

THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

**Philip Larkin's Textual Identities**

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by

James Underwood, BA (Hons) (*Dunelm*), MA (Hull)

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# List of Abbreviations

References to the works of Philip Larkin are incorporated in the text using the following abbreviations:

<i>AGW</i>	<i>A Girl in Winter</i>
<i>AWJ</i>	<i>All What Jazz</i>
<i>CP</i>	<i>Collected Poems</i> (1988)
<i>EPJ</i>	<i>Early Poems and Juvenilia</i>
<i>FR</i>	<i>Further Requirements</i>
<i>J</i>	<i>Jill</i>
<i>LM</i>	<i>Letters to Monica</i>
<i>OBTCEV</i>	<i>The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse</i>
<i>RW</i>	<i>Required Writing</i>
<i>SL</i>	<i>Selected Letters</i>
<i>TCP</i>	<i>The Complete Poems</i> (including Archie Burnett's commentary)
<i>TWG</i>	<i>Trouble at Willow Gables and Other Fictions</i>

References to archived correspondences held by the University of Hull in the Larkin Estate Collection at the Hull History Centre are incorporated in the text as individual letters' dates. The relevant reference numbers from this collection are:

U DP/174	Letters from Philip Larkin to James Ballard Sutton
U DP/179	Correspondence between Colin Gunner and Philip Larkin
U DX/341	Photocopied letters from Philip Larkin to Monica Jones

All unabbreviated references are given in full at their first appearance, and in short thereafter. Insertions in square brackets are mine unless indicated otherwise. All web addresses were last accessed on 3 September 2015.

# *Introduction*

Three days after the death of Philip Larkin, the *Sunday Telegraph* published an obituary tribute by the Oxford Professor of Poetry, Peter Levi:

Philip Larkin, until his death on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1985, was the funniest and most intelligent English writer of his day, and the greatest living poet in our language.

It is possible to feel about him, as people felt about Eliot, that he was the last great poet. [...] No new poet in English will be so well remembered for a long time to come.<sup>1</sup>

In 2015, Geoffrey Hill used his valedictory lecture as Professor of Poetry to severely criticise Larkin:

Let me become a little aggressive towards you [...] by the easy expedient of introducing the name of Larkin. [...] *The Complete Poems* [...] contains fine poems, *fine* poems, and poems that are average, and poems that are even below average. His work is rated so highly across the literary board, because a large consensus has been persuaded by critical opinion that certain mediocre poems are outstanding.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Levi, 'The English Wisdom Of A Master Poet', *Sunday Telegraph*, 8 December 1985; reprinted in *An Enormous Yes: in memoriam Philip Larkin (1922-1985)*, ed. Harry Chambers (Calstock: Peterloo Poets, 1986) 33-5.

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Hill, 'I know thee not, old man, fall to thy prayers', Professor of Poetry Lecture, University of Oxford, 5 May 2015. A podcast of this lecture is available at: <[http://media.podcasts.ox.ac.uk/engfac/poetry/2015-05-05\\_engfac\\_hill.mp3](http://media.podcasts.ox.ac.uk/engfac/poetry/2015-05-05_engfac_hill.mp3)>.

On the subject of Larkin's popularity, Hill had this to say:

If it is permitted to make some general technical-ethical comment that sets aside biographical implications, I would wish to say that if you find it very, very gratifying indeed when quite ordinary people – i.e. not reviewers – tell you ‘that’s just what I felt’, I think you would be far better employed, you would be bringing far more delight to a far wider variety of audiences, you would obtain far greater job satisfaction, if you were to sign up to appear as a regular expert on the *Antiques Roadshow*. Except in a very *specific* sub-genre known by such descriptive titles as comic and curious verse, I cannot see that poetry has *any* obligation to cheer people up; or even to depress them in the particular ways they enjoy being depressed, which is what I suggest that many people found appealing in Larkin.<sup>3</sup>

Notwithstanding individual differences of taste and temperament, or critical and creative practice, the gulf of opinion between these two Professors of Poetry neatly bookends Larkin's fall – perhaps the greatest in twentieth-century British literature. ‘During his lifetime Larkin was granted endless credit by the bank of Opinion’, Hill has written elsewhere; this is untrue, but the bank's withdrawal of credit in the thirty years since Larkin's death affected the reception of his work as well as his personal reputation.<sup>4</sup> That is a scandal which this study addresses, not by presenting Larkin's superior moral qualities, but by re-focusing critical attention onto the very basis for judgements about any writer's reputation: the texts. More specifically, this study sets out to respect and protect the integrity and autonomy of Larkin's writings, so that the

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Hill, *Style and Faith* (New York: Counterpoint, 2003) 204.

man himself becomes *almost* irrelevant, except for the unavoidable fact of his authorship. The central idea is to approach Larkin's texts *as texts*: to read them as products of a conscious verbal artistry, rather than as expressions of personality, or preserved life experiences. All further concerns – biographical, theoretical, socio-cultural – surface only where they are prompted by the texts themselves. For Hill, Larkin represented 'a narrow English possessiveness, with regard to "good sense" and "generous common humanity"'. [...] The notion of accessibility in his work acknowledged the ease with which readers could overlay it with transparencies of their own preference'.<sup>5</sup> His objection is to Larkin's simplicity and lack of ambition; other detractors have targeted Larkin's identity politics. Of course, the two are closely related. Consequently, this study analyses the diverse and complex *textual* identities constructed by Larkin's various writings. The first task, however, is to sketch the critical and cultural context behind the shift from Levi's warmth in 1985 to Hill's severity in 2015.

### **Complete Balokowsky? Literature and biography**

Jake Balokowsky, the fictive biographer in Larkin's poem 'Posterity', describes his subject as 'One of those old-type *natural* fouled-up guys', but Martin Amis has argued that such details are unimportant (*TCP*, 86). Introducing his selection of Larkin's verse, Amis writes with straightforward conviction: although 'what rivets us [is] the mystery story of Larkin's soul', there is a 'simple truth that writers' private lives *don't matter*; only the work matters'. Nonetheless, as he admits, 'Every serious devotee' will have read not just the *Collected Poems*, but also the *Selected Letters* and Andrew Motion's biography. The reaction to those publications was, he writes, 'prodigiously ugly and violent', a 'bovine' ideological stampede led by Tom Paulin. Yet Amis seems confident

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

that Larkin's reputation has now been restored. There was an 'historical explanation', namely the *zeitgeist* of the 1990s, 'the high noon, the manly pomp, of the social ideology we call PC'. But with that chapter of Western history having been closed, Larkin is 'back to being what he was Before: Britain's best-loved poet since World War II'.<sup>6</sup>

Amis's essay has the feel of a case being closed, but even as recently as 2011 his thinking was more wishful than truthful. Writing in the *Guardian*, Sean O'Brien criticised the easy distinction between the life and the work:

This kind of thing may not 'matter' to some presumed eternity of true judgment, but it propagates itself. Amis's own distinction between what we attend to (the work) and should set aside (the private life) is not one that he himself is able to observe: see the absorbing and chilling biographical sketch with which he concludes his introduction.<sup>7</sup>

O'Brien is right: Amis introduces that sketch as 'a personal assessment of Larkin's character, and one that reflects a preoccupation that can fairly be described as lifelong'.<sup>8</sup> In this fleeting dispute between Amis and O'Brien, one finds the essence of a debate which now divides scholarship on Larkin. Even more recently, in 2014, Blake Morrison argued 'there's no doubt that a corrective is needed before the myth of Larkin as monster (misogynist, racist, porn addict, gin-swilling Thatcherite bigot) hardens into

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<sup>6</sup> Martin Amis, ed. and introd., *Philip Larkin: Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011) xvi-ii.

<sup>7</sup> Sean O'Brien, 'Philip Larkin: Poems selected by Martin Amis – review', *Guardian*, 16 September 2011, at <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/sep/16/philip-larkin-poems-review>>.

<sup>8</sup> Amis, xvii-xviii.



fact'.<sup>9</sup> This study does not concern itself with Larkin's gin and porn consumption – why should it? – but it *is* concerned with what Morrison calls 'the myth of Larkin as monster'; more precisely, with how mainstream interpretive practices have falsified Larkin's work, and then branded it 'rancid', 'insidious', and 'minor', to quote Peter Ackroyd.<sup>10</sup> Amis's identification of three key publications between 1988 and 1993 helps to explain much of this. When Anthony Thwaite's edition of the *Collected Poems* appeared three years after Larkin's death, bad feeling could already be detected. For some critics, the 83 previously unpublished poems were simply underwhelming. Ian Hamilton, for instance, disagreed with the idea that 'adding means increase', commenting that 'Kilograms aside, the plumpened Larkin oeuvre does not carry a great deal of extra weight'.<sup>11</sup> A deeper problem, however, was Thwaite's decision to arrange the poems in chronological order of composition. His intention may have been to chart the poet's development, but a subsidiary effect was to make the *poems* readable in relation to the *life*. Clive James was prescient when he wrote: 'The process of explaining him will be hard to stop now that this book is available'.<sup>12</sup>

This soon facilitated major problems, for in 1992, Thwaite published a selection of Larkin's letters. Littered with obscenities, many of them misogynist and racist in nature, the volume shocked a hitherto adoring public. Readers now eagerly awaited Andrew Motion's biography of Larkin, released the following year, and consolidating the revelations of the *Selected Letters* – with added cause for concern. No longer just

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<sup>9</sup> Blake Morrison, 'Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love by James Booth – review', *Guardian*, 22 August 2014, at <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/aug/22/philip-larkin-james-booth-review>>.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Ackroyd, 'Poet Hands on Misery to Man', review of *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* by Andrew Motion, *Times*, 1 April 1993, 35.

