, pp. 306-7, ll. 18-21). Hardy believed that men were at the mercy of an evil God who could be known only through the disastrous natural forces that He used to shape men's very lives. Hardy therefore concluded that men were destined to lead desperate lives that would end in oblivion.

Like Hardy, Larkin acknowledges life's overwhelming despair, and he too believes that life will end in oblivion, that men even "desire" oblivion--"Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs" (7, l. 6). But Larkin's philosophy departs from Hardy's here. Larkin acknowledges cruel forces in the world, the traps layed for us that we cannot see that he describes in "Myxomatosis" (4). But Larkin is not a determinist, he is an atheist; and although he believes that men cannot escape life's terrible absurdity in a world where values are uncertain, he is not as pessimistic as Hardy. He cannot accept Hardy's view that men have no choice, that they are at the mercy of a "Crass Causality that obstructs sun and rain" (1, p. 9, l. 11). Larkin finds meaning in the choices men make. He declares that "how we live measures our own nature" (3, l. 25). Like many men of his generation, Larkin is an existentialist.

Both Hardy's influence on Larkin, and Larkin's consequent development become clear when Hardy's "Thoughts of Phena" (1) is compared with Larkin's "I Remember, I Remember" (2), for in these pieces, both poets examine the popular and sentimental fallacy about memories. In both poems, experiences and memories

are presented honestly. Hardy admits an inability to remember, and Larkin admits some lapses and some memories that are all too painful.

Hardy's "Thoughts of Phena" is an untraditional poem made of broken recollections of a woman who has just died:

Not a line of her writing have I,
 Not a thread of her hair,
 No mark of her late times as dame in her dwelling, whereby
 I may picture her there;
 And in vain do I urge my unsight
 To conceive my lost prize
 At her close, whom I knew when her dreams were upbrimming with light
 And with laughter her eyes.

What scenes spread around her last days,
 Sad, shining, or dim?
 Did her gifts and compassions enray or enarch her sweet ways
 With an aureate nimb?
 Or did life light decline from her years,
 And mischances control
 Her full day-star; unease or regret, or foreboding, or fears
 Disenable her soul?

Thus I do but the phantom retain
 Of the maiden of yore
 As my relic; yet haply the best of her--fined in my brain
 It may be the more
 That no line of her writing have I,
 Nor a thread of her hair,
 No mark of her late time as dame in her dwelling, whereby
 I may picture her there.

(1, p. 62)

Hardy has no clear recollection of Phena, and he says so. When he hears of her death, he puts down unromantic guesses about what she must have seen and felt just as they come to him, and his lack of concreteness echoes the physical losses of the woman herself. Hardy's recollections are vague because they are honest and intentionally unsentimental.

In "I Remember, I Remember" Larkin too creates a poem out of very unlikely material. As he passes Coventry he sees no solid reminders of his childhood, but he is reminded of the constant unhappiness of growing up:

Coming up England by a different line
 For once, early in the cold new year,
 We stopped, and watching men with number-plates
 Sprint down the platform to familiar gates,
 'Why Coventry!' I exclaimed. 'I was born here.'

I leant far out, and squinnied for a sign
 That this was still the town that had been 'mine'
 So long, but found I wasn't even clear
 Which side was which. From where those cycle crates
 Were standing, had we annually departed

For all those family hols? . . . A whistle went:
 Things moved. I sat back, staring at my boots.
 'Was that,' my friend smiled, 'where you "have your roots"?'
 No, only where my childhood was unspent,
 I wanted to retort, just where I started:

By now I've got the whole place clearly charted
 Our garden, first: where I did not invent
 Blinding theologies of flowers and fruits,
 And wasn't spoken to by an old hat.
 And here we have that splendid family

I never ran to when I got depressed,
 The boys all biceps and the girls all chest,
 Their comic Ford, their farm where I could be
 'Really myself'. I'll show you, come to that,
 The bracken where I never trembling sat,

Determined to go through with it; where she
 Lay back, and 'all became a burning mist'.
 And, in those offices, my doggerel
 Was not set up in blunt ten-point, nor read
 By a distinguished cousin of the mayor,

Who didn't call and tell my father There
Before us, had we the gift to see ahead--
 'You look as if you wished the place in Hell,'
 My friend said, 'judging from your face.' 'Oh well,
 I suppose it's not the place's fault,' I said.

'Nothing, like something, happens anywhere.'