<sup>11</sup> Ian Hamilton, 'Phil the Lark', review of *Collected Poems* by Philip Larkin, *London Review of Books*, 13 October 1988, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Clive James, 'Somewhere becoming rain', in *Reliable Essays: The Best of Clive James* (Basingstoke: Picador, 2001) 34.

interested in ‘That vase’, readers became fascinated by that wind-up, saluting model of Hitler which Larkin’s father had proudly displayed on the family mantelpiece (*TCP*, 54-5). They were also absorbed by Larkin’s pornographic habits, heavy-drinking, sexual infidelities, and his slurs against women, ethnic minorities, the working-class, and so on. Eight years earlier, at the moment of his death, Larkin’s popularity had largely rested on the achievement of three slim volumes of verse. Very quickly, readers could access a fat wad of private correspondence, an equally hefty biography, and an expanded poetic corpus arranged in chronological order of composition, which invited the *Letters* and the *Life* to be tacked onto it. In his afterlife, Larkin had become the literary scandal of the decade.

Perhaps the real scandal, though, was the behaviour of some cultural commentators, who instantly seized upon the sordid details of Larkin’s life. The early backlash was initiated by Germaine Greer, Tom Paulin, and Lisa Jardine. As early as 1988, Greer had argued Larkin’s verse expressed attitudes that were ‘anti-intellectual, racist, sexist, and rotten with class-consciousness’.<sup>13</sup> At least she possessed the imagination to make these claims *before* she had the benefit of reading the *Selected Letters*; once that cat was out of the postbag, other critics retrospectively applied the revelations they found there to the literary work. Paulin described the letters as ‘a distressing and in many ways revolting compilation which imperfectly reveals and conceals the sewer under the national monument Larkin became’, whilst Jardine, lambasting Larkin’s ‘Little Englandism’, boasted ‘we don’t tend to teach Larkin much now in my Department of English’.<sup>14</sup> In one sense, these interventions were, as Amis argues, symptomatic of the period’s preoccupation with Political Correctness. Within the Academy, ‘PC’ had a

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<sup>13</sup> Germaine Greer, ‘A very British misery’, *Guardian*, 14 October 1988, 27.

<sup>14</sup> Tom Paulin, letter, *Times Literary Supplement*, 6 November 1992, 15; Lisa Jardine, ‘Saxon Violence’, review of *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin*, *Guardian*, 8 December 1992, 4.

specific cause to fight, with debates about the content of the canon and curriculum taking place. Broadly speaking, those debates benefited the discipline of English Literature, but once you have the ‘correct’ canon in place, or have exploded the very notion of canonicity, you still have to know *how* to read a literary text. The Greer-Paulin-Jardine attack showed how badly and unjustly particular reading practices can distort an author’s work. Reading and misreading are central themes of this study.

A case in point: it is interesting to note that the hatchet jobs penned by Greer and Jardine, in 1988 and 1992 respectively, are both accompanied by the same photograph of Larkin, sitting on a roadside stone marker emblazoned with ‘ENGLAND’ and the St. George’s Cross, which is located at Coldstream, in the Scottish Borders region. It does not require much critical *nous* to understand why this image was chosen: it evokes the Little England attitudes which both critics claim to find in Larkin’s work. What neither article reveals, however, is that Larkin had urinated over the sign just before the photograph was taken. That is Anti-Establishment, not Aunt Bessie. At the very least, it visually demonstrates the imbalance between surface and depth which characterises readings of Larkin.

Regrettably, that imbalance in the journalistic treatments has been perpetuated and expanded in scholarly treatments, when it should have been challenged. A biographical approach has been established as the allegedly natural way to think about Larkin’s work, and this critical practice of relating the work to the life, turning poems into life stories, is far more likely to be propagated than critiqued: John Osborne has calculated that ‘Of the twenty to thirty critical books and sixty or so worthwhile essays on Larkin, well over ninety per cent employ the biographical approach’.<sup>15</sup> This tendency can be traced back to the first ever monograph on Larkin, published in 1973. In it, David

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<sup>15</sup> John Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence: A Case of Wrongful Conviction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) 24-5.

Timms consistently renders ‘the poet’ and ‘the speaker’ interchangeable terms.<sup>16</sup> The subsequent prevalence of this can be demonstrated by tracing the critical reception of individual poems across the numerous studies published in the last four decades. Consider, for instance, ‘Church Going’. What follows is a selection of excerpts from Larkin monographs and biographies: Timms, 1973 – ‘Out for a bicycle ride, the poet stops at a church, and goes in to look round’; Brownjohn, 1975 – ‘the poet, having stepped awkwardly into the building, looked vaguely around it and donated [...] “an Irish sixpence”’; Petch, 1981 – ‘As the poem develops the poet infuses himself into the speaker’s radiating concerns’; Motion, 1982 – ‘his [Larkin’s] speculations about what churches will become when they fall “completely” rather than partially “out of use”’; Day, 1987 – ‘Unlike many poems in which Larkin speaks from a solitary experience, in “Church Going” he takes it upon himself to speak for a civilisation’; Hassan, 1988 – ‘the poet does not show interest in this church [in ‘The Building’], unlike that which he visited in “Church Going”’; Rossen, 1989 – ‘The poet begins his encounter with the church building by describing the contents of the building’; Tolley, 1991 – ‘what is offered is a self-portrait with only a mild touch of parody’; Motion, 1993 – “‘It pleases me”, Larkin says finally, “to stand in silence” in an empty church’; Lerner, 2005 – ‘It begins with a comic picture of the poet getting off his bicycle to stop, and look round an empty church’; Booth, 2005 – ‘his lyric “I” is not clearly distinguished from the author

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<sup>16</sup> David Timms, *Philip Larkin*, Modern Writers (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1973). Not only is the conflation of ‘poet’ and ‘speaker’ problematic, but so is the use of the term ‘speaker’ in the first place. Poems are *written* and therefore *narrated*, and because this study focuses on the *textuality* of Larkin’s writings, I consider it especially important to discuss ‘narrators’ rather than ‘speakers’. On the separate assumption that a narrator can only be a poet because the narrative is presented as poetry, I quote Osborne: ‘the semi-literate truant schoolboy Huckleberry Finn narrates in the first person the novel that takes his name, but it would be an hermeneutical absurdity to describe Huck as a “novelist” or to otherwise elide the distinction between Huck and Mark Twain’; see *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, 18.

himself'; Bradford, 2005 – 'He [Larkin] feels comfortable in this vast, ancient building and persuades us that his presence, alone, as a dry commentator upon its span of false mythologies and centuries of unremembered ritual is somehow fitting'; Booth, 2014 – 'The poet's "awkward reverence" as he removes his bicycle clips is half ironic'; Waterman, 2014 – 'Larkin loves the Anglican tradition as an aspect of his own culture, and also for what it suggests about "compulsions" in all of us, but resists its theology'.<sup>17</sup>

I am, of course, guilty to some extent of cherry-picking, but the dominance and danger of such an approach will become even clearer in the course of this study. Booth's reference to 'the lyric "I"' perhaps flags up a widespread subscription to outdated notions of lyric poetry. Scott Brewster has distinguished the modern lyric from its Romantic ancestor: 'far from presenting the unmediated thoughts and feelings of an isolated individual, [the modern lyric] centres on the relationship between the self and others, the self and history, and the self and language'.<sup>18</sup> Although this arguably caricatures the Romantic lyric, it seems the self-awareness he describes – which is an important feature of Larkin's lyric poetry – has been lost on a number of the authors cited above, who instead view biography as a natural or common-sense way to approach

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<sup>17</sup> Timms, 83; Alan Brownjohn, *Philip Larkin, Writers and their Work* (Harlow: Longman, 1979) 12; Simon Petch, *The Art of Philip Larkin* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1981) 55-6; Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin, Contemporary Writers* (London: Methuen, 1982) 60; Roger Day, *Larkin, Open Guides to Literature* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1990) 46; Salem K. Hassan, *Philip Larkin and his Contemporaries: An Air of Authenticity* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988) 111; Janice Rossen, *Philip Larkin: His Life's Work* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989) 34-5; A. T. Tolley, *My Proper Ground: A Study of the Work of Philip Larkin and its Development* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991) 80; Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994) 241; Laurence Lerner, *Philip Larkin, Writers and their Work*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2005) 17; James Booth, *Philip Larkin: The Poet's Plight* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 128; Richard Bradford, *First Boredom, Then Fear: The Life of Philip Larkin* (London: Peter Owen, 2009) 126; James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014) 194; Rory Waterman, *Belonging and Estrangement in the Poetry of Philip Larkin, R. S. Thomas and Charles Causley* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014) 165.

<sup>18</sup> Scott Brewster, *Lyric, The New Critical Idiom* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009) 14.

what they perceive to be ‘the unmediated thoughts and feelings of an isolated individual’.

It may be that some do so unconsciously, only using ‘the poet’ as terminological shorthand, but it is not unfair to expect literary critics to reflect upon their reading practices, and to distinguish their work from the clichés and caricatures of lazy journalism and cultural commentary. On the other hand, there are critics who have transparently committed themselves to biography. Motion has clearly stated that ‘the poems *are* autobiographical’,<sup>19</sup> and A. T. Tolley, whose two books on Larkin open with implied endorsements from the man himself, has written:

In the poems where the speaker is a dramatized version of the poet, some sort of autobiographical involvement is implied. Larkin seems close to the experience of his poems [...]. [In] his later poems Larkin’s self-dramatization was more successful where he offered a straighter presentation of the autobiographical figure, as in ‘Dockery and Son’.<sup>20</sup>

Whereas the poems of the 1950s contain ‘the poet, un-self-consciously and unostentatiously himself, the man who “says” the poem’, Tolley is troubled by those poems ‘with satirized personae [...] [which] have given problems concerning how they

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<sup>19</sup> Andrew Motion, ‘On the Plain of Holderness’, in *Larkin at Sixty*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 1982) 68.

<sup>20</sup> Tolley, *My Proper Ground*, 100, 107. His study opens with an acknowledgement to ‘the late Dr P.A. Larkin, who read and commented on some parts of this book in an earlier form’ (ix); his 1997 study of the workbooks opens with an acknowledgement to ‘the late Philip Larkin who read some of the material incorporated in this book’; see *Larkin at Work: A Study of Larkin’s Mode of Composition as seen in his Workbooks* (Hull: University of Hull Press and The Philip Larkin Society, 1997) ix. If ultimate hermeneutic authority lies with the poet himself, what better way to promote your work than by implying you have the endorsement of that poet?

are to be taken'.<sup>21</sup> Reading 'Naturally the Foundation will Bear Your Expenses', he feels that 'one can remain uncomfortable with a poem that does not seem readily to declare itself to its readers – that depends so much on our right sense of tone and our attitude to detail at every point'.<sup>22</sup> In other words, Tolley equates what he perceives to be straightforward autobiographical presentation with success, and more complex dramatisation with failure – as though professional literary critics should not be expected to *work hard*. James Booth is a far more subtle and responsive reader than Tolley, and comfortable with Larkin's irony, but he too sees Larkin's aesthetic as a deeply personal and direct one:

[The] meaning of each poem is a unique, provisional embodiment of emotions and attitudes [...]. But, ultimately, what holds these mediations of experience together is not, as some commentators have implied, conservative ideology, or stoic pessimism, or any conscious or unconscious identification with a particular historical or social group. It is something more immediate and personal, and more verbal. It is an idiomatic assurance, as of someone speaking socially to the reader. [...] He is a highly 'visible' poet, who seems to have no inhibition about addressing the reader in his own candid, natural tone.<sup>23</sup>

For Booth, a stable and recognisable selfhood is expressed in poetry by a poet who speaks directly to his readers about particular experiences or emotions. There are theoretical issues associated with this model, explored within this study. But two more general problems present themselves here. The first is the way in which the scope of

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<sup>21</sup> Tolley, *My Proper Ground*, 77, 107.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>23</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Writer* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992) 6.

Larkin's poetry becomes narrow, so that only interpretations which fit the perceived narrative of the life are considered. This results in a loss: the loss of alternative readings which are just as interesting and powerful, if not more so, than the life stories; it can also skew the work in ways that are ungrounded and unjust. The other problem is that contrasting views on Larkin and his work end up being two sides of the same coin. Defenders and detractors present competing versions of the life in order to prove the superiority or inferiority of the work. A particular letter or anecdote is produced which shows Larkin's compassion for women, which in turn shows that 'Sunny Prestatyn' is a compassionate poem – but there is always a different letter or anecdote which shows the opposite to be the case. The marginalisation of Larkin's poetry by Jardine's Department of English, for instance, was predicated on a widely-held perception of the man as a bigot entrenched on the wrong side of history. And yet Booth introduces his recent biography of Larkin with this question:

[We] might ask whether art and life can have been so deeply at odds with each other that the poet who composed the heart-rending 'Love Songs in Age', the euphoric 'For Sidney Bechet' and the effervescent 'Annus Mirabilis' had no emotions, or was a shit in real life. [...] Those who shared [Larkin's] life simply do not recognize the Mr Nasty version.<sup>24</sup>

Whereas for Jardine the foul-smelling letters were proof of Larkin's politically-backwards poetry, Booth cannot accept that the author of such warming poems could have been a bad person. Much ink has been spilled dealing with these matters. This

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<sup>24</sup> Booth, *Life, Art and Love*, 6.



study has little to say about Larkin the man, seeking instead to complicate our understanding of how and what he wrote.

### **New directions**

This study does, however, take place within a changing critical landscape. Within the last decade, a minority of scholars has made the case for new readings of Larkin's work. Osborne's *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence: A Case of Wrongful Conviction* (2008) revolutionised the field with its wholehearted rejection of biographicalism, a methodology which replaces '*the hermeneutical quest for textual meaning [with] a biographical quest for the moment of origination*'.<sup>25</sup> By substituting a text-centred approach for the author-centred one, Osborne made close reading key to the process of interpreting Larkin's work: 'Once the meaning of an artefact is no longer regarded as having been nailed to the floor of the author's intentions, a limited plurality of interpretations is generated relative to different reading perspectives'.<sup>26</sup> His study identifies countless misreadings of Larkin's verse in which critics 'sex', 'race', and so on, the narrators of poems in order to make their identities fit with that of the poet:

The stark truth is that the overwhelming majority of the poems tell one nothing about the gender, race, class or nationality of either their narrators or their addressees, but that both the poet's champions and detractors fill in the missing information by jumping to the conclusion that the protagonist is always and only a white, male, middle-class Englishman named Philip Larkin.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, 19.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

Osborne wipes clean that slate of presuppositions, approaching each poem afresh with the intention of reading *out* of it rather than *into* it (exegesis instead of eisegesis). The results are surprising, and clear space for a new conception of the poet as progressive and relevant. One particularly sharp example is Osborne's reading of 'MCMXIV': simply by shifting the emphasis of the poem's final line onto the word 'Never', he turns it into an anti-nostalgic myth-buster – 'Never such innocence again, *please God!*', as he puts it.<sup>28</sup> In other words, a single verbal shift by a reader can transform the entire poem. More generally, Osborne revamps Larkin's relationship to Modernism, and argues that the poet anticipated Deconstructionism by decades; he concludes by demonstrating Larkin's influence on a generation of younger British postmodernists. He has since followed this up with *Radical Larkin*, a study of seven important radical techniques used by the poet, including ellipsis, deterritorialisation, and de-essentialism.<sup>29</sup> As a polemicist angered by the critical violence done to Larkin's work, Osborne must consciously overstate his case, to some extent. Nonetheless, he has thrown wide open this field for new kinds of investigation, and distanced Larkin from the illiberal and regressive Little Englandism alleged by Greer, Paulin, and Jardine. This study takes place within the space cleared by his thinking.

Gillian Steinberg's 2010 study, *Philip Larkin and His Audiences*, complements Osborne's innovations in many ways. Finding Larkin's letters and interviews unreliable, Steinberg opts instead to privilege the poems. Like Osborne, she pays close attention to the texts, articulating a common strategy of Larkin's verse, which invites the reader to fill in hermeneutic gaps, *not* with details of the poet's life, but with interpretations and allegiances of their own. In 'Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album', for instance,

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>29</sup> John Osborne, *Radical Larkin: Seven Types of Technical Mastery* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

Steinberg shows how Larkin's use of pronouns implicates the reader in the poem's message about exclusion, thereby aligning lonely speaker with lonely reader, so that 'the primary connection – the one on which the poem hinges and the one that contains the most meaningful and *real* emotion – is not the one between the speaker and the subject but between the speaker and the reader'.<sup>30</sup> Across the *oeuvre*, she argues, Larkin gently attends to the role of the reader, repeatedly creating empathetic connections with those who are, in various ways, removed from him.

Gillian Steinberg is a young woman, who lives in the Bronx, and teaches at a Jewish liberal arts college. If we are to believe the claims of figures like Greer, Paulin, and Jardine, she is an unlikely admirer of Larkin's work. Yet her monograph plays an important part in the reconsideration of a maligned English poet. It is also part of the internationalisation of Larkin studies. This is partly a side effect of time's annoying tendency to keep ticking on: as Larkin's life and death recede further into history, fewer accounts are written by those who knew him.<sup>31</sup> But internationalisation has gone hand-in-hand with text-centred approaches, which require no familiarity with the author whatsoever. Relatively recent examples of this include the Belgian scholar, Raphaël Ingelbien, whose *Misreading England* refutes nationalist readings of Larkin (as well as Hughes, Hill, and Heaney), and the Iraqi poet, Fadhil Assultani, whose book analyses Larkin's work in the context of existentialism and the outsider.<sup>32</sup> *About Larkin*, the

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<sup>30</sup> Gillian Steinberg, *Philip Larkin and His Audiences* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) 18.