The similarities in these two poems are striking. Both poets use simple language: Larkin does throughout "I Remember, I Remember," and Hardy does sporadically in lines like the one Larkin himself referred to in his remarks about Hardy's ability to use direct language: "Not a line of her writing have I,/ Not a thread of her hair." Though Hardy's language is quaint in places--"dame in her dwelling," "maiden of yore"--(1, p. 62, l. 3 and l. 19), it is honest and innovative in other places. Hardy's "And in vain I do urge my unsight" (1, l. 5) is somewhat like Larkin's "No, only where my childhood was unspent" (2, l. 14). Both poets also use casual abbreviations: Larkin writes "family hols" (2, l. 11), and Hardy writes "aureate nimb" (1, l.13). This more natural language is less characteristic of the poems in the North Ship than of the poems in Larkin's other volumes, beginning with the Less Deceived (the volume containing "I Remember, I Remember"). So these developments may be credited in large part to Hardy's profound effect on Larkin.

But the two poets are most alike in approach to subject matter, and this is the most important similarity. Both poets write from personal experience, but neither has any solid reminders of his subject, just memory, lapses of memory, and honesty. Hardy has no tangible reminder of Phena, and Larkin is not sure which side of Coventry he is on. These inexact remembrances are true to life, and both men create poems from them.

Both poets are unsentimental. Hardy admits in the first few lines of the poem that he hasn't a lock of hair, a piece of writing, or any way to imagine Phena when "her dreams were upbrimming with light" (1, ll. 1, 2, and 7). He keeps "the best of her" in mind (1, p. 62, l. 20), but he repeats these lines to close the poem and to remind himself that he has nothing tangible from Phena, and that unlike tangible objects, "the best of her" will fade. But it is in the second stanza that he is the most unsentimental. He asks two questions about the scenes surrounding Phena's last days. He wonders first if her "gifts and compassions" will "enarch" her "sweet ways" with a golden halo-like cloud (1, ll. 12,13). But then he wonders if "mischances" controlled "her full day-star" (1, ll. 15, 16), and this seems more likely since it is the naturalistic explanation for death.

Larkin is equally unsentimental in "I Remember, I Remember," but his attack on the commonly accepted notions about memories goes beyond naturalistic explanations to existential ones. In "I Remember, I Remember" Larkin portrays his childhood truthfully. It was ordinary. There were no remarkable signs or incidents to foretell the remarkable poet:

And ,in those offices, my doggerel
Was not set up in blunt ten-point, nor read
By a distinguished cousin of the mayor,

Who didn't call and tell my father There
Before us, had we the gift to see ahead--

(2, ll. 28-32)

Two other denials of the extraordinary point out that Larkin is no longer a disciple of Yeats. "Our garden first: where I did not invent/Blinding theologies of flowers and fruits" (2, ll. 17,18) indicates that Larkin's childhood was dull and unexceptional as life usually is, and that he feels that his poetry must be true to his actual experience. He cannot create theologies as Yeats did. "The bracken where I never trembling sat/Determined to go through with it, where she/Lay back, and 'all became a burning mist'" (2, ll. 25-27) indicates that love in Larkin's poetry will be more like love in Hardy's poetry than in Yeats's.

In "I Remember, I Remember" Larkin is saying that biographies that contain such embellished experiences are suspect, but he cannot accept Hardy's bleak, deterministic naturalism. Nowhere in "I Remember, I Remember" is there mention of "mis-chance" as an explanation for the unhappy triviality of life. Larkin ends "I Remember, I Remember" with an aporism: "Nothing. like something, happens anywhere" (2, l. 36), and this explanation is in agreement with the one Sartre offers in "Existential Psychoanalysis" (8, pp. 712-734), his chapter in Being and Nothingness in which he attacks biographies that distort the ordinary circumstances of life. Sartre says that "we can advance no further but have encountered the self-evident irreducible when we have reached the project of being" (8, p. 722). He says that there are no givens such as heredity or environment to account for behavior. The goal of existential

psychoanalysis is to find a person's "original choice" (5, p. 728). And this is what Larkin's maxim means: men become what they originally choose to become. It's "not the place's fault/ Nothing, like something happens anywhere" (2, ll. 35-36).

Existentialism provides the philosophical framework for Larkin's poetry just as naturalism provides the framework for Hardy's poems. Larkin's confidence in his own ordinary perceptions, encouraged by Hardy's naturalistic poetry, is the foundation for Larkin's existentialism.

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