<sup>31</sup> Thwaite and Motion, for instance, were friendly with Larkin; both became his literary executors, and his editor and biographer respectively. In fact, given how many critics and scholars were able to get to know Larkin, either in person or through correspondence, it seems he was far more generous with his time than his popular reputation as the Hermit of Hull would suggest.

<sup>32</sup> Raphaël Ingelbien, *Misreading England: Poetry and Nationhood Since the Second World War* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002); Fadhil Assultani, *Philip Larkin: An Outsider Poet: Transcendence of Solitude, Sex and the Ordinary* (Leeds: Mira, 2013).

Philip Larkin Society's journal, frequently publishes pieces written by fans and scholars from foreign lands and cultures, such as the Indian academic, S.N. Prasad, who has penned an original essay on 'Solar' and its relation to the multicultural tradition of sun-worship.<sup>33</sup> As the biographical approach begins to loosen its grip on the field, these authors are evidence of Larkin's ongoing relevance to a contemporary world audience.

Steinberg concludes her monograph by suggesting 'metatextual criticism' as a possible way forward for Larkin scholarship; although she does not gloss the term, I interpret it as a more explicit awareness of the author's subtle textual manipulations.<sup>34</sup> Rather than a possibility, I would argue this is now a *necessity*, following the 2012 publication of the *Complete Poems*, a landmark moment for Larkin studies. This volume's editor is not Thwaite, but Archie Burnett, co-director of Boston's Editorial Institute. His edition expands the corpus by including *all* accessible poems, with newly interrogated print and manuscript sources, Burnett having found well over 100 errors in Tolley's edition of the *Early Poems and Juvenilia* alone. Most impressively, Burnett provides a comprehensive commentary on the poems, outlining (amongst other things) the extensive presence of intertextuality within Larkin's verse.

The consequences of his editorial scholarship are substantial and manifold. Larkin's corpus is not just larger, but more accurate. Perhaps more significantly, Burnett has weakened the *author-centred* approach by strengthening the *text-centred* one. Although there is far more biographical information than in any previous edition, the commentary also presents summaries of divergent critical interpretations, non-biographical contexts, and Larkin's many citations and allusions. In other words, his commentary encourages readers to look *within* the poems in order to understand them. As the dustjacket states,

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<sup>33</sup> S.N. Prasad, 'Philip Larkin and the Worship of the Sun', *About Larkin*, 28 (October 2009), 34-6.

<sup>34</sup> Steinberg, 156.

‘Larkin played down his literariness, but his poetry enrichingly alludes to and echoes the writings of many others; Archie Burnett’s commentary establishes him as a more complex and more literary poet than many readers have suspected’. The inadequacies of an author-focused approach, and the necessity of a textual one, are perfectly exemplified by the case of ‘The Whitsun Weddings’, one of Larkin’s most famous poems (*TCP*, 56-8). The history of its reception encapsulates the problems and possibilities faced by Larkin scholarship, past and present – and so it is to this poem’s ‘journey’ which I shall now turn.

### **Derailing ‘The Whitsun Weddings’**

What Osborne has called the ‘moment of origination’ has largely dominated the interpretation of ‘The Whitsun Weddings’. In his biography, Motion cites the text of a 1981 interview conducted by Melvyn Bragg for the *South Bank Show*, in which Larkin recalls a journey from Hull to London on Whit Saturday, 1955, taken on

a very slow train that stopped at every station and I hadn’t realized that, of course, this was the train that all the wedding couples would get on and go to London for their honeymoon[;] it was an eye-opener to me. Every part was different but the same somehow. They all looked different but they were all doing the same things and sort of feeling the same things. I suppose the train stopped at about four, five, six stations between Hull and London and there was a sense of gathering emotional momentum. Every time you stopped fresh emotion climbed aboard. And finally between Peterborough and London when you hurtle on, you felt the whole thing was being aimed like a bullet – at the

heart of things, you know. All this fresh, open life. Incredible experience. I've never forgotten it.<sup>35</sup>

Richard Bradford reproduces this account in his 2005 biography.<sup>36</sup> And in another interview from this period, Larkin told John Haffenden the poem was 'the transcription of a very happy afternoon. I didn't change a thing, it was just there to be written down'. Asked if he was 'flirting with a romantic visionary quality', Larkin emphatically agreed: 'Yes. [...] It only needed writing down. Anybody could have done it' (*FR*, 57). The majority of critics have taken him at his word, consciously or unconsciously assuming the narrator is Larkin himself, travelling by rail from Hull to London during Whitsun, 1955. Osborne has collated a list of the specific assumptions critics have made: 'All agree with Timms that the perceiving subject is "a man" [...]. "[H]e" is a "bachelor" (Lerner); a "librarian" (Tolley); a "poet" (Swarbrick); an "intellectual" (Regan) reading "a book" (Whitehead); and a "passive" representative of the "middle-class" (Morrison)'.<sup>37</sup> Tolley sums up with confidence: the "'I" is clearly Larkin [...] leaving Hull late on a Saturday afternoon'.<sup>38</sup> But reading the poem closely, not one of these details can be verified – where is the book? Or evidence of the narrator's job, or relationship status? It is by filling gaps with details from Larkin's life that critics are able to read into the poem the kinds of attitudes they would expect him to possess. On this, Antony Easthope is unequivocal: 'Though the poetry and a writer's critical voice do not necessarily coincide, in Larkin's case they do'. With this in mind, he reads 'The Whitsun Weddings' thus:

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<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Motion, *A Writer's Life*, 287-8.

<sup>36</sup> Bradford, 157.

<sup>37</sup> Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, 64.

<sup>38</sup> Tolley, *My Proper Ground*, 95.

What the speaker noticed from the external world had already introduced a certain unease, for he found himself faced with both an English pastoral landscape and the detritus of modernity, ‘industrial froth’, ‘dismantled cars’. Uncertainty soon develops into full-blown class anxiety when the train fills with representatives of the post-1950s’ newly-rich working-class wearing ‘parodies of fashion’ and ‘jewellery-substitutes’, figures who represent the social, the body, sexuality – all put at risk the control of the isolated ‘I’. Subject and object threaten to lose touch with each other.<sup>39</sup>

In this short passage, Easthope attributes to the poem’s narrator the following qualities: love for the English pastoral scene; fear and loathing of modernity; class anxiety; class condescension; unease with the corporeal and sexual; and a superior, controlling voyeurism. Tolley, too, has criticised the poem for its social superiority: ‘[T]he “We” with which the poem concludes comprises the speaker of the poem and the other occupants of the train; but the “we” implied by the valuations that are part of the “writing down”, and which the poem depends upon for its reception, decidedly excludes the newly-weds and their social group’.<sup>40</sup> Comparable attitudes *can* be found between the covers of the *Selected Letters*, but the question is whether or not they arise, *unforced*, from the poem itself. In more recent years, critics inclined towards focused exegesis have arrived at different destinations, with strikingly different readings. Osborne, for instance, pays close attention to the poem’s ‘pronominal fluctuations’ – ‘I-my-we’, ‘I-we-I-we-we-us’, etc. – asking ‘Is this not the precise lexical register of a person caught with one foot inside the culture and the other foot outside?’. Additionally,

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<sup>39</sup> Antony Easthope, *Englishness and National Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999) 185-6.

<sup>40</sup> Tolley, *My Proper Ground*, 97.

the poem's citational 'cosmopolitanism' (Eliot, Tennyson, Yeats, *Coriolanus*, music hall, Betjeman, Olivier's *Henry V*, Longfellow, Martin Luther King, and more) reinforces the sense of cultural alienation and difference:

If we picture the narrator as black or Muslim or lesbian or gay – or simply imagine how such readers identify with the narrative (not a bizarre idea for critics in a multicultural society to entertain, especially when they habitually parade their political correctness in such matters) – does the poem not signify as powerfully, though differently, as when we employ class-based interpretations?

Moreover, he argues, there is a process of observation which is 'self-monitoring, self-correcting', so that no single viewpoint is definitive or omniscient.<sup>41</sup>

Steinberg also analyses the poem's pronouns, arguing that 'while the poem seems mostly to focus on what the speaker sees, and what makes him most thoughtful, what alters his way of viewing most, is thinking about what they saw'.<sup>42</sup> She then goes a step further than Osborne, observing how 'Readers are also asked to consider their own positioning in ways that change frequently and with only the subtlest warnings'.<sup>43</sup> Her interpretation finds inclusivity and democracy where others claim to find condescension and manipulation. The text-centred readings by Osborne and Steinberg are a far cry from the accusations of class anxiety and judgement by critics like Easthope and Tolley.

When Burnett's edition of the *Poems* was published in 2012, the arguments of biographically-minded critics were finally derailed. His commentary cites letters Larkin wrote about the journey, contradicting the details he gave in those interviews during the

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<sup>41</sup> Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, 65-6.

<sup>42</sup> Steinberg, 38.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.



early 1980s. Days after his vivid experience – which actually took place in *July* rather than Whitsun – he told Monica Jones that his ‘literary pleasure’ at the ‘importunate wedding parties, gawky & vociferous’, had been ‘damped by missing the 4.8 connection at Grantham’ (*TCP*, 411). He then describes getting a ride from a farmer to Melton Mowbray, followed by a bus ride to Loughborough, where his mother lived – this, not London, being his intended destination. More intriguingly, Burnett has unearthed a letter in the University of Hull archives, written months before Larkin’s death, in which he reveals ‘when I came to look up the genesis of “The Whitsun Weddings” I found that not only did it not take place at Whitsun, but that I actually got out of the train at Grantham and took a motorbus to the Midlands to see my family, or what was left of them. Twenty years or so had made me believe the poem rather than what actually happened!’ (*TCP*, 411).<sup>44</sup> It seems Larkin’s memory of *the journey*, prompted by interviewers in the early 1980s, was a false one based on the details of *the poem*.<sup>45</sup> The unreliability of memory is part of the human condition, and it would be harsh to criticise Larkin’s vulnerability to it. But what about the critics who chose to predicate their readings on biographical information which now turns out to be false? The basis for their (predominantly class-based) interpretations has dissolved, calling into question their discussions and method – whilst the readings based only on the words of the poem remain intact. This tale foregrounds the textuality of ‘The Whitsun Weddings’, showing

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<sup>44</sup> There is some confusion here. Strangely, the section of the interview conducted by Bragg which Motion cites did not appear in the final cut of the *South Bank Show*; even stranger, the final cut *did* contain a section in which Larkin discusses his errors regarding the poem’s moment of origination, and the difficulties in drafting it. This prompts two questions: did Motion accidentally attribute the quote to the wrong source? If not, why did he use an excerpt which was discarded *and* evidently inaccurate, when a more accurate one was available?

<sup>45</sup> This did not stop the Philip Larkin Society from ‘recreating’ the journey from Hull’s Paragon Station to London King’s Cross in May 2014, to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of *The Whitsun Weddings*. This, of course, was harmless fun; nonetheless, when extrapolated into a full-blown method for literary and cultural criticism, the consequences can impose undue limits on interpretive possibilities.

it to be what it always was: a complex artistic creation, its realities constructed by language, rather than directly copied down from experience. This is also evidenced by Larkin's workbooks, which contain more than thirty pages of drafts, wrestled with over three years – not quite the visionary transcription of life into art described in the interviews. The fact that the details of the actual journey differ from those of the poem's journey demonstrates how a poem's narrator is not a real person in a real place, but rather, and always, a fictive identity created in the act of writing. One more excruciating railway analogy, if I may: just as a train tightly hugs its tracks, readings of this poem which have stayed close to the words on the page have benefited from doing so. By contrast, the preoccupation with biographical details has set a significant number of critics on the wrong track altogether, in the end causing their arguments to be derailed.

The case of 'The Whitsun Weddings' is only the beginning. Larkin scholarship has been forced to learn the hard way the lessons of methodology, as more and more damage has been done to the work's reputation since the early 1980s. Recent scholarship has paved the way for fresh studies of this writer, and the possibility of reputational restoration is now more real than at any point in the last thirty years. It is, however, a process, and one which is very much ongoing – with the results still hanging in the balance. Large numbers of readers, critics, and cultural commentators remain unconvinced and highly critical of Larkin – consider Hill's remarks in his valedictory lecture, or one reviewer of the *Complete Poems*, who claimed 'The only thing we're reminded of is what a shit Larkin was in real life'.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, studies of Larkin's work which repeat the dominant approaches and orthodoxies continue to be written, without

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<sup>46</sup> Morten Høi Jensen, 'Larkin's Way', review of *The Complete Poems* by Philip Larkin, *Idiom*, 3 April 2012, at <<http://idiommag.com/2012/04/larkins-way/>>. Jensen's presumptuous use of the first-person plural is particularly ironic, given how often Larkin is criticised for this by his detractors.

consideration of the changes I have sketched here.<sup>47</sup> Aware of this, the present study situates itself within the *changing* critical landscape – post-Osborne, post-Steinberg, post-Burnett – where there is still much labouring to be done.

## **Prospectus**

Beginning with the premise that a narrator's identity is constituted, not expressed, by the text, this study explores the diverse and complex constructions of identity produced by Larkin's writings. I use the term 'writings' to reflect the range of forms discussed. The study is divided into three parts, looking at Larkin's letters, the Brunette Coleman *oeuvre*, and the mature poetry. Although this may at first look like an eccentric or partial focus – why not the two published novels? Or *The North Ship*? Or Larkin's jazz criticism? – there are important justifications. This study is not conceived as a book-by-book analysis of Larkin's output, nor as a thematic exploration of, say, marriage, religion, death, and so on. Instead, it makes an important *conceptual* intervention within Larkin studies by bringing a sharp and focused textual scholarship to those writings most in need of such an approach, and most demonstrative of its potential for wider application. Parts I and II represent the most comprehensive and original studies to date of Larkin's letters and Brunette Coleman heteronym respectively, whilst Part III offers fresh readings of a number of major and representative poems. The letters and the Coleman writings have been particularly brutalised by the widespread desire for biographical plunder; this is the first study to exclusively and extensively read them as constructs, instead of treasure-houses of the author's psychology or life stories. The

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<sup>47</sup> Waterman's study, for instance, dismisses Osborne's innovations as 'protestations', only mentions Steinberg's book in the bibliography, and – although explicitly promoting itself as 'one of the first to concentrate on Philip Larkin's poetry since the publication of *Complete Poems*, edited by Archie Burnett' – fails to take into account changes effected by that edition, such as the significant title change of 'The March Past' to 'March Past'; see Waterman, 97, 3, 61-3.

mature poetry is then discussed in order to demonstrate that the approach is just as useful for the work which leads people to Larkin in the first place.

All of the writings discussed are chosen because they dramatise especially well the issues of creative and critical practice which this study explores. This is particularly relevant to the chapters on Larkin's poetry, where depth of reading is privileged over coverage of poems, in order to prove the rich potential of textual scholarship. By 'textual scholarship', I am referring to the particular and peculiar qualities inherent to written texts. Examples of this include scrutiny of tone; the definitions and etymologies of words; intertextual citations and allusions; consideration of genre and form; cultural, historical, and intellectual contexts; typography; and even theoretical issues where appropriate. Paying close attention to these aspects of textuality can help us to acutely perceive what Clive James describes as 'the depth under the clarity'.<sup>48</sup> The term 'textual scholarship' may seem to lack the fuller articulation which would usually preface a feminist or structuralist study, for instance. But this is because it is a sensitive methodology which allows itself to be guided by the texts themselves, to be limited or liberated by what they allow, rather than a heavy and over-arching apparatus bolted onto a writer's corpus. Textual scholarship represents a 'bottom-up' approach, which acknowledges the performative and constructionist dynamic of writing. It does so at the marked expense of biography and personality.

Part I (Chapters 1 to 5), based on extensive archival research, explores Larkin's complex construction of different identities in dialogue with three important correspondents: James Ballard Sutton, school friend and painter with whom Larkin collaborated on the construction of an aesthetic selfhood; Colin Gunner, a later and less frequent pen pal to whom Larkin wrote many of the letters which allegedly reveal his

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<sup>48</sup> James, 34.

bigotry; and Monica Jones, long-distance lover and correspondent of nearly forty years, with whom Larkin engaged in an unorthodox feminine-lesbian discourse. As well as examining the correspondences individually, these chapters more widely critique the dominant notion of letters as portals onto a writer's soul. Part II (Chapters 6 to 10) takes a similar approach to the 1943 Brunette Coleman *oeuvre*, a collection of writings in and on the schoolgirl fiction genre which Larkin produced using a female lesbian heteronym during his final term at Oxford. These are almost exclusively interpreted as juvenilia revealing the undergraduate Larkin's perversions and struggles with sexuality; unprejudiced textual scholarship instead locates an extended and progressive investigation of genre and gender politics, and consequently reframes the *oeuvre* as an important influence on Larkin's published fiction and mature poetry. Finally, Part III (Chapters 11 to 14) applies the lessons of Parts I and II to a selection of Larkin's major poems, divided into 'persona poems' (poems whose narrators are commonly assumed to be Larkin, or a version thereof), and 'impersonal poems' (poems whose narrators are definitively not Larkin). After tracing the construction of a public Larkin persona in the 1964 BBC documentary *Down Cemetery Road*, these chapters present fresh and alternative ways of reading the mature poems. The specific 'persona poems' of Chapter 13 are chosen because their perceived proximity to Larkin's character means they signify very differently when biography is excluded; the 'impersonal poems' chosen for Chapter 14 then serve to reinforce the idea that Larkin's poetic concerns and strategies are much broader than is generally acknowledged. The collective objective of the fourteen chapters is to demonstrate the diversity and complexity of the textual identities constructed by Larkin in his writings, these qualities having been denied and suffocated by the dominant biographical method. Seeking to respect and promote the autonomous, performative, and constructed nature of Larkin's writings, this study opposes the critical

practices of Greer, Paulin, Jardine, and countless others, by drawing attention to the presence of depth, complexity, and radicalism, all of which characterise the work, and confirm its brilliance.

# **Part I**

## ***The Letters***

# 1

## Introduction: Letters and Letter-Writing

Whether such considerations are the key to the real Philip or not, it is certain that the two-dimensional figure [...] is gone for good. In its place we must accept a much more complicated, and even contradictory, personality: commonplace yet uniquely gifted, compassionate yet insensitive, complacent yet diffident, characterized by the unnatural maturity of the mother-dominated yet retaining the eagerness and hilarity of extreme youth. ‘This union of opposites was, I fancy, characteristic of his whole personality,’ as Frank Nicholson wrote, ‘and may perhaps explain his power of inspiring affection in men and women alike.’

This chapter begins with a small deception – for these words were not written by a revisionist biographer of Larkin, but by Larkin himself (*RW*, 238). And he was not writing about himself, or anyone called ‘Philip’, but about Jon Stallworthy’s revisionist biography of Wilfred Owen; for ‘the real Philip’, please insert ‘the real Wilfred’. The point of the deception is to show how easily the reconsideration of a ‘two-dimensional’ identity might be applied to Larkin; only the name needs replacing. In these chapters, I want to critique two-dimensional interpretations of Larkin’s epistolary identities, by drawing attention to their diversity and performativity.

Two things we know about Larkin are that he read a lot of books, and wrote a lot of letters. Indeed, he had an abiding interest in the letters and (auto)biographies of other writers as diverse as D. H. Lawrence and Beatrix Potter. The many reviews Larkin



wrote reflect this taste, but they also reveal a persistent awareness of the ways in which writers can construct and manipulate their identity through letter-writing. This awareness extends to the issues faced by critics and biographers, who use those letters in order to construct and manipulate their own versions of a subject's identity. Larkin's review of the Owen biography celebrates the flood which has 'swept away' his 'two-dimensional' popular conception – the 'pard-like spirit' of Edmund Blunden's memoir, and 'Sassoon's voice and nothing more' (*RW*, 230). But reading the letters of another war poet, Rupert Brooke, Larkin is acutely aware of problems inherent to the selection:

His present editor, Sir Geoffrey Keynes, makes it clear that [...] his fellow trustees (Sir John Sheppard, Dudley Ward and Walter de la Mare) objected to his selection on the grounds that it 'seriously misrepresented' the writer of the letters. Here at the outset is an additional problem: not only have we to decide what kind of person the letters suggest, but we must take into account that some of the people who knew him best think that this suggestion misrepresents him. (*RW*, 177)

Consequently, Larkin's review is characterised by a lack of biographical certainties: Brooke displays 'determined facetiousness and affectation'; the cause of his 'stress and unhappiness' is 'far from clear', as are the reasons for his interest in Ka Cox; 'The notion of marriage recurs, but, frustratingly, without particular reference to anyone'; and so on (*RW*, 178-80). In short, his review problematises and hazes a compilation which was published in order to reveal and enlighten.

As a critic, Larkin does this again and again. Discussing one scholar's linking of Christina Rossetti's love life and love poems, he complains: 'Unfortunately there is

little, if any, objective evidence', whilst in the case of Evelyn Waugh's letters, he duly notes the editor's warning 'against assuming anything Waugh writes to be "true"' (*FR*, 253, 301). On Thomas Hardy, one of his literary heroes and the subject of several articles, Larkin has plenty to say:

[I]n recent years we have awoken to the fact that Hardy's life, and for that matter his letters, may not be entirely what they seem. For a quarter of a century after his death 'the good little Thomas Hardy', to use Henry James's patronizing phrase, tended to be taken at his face value, a bourgeois countryman who, apart from being a genius, exemplified pedestrian provincialism. Few perceived that, even in its surface quietness, his life was really rather remarkable. [...] The fact is that much of what we know of Hardy is simply what he chose we should know. (*FR*, 269-70)

He describes how Hardy burned photographs, rewrote poems, and then destroyed the original manuscripts:

What caused all this? It seems to have begun as a necessary concomitant of writing his autobiography – necessary, because for Hardy one suspects that autobiography was not, as with other men, simply a personal version of his life – a kind of speech for the defence – but an attempt to give such a version the status of truth. [...] And once it was completed, the records had to be destroyed in order to replace actuality by fiction, an account shaped by himself and illustrated by incidents of his own choosing. Thereby what he wished to be remembered would be remembered; what he wished to be forgotten would be

forgotten. This was less a falsification than a shifting of emphasis, but these letters show very well how it worked. (*FR*, 270)

In passages like these, we can see how Larkin's criticism was often far more sophisticated than the common-sense statements he made regarding his own poetry: 'once I have said that the poems were written in or near Hull, Yorkshire, with a succession of Royal Sovereign 2B pencils during the years 1955 to 1963, there seems little to add' (*RW*, 83). In itself, this propensity to switch between different textual tonalities is indicative of a slippery authorial identity. The Hardy piece reinforces this, given Larkin's argument that multiple versions of a life may co-exist, and that life-writing involves 'a shifting of emphasis' rather than a sieving for truth.

'Readers of biography are greedy readers', writes Hermione Lee; 'The reader's first question of the biographer is always going to be, what was she, or he, like?' She goes on to contend that 'when we are reading other forms of life-writing – autobiography, memoir, journal, letter, autobiographical fiction or poem [...] we are always drawn to moments of intimacy, revelation, or particular inwardness'.<sup>1</sup> At least in relation to the letter, Larkin has challenged the wisdom of this attraction: 'A writer's letters stand midway between literature and biography', he wrote in a review of Evelyn Waugh's letters (*FR*, 302). This is very clear: a writer's letters are not purely biographical, nor are they purely literary; they stand at the midway point between those modes. What does this mean in practice, though? Reading a writer's letters, we will of course discover more about the life than we previously knew, both in the small details (the food they ate, the struggles to control their weight), and the bigger picture (their personality, temperament, their values and philosophies). But because letters also stand in some

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<sup>1</sup> Hermione Lee, *Body Parts: Essays in Life-Writing* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2005) 3.

relation to the literary, their biographical value is tempered. If letters are related to literature, this means some degree of artifice must be involved. The writer is engaged in the control, the manipulation, the stylisation, of what is written; that is, after all, a writer's *raison d'être*. Issues of voice and narrative become complex, not straightforward. There is an interplay between what is revealed and what is concealed, what is said and what is unsaid – let alone what is invented, or constituted, by the act of writing itself. Since Larkin the critic could point to issues like these in sophisticated ways, it is perhaps strange that scholars of his work have not followed the lead. In the Introduction, I described how a majority of critics has blurred the lines between art and life, so that the poems' 'lyric I' is repeatedly deemed to be Larkin himself. But this tendency to biographicalise the poems has been based on a rather naive understanding of the very material of traditional biography, namely letters.

Larkin appears to have foreseen his own posthumous downfall on this basis; in the piece on Owen, he argues: 'A writer's reputation is twofold: what we think of his work, and what we think of him. What's more, we expect the two halves to relate: if they don't, then one or the other of our opinions alters until they do' (*RW*, 228). Interestingly, he does not argue that this *should* be the case; only that it is. And it most certainly was following the publication of his own letters and biography. The bespectacled and beloved elder statesman of modern English verse, the man with a Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry, the Unofficial Laureate, the author of poems about train journeys and new-born lambs – suddenly, it was revealed that this figure had enjoyed some rather unsavoury habits: pornography in the office, whisky for breakfast, stringing along three women at the same time, and penning kick-out-the-niggers ditties for fun. One can only imagine the confusion felt by so many readers; indeed, Alan

Bennett suggested in the *London Review of Books* that we had been duped by Larkin.<sup>2</sup> For Geoffrey Hill, however, ‘the rage which in some quarters greeted [the] posthumously published *Letters* was that of people who consider themselves betrayed by one of their own kind. In fact Larkin betrayed no one, least of all himself. What he is seen to be in the letters he was and is in the poems’.<sup>3</sup> To borrow Larkin’s phrase, the two halves did not relate, and one of them had to be altered. It was the work. An *oeuvre* which had been fondly read for its descriptions of rural and urban England, for its small animals and lonely but harmless bachelors, was now read as a poetics of bitterness and misery, oozing with violence against women and class anxiety. That way, what people thought they knew about Larkin could match the work. In this, Larkin was an unfortunate prophet of his own posthumous future.

In fairness, the biographical sins of scholars who have read the work in this way are part of a significantly wider historical trend. Rebecca Earle points to the long history of purloined letters as evidence of their allure. This is not merely a matter of straightforward intelligence (such as the systematic censorship of soldiers’ letters during the First World War), but a sign that letters are commodities, economically and in other ways. Petrarch and Pope both complained about having letters stolen by bandits and servants (respectively) hoping to make a quick buck by selling them. Why? Because, as Earle writes, ‘real letters had another charm for lovers of the authentic’:

Personal letters, particularly those written with no apparent thought to publication, have often been read as windows into the soul of the author. The ancient trope that views the letter as merely a conversation in writing lent

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<sup>2</sup> Alan Bennett, ‘Alas! Deceived’, review of *Philip Larkin: A Writer’s Life* by Andrew Motion, *London Review of Books*, 25 March 1993, 3-9.

<sup>3</sup> Hill, *Style and Faith*, 204.

particular force to this idea, whereby the letter becomes as unmediated as a casual conversation. At its best, eighteenth-century epistolary epicures proclaimed, a letter should resemble a conversation between friends. Reading other people's mail thus becomes a form of eavesdropping.<sup>4</sup>

This also explains the epistolary novel's popularity in the eighteenth century, as well as 'fictional letter collections [presented] as genuine correspondence that had inadvertently fallen into the hands of an editor' – anti-artifice was, after all, an important aspect of eighteenth-century literature.<sup>5</sup> But the concept of letters as intimate pattern has remained a powerful one ever since: 'See! how I keep chatting, just as if I were sitting by your fireside, in the little book-room, pipe in hand', Tennyson wrote in one letter to a friend.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, 'Mined for quotations, read for content, analysed for meaning, letters form the hidden underpinnings of much historical research', Earle writes – and 'historical research' can be broadened to include literary biography and criticism.<sup>7</sup> But as Amanda Gilroy and W. M. Verhoeven have argued, this method leads to 'acts of erasure', ignoring both 'the dialogic construction of identity' and the independent 'textuality' of letters.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, this view of the letter as a repository of biographical and historical data *is* a scholarly convention, and the basis of many a work of literary criticism and biography.

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<sup>4</sup> Rebecca Earle, ed. and introd., *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-Writers, 1600-1945* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999) 4-5.

<sup>5</sup> Earle, 5.

<sup>6</sup> Alfred Lord Tennyson, *The Letters of Alfred Lord Tennyson, Volume I: 1821-1850*, ed. Cecil Y. Lang and Edgar F. Shannon Jr. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982) 246-9.

<sup>7</sup> Earle, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Amanda Gilroy and W. M. Verhoeven, editorial, *Correspondences*, special issue of *Prose Studies*, 19:2 (August 1996), 121.

At this point, it is useful to reflect on the nature of a correspondence. The first and most fundamental point to make is that a correspondence is a *private world*. The fact that one writes to a specific and familiar audience does not automatically mean that one's letters will be more revealing than anything written or said in a public setting. Instead, a space is created which implicitly grants the two correspondents permission to perform a disinhibited selfhood of their choosing. The other (connected) point is that the word 'correspondence' literally means to *co-respond*; in other words, to be in harmony, or agreement – this was the meaning of the word long before it came to be attached to the act of communicating by letters. Each party corresponds *to*, as well as *with*, the other party, and this relates to the previous point because it requires a set of conventions (in terms of tone, subjects, a lexicon, and so on) to be established within the private world. Generally speaking, a correspondence only takes place because of distance; distance is also absence, and so a correspondence is designed to fill a void. In place of a 'real' relationship, a written (and thus constructed) one must suffice. As a result, relationships which begin or exist primarily as correspondences can be disappointing when 'realised' in the flesh. This is precisely what occurs in Larkin's novel, *A Girl in Winter*: after a long exchange of letters, Katherine is disappointed to find that her English pen pal, Robin, is nothing like the figure she built him up to be. To use a more contemporary example, the act of performance which is inherent to correspondence can certainly help to explain the bitter disappointment of countless first dates arranged via online dating sites, since there is no guarantee a person will match up to the persona which they present within a correspondence.

Despite all this, the use of letters as historical documents is an entrenched one, and the prevalence of biographical scholarship within Larkin studies is the following of, rather than the exception to, this rule. A quick scan of the plaudits quoted on the covers

of the published letters shows how widespread it is: for John Carey, the 1992 *Selected Letters* is ‘the most *enlightening* collection of letters I have ever read by any writer’, whilst the eminent biographer Claire Tomalin writes ‘there is something *raw* about this early *exposure* of intimacies’ (*SL*, front and back covers). When *Letters to Monica* was published in 2010, the response from reviewers was similar: William Boyd found ‘a compelling *authenticity* and *almost vulnerability*’; David Sexton called them ‘*the most intimate* letters of a major poet’; whilst John Carey was again delighted with how they ‘*reveal* the life and personality *more intimately* than ever before’ (all italicisations are my own) (*LM*, front cover and inside matter).

Of course, the chattering which goes on in newspapers and literary magazines is not always representative of the direction of scholarship, but in Larkin’s case it is; when developed into a fuller hermeneutics, this tendency to see letters as intimate and revealing documents can produce some bewildering literary criticism. Booth believes that ‘we puzzle over what “real life” event lies behind the change of tone from one poem to the next. We want to know more about the particular people to whom poems are addressed’.<sup>9</sup> To quench this thirst, he reads Larkin’s letters in order to ‘know more’ about the specific women who became muses for the poems. In the case of Ruth Bowman, with whom Larkin had a seven year relationship ending in an aborted engagement, Booth draws upon Larkin’s correspondence with James Sutton, highlighting the expressions of guilt, unhappiness, selfishness, and self-imposed isolationism. Turning to Larkin’s poems from the same period, Booth deduces the following: ‘As his relationship with Ruth neared its end this questioning of his motives threw the poet into the crisis fictionalized in “Deceptions” (1950), which describes a man’s attempt to free himself from the conventions of “bridal London” by means of

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<sup>9</sup> Booth, *The Poet’s Plight*, 48.



rape'.<sup>10</sup> This summary of the poem is a distortion of its actual content, and Booth's leap of faith between life and art is a difficult one, both hermeneutically and morally. Did Larkin really appropriate an historical rape case as a trope for the exploration of his guilt and selfishness? If so, one would need to ask some tough questions of his ethics. As it happens, I am not persuaded by the connection between the guilt-ridden letters to Sutton and the harrowing sexual violence of the poem.

More concerning is Edna Longley's essay, 'Larkin, Decadence and the Lyric Poem', which argues for an understanding of Larkin as a kind of *fin-de-siècle* aesthete, part of a tradition which includes Wilde, Yeats, Lawrence, and Derek Mahon. 'Several critics, myself included', Longley writes, 'have already discussed Larkin as (to quote his youthful self-description) a "fin de siècle Romantic". [...] But the biographical disclosures provide a new context for this emphasis, and perhaps this emphasis provides a new context for them'.<sup>11</sup> Those 'biographical disclosures', she continues, evoke 'a hinterland of disturbance that stretches into the burnt diaries and includes trace elements of several *fin-de-siècle* sins'.<sup>12</sup> This sentence in particular is quite astonishing. Longley claims that Larkin's disturbing psychology can be found in his diaries – but, as she herself states, those diaries were 'burnt'. The implication is that Longley, having read the letters and biography, knows enough about Larkin to *guess* the contents of his diaries, even though they were destroyed in 1985, having been seen by no more than three pairs of eyes, hers not included.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>11</sup> Edna Longley, 'Larkin, Decadence and the Lyric Poem', in *New Larkins for Old: Critical Essays*, ed. James Booth (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000) 30.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 36.

Perhaps most troubling is the way Longley takes this biographical-psychological model to the extreme, using the ‘biographical disclosures’ to diagnose Larkin with narcissism:

Before the letters and biography appeared, I had written on Larkin as *poète maudit* (1988), but without knowing the half of it. At least people who expect poetry to be cosy or poets always to be Mr Nice Guy – or Gal – have had a shock. They may now be more attuned to the precise resonance of Larkin’s despair. Here I want to propose a psychological model that might fit Larkin: a model that particularly applies to decadent writing, and one that accounts for some of its strengths as well as weaknesses. This is the psychology of narcissism, and I will be drawing on various accounts of it. Narcissism has been described as both a personal and cultural phenomenon, and as operating across a spectrum from the pathological to the normal. It is characterized by difficulties in moving from the grandiose idealized self of infancy to realistic self-esteem, and also from solipsism to relationship.<sup>13</sup>

With this statement, Longley lands squarely in the realm of psychiatry. Narcissism is a type of personality disorder, one of the most complex psychological conditions, which can only be diagnosed by professional clinicians following years of scientific training, and extensive time spent with the patient, using official diagnostic tools. Longley is a well-respected literary and cultural critic; as a poet, editor, and scholar, her list of achievements is vast and enviable. But a clinical psychiatric background does not list among them; consequently, her diagnosis of a personality disorder (using the letters of a

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 36.

man who had been dead for well over a decade prior to the diagnosis) raises questions regarding medical and scholarly ethics. At the very least, what Longley's essay relies upon is a view of the letters as a straightforward portal into Larkin's mind (and, even more presumptuous, into his *unconscious* mind); without this model, the edifice of her argument comes crashing down. It is precisely this model which I intend to challenge. The basic argument of Part I is that Larkin's letters, far from being reliable documents which instruct readers about the 'real' Larkin, are artificial and constructed works in which different discourses of selfhood are employed and rehearsed. This is always dialogic, contingent on the specific correspondent.

The idea that different voices can be found in Larkin's letters is not new, various critics having pointed this out. So often, though, those critics attempt to draw a line through all but one of the voices, in order to privilege a particular one. Booth, for instance, argues that Larkin's racist letters are 'greatly complicated by contradictory elements', such as his praise for Louis Armstrong in letters to his Faber editor Charles Monteith, which Booth sees as showing 'an appreciation of the black element in his own culture'.<sup>14</sup> Booth is quite right to complicate the letters in this way. But in the same essay, he carefully selects specific letters in order to prove Larkin's 'Englishness'. This methodology plays into the hands of the critics he seeks to critique, such as Jardine: for every letter Booth plucks out as evidence of Larkin's positive racial politics, Jardine can counter it with another showing Larkin's despicable racial politics. The typical mode of reading Larkin's letters, then, is a problematic one.

The originality of my argument is its insistence on the letters' *constructed-ness* and *relativity*. In this sense, the letters provide a *model* for reading the literary works, rather

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<sup>14</sup> James Booth, 'Philip Larkin: Lyricism, Englishness and Postcoloniality', in *Larkin with Poetry*, English Association Conference Papers, ed. Michael Baron (Leicester: English Association, 1997) 24.

than functioning as a treasury of biographical evidence supporting the (frequently unconvincing) arguments of critics. Moreover, it is not sufficient to simply make the point that Larkin had more than one voice. Discussing the poetry, Osborne argues that ‘the palimpsestic range and density of Larkin’s referencing is such as to render his *oeuvre* a Palgrave or Quiller-Couch atomized into radiant piths and gists’.<sup>15</sup> Osborne’s two monographs, as well as Burnett’s *Complete Poems*, have established the enormous range of citations present in Larkin’s verse. But precisely the same can be said of his letters: not only does Larkin employ different voices, he often does so by absorbing, juxtaposing, and collaging the voices of others – sometimes with absolute subtlety. By recognising these citations, we can interpret the letters in ways unavailable to biographical critics, who put their faith in a singular presence speaking to us through the work. Thwaite’s sparse footnoting in the *Selected Letters* and *Letters to Monica* has, unfortunately, allowed the high level of citation within Larkin’s letters to pass under the radar. James T. Boulton, editor of D. H. Lawrence’s letters, has described how ‘an editor can easily falsify the Lawrence identity’ if s/he is not sensitive to ‘the network of literary references and allusions which supply the essential tone and character of the passage’.<sup>16</sup> He argues that alertness to this network allows Lawrence’s ‘underestimated’ qualities of humour and learning to emerge. Booth has commented that Larkin’s reading ‘was as wide and deep as Eliot’s’; perhaps, then, Larkin’s letters need Boultonising.<sup>17</sup>

Peter Childs points out that ‘while letters are often to biographers what novels and poems are to critics, they have idiosyncratic textual effects that also should be attended

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<sup>15</sup> Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, 55.

<sup>16</sup> James T. Boulton, ‘Editing D. H. Lawrence’s Letters: The Editor’s Creative Role’, *Correspondences*, special issue of *Prose Studies*, 19:2 (August 1996), 211-12.

<sup>17</sup> Booth, *Life, Art and Love*, 33.

to'.<sup>18</sup> Much greater sensitivity to the textual idiosyncrasies of Larkin's letters is required if hot-headed accusations – such as Paulin's of 'quasi-fascism' – are to be avoided. Paulin himself has written an intelligent essay on Elizabeth Bishop's letters, asking whether there exists 'a poetics of the familiar letter? Or do we simply enjoy a writer's published letters and then treat them as sources for literary works?'<sup>19</sup> His view – that letters are written with an 'in-the-moment' authenticity – is enlightening in the case of Bishop, but one size does not fit all. The wider relevance of his essay lies in its refusal to read a literary correspondence as either biographical plunder or as a series of early but inferior versions of soon-to-be great poems; instead, he treats them as textual artefacts requiring a poetics of their own. All the stranger, then, that Paulin failed to adopt such a sophisticated approach when it came to Larkin's letters; especially since his essay briefly and vaguely mentions 'other, colder views of Bishop', but argues that moral judgement is, 'in my view, a most improper exercise where artists are concerned'.<sup>20</sup> If this is true, and the 'performative element' of the epistolary act 'scarcely needs emphasizing', why did this slip his mind when he penned his scathing letter to the *TLS* in 1992?<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, Paulin's approach to Bishop's letters, which respects their textuality and individuality, is a useful one, and might be asset-stripped by Larkin scholars.

The staunch rejection of biography in relation to Larkin's poetry has already begun: 'underneath the naturalness and orality attributed to Larkin's verse is a textuality that

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<sup>18</sup> Peter Childs, "'One may as well begin with Helen's letters...': Corresponding but not Connecting in the Writings of E. M. Forster', *Correspondences*, special issue of *Prose Studies*, 19:2 (August 1996), 202.

<sup>19</sup> Tom Paulin, 'Writing to the Moment: Elizabeth Bishop', in *Writing to the Moment: Selected Critical Essays 1980-1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996) 216.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

dare not speak its name', Osborne has written.<sup>22</sup> But Larkin's *epistolary* textuality, which so far has not dared to speak its name, must now be dragged from the closet. I have already described the ways in which a correspondence becomes a *co-respondence*; one effect of citation is to create a particular discursive space which co-responds to a particular version of the self. In practice, this means that the discourse of 'the aspiring novelist', seen in Larkin's letters to James Sutton, is built up from the ground partly by incorporating citations from Lawrence, Isherwood, Woolf, Joyce, and more. In this way, 'voice' is not simply numerous, but also infinitely diverse, supporting the argument that the selves presented within the letters are verbal constructs. Even the emphasis on personal pronouns, in the various memoirs associated with Larkin, implies a potentially infinite fragmentation of his persona: it is the Philip Larkin *I knew* (Maeve Brennan), or Philip Larkin *and me* (Jean Hartley), which are offered, instead of definitive accounts of the man.<sup>23</sup> The format of the *Selected Letters* brings out this multiplicity: although replicating the chronological structure of the 1988 *Collected Poems* which I critiqued in the Introduction, it allows readers to experience the diversity of identities which Larkin could employ within the same week or even day.

Consequently, the scope of these chapters cannot possibly allow for the sheer diversity of possible 'Larkins' to be anywhere near exhausted. Instead, they focus on a shortlist of correspondences, in order to explore *some* of the differing constructions of identity which Larkin creates and sustains. In doing so, I have made the decision to look at archived correspondences, rather than rely on the two published selections. This was partly to guarantee the wider perspectives which come with poring through an entire correspondence instead of an abbreviated selection. But distortion may take other forms.

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<sup>22</sup> Osborne, *Radical Larkin*, 1.

<sup>23</sup> See Maeve Brennan, *The Philip Larkin I Knew* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002); and Jean Hartley, *Philip Larkin, the Marvell Press and Me* (London: The Sumach Press, 1993).

Thwaite's work on the *Selected Letters* and *Letters to Monica* certainly satisfies the needs of a commercial edition: those needs, I would suggest, tend to focus on the more 'interesting' or 'significant' aspects of a writer's correspondence – what did s/he say about the famous figures s/he knew? Particularly literary contemporaries? What did s/he say about the great writers of the past? Or about politics, and the momentous events of his or her lifetime? This approach, however, generally fails to fully convey the experience of the everyday which pervades Larkin's correspondences. The perspectives afforded by archival research, then, were deeper as well as wider. As such, readers familiar with the two editions will recognise some of the material cited here, whilst the rest is yet to be discussed or published.

It should be said that other critics have been more disparaging of Thwaite's editing. Following the publication of Larkin's *Selected Letters*, Paulin attacked the many editorial omissions, scathingly re-naming the volume "The Selected Letters of Philip Larkin as Doctored by Anthony Thwaite".<sup>24</sup> Most troubling for Paulin was the practice of cutting short moments of 'race hatred'. Instead, Paulin argued, the letters should have been 'properly edited, with a full scholarly apparatus of footnotes and references and an introduction which sought to place, analyse and understand – socially and psychologically – Larkin's racism, misogyny and quasi-fascism'.<sup>25</sup> But Thwaite repeated the strategy of omissions and light footnoting in *Letters to Monica*, insisting that he had 'included something of everything, but in some cases I have chosen to give only a few examples of repeated themes and topics' (*LM*, xiv). It may be, however, in the repetition that the Larkin of this correspondence appears with greater clarity; his concerns, as I argue, are not political, and often not even literary. In this way, working with the full extant correspondences has provided important and manifold benefits.

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<sup>24</sup> Paulin, letter, 15.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

The correspondences explored are with James Ballard Sutton, Colin Gunner, and Monica Jones. Each one has its own individual texture, which the following chapters bring out.<sup>26</sup> By looking at the correspondences in-depth, we can not only witness the multiplicity of Larkin's epistolary voices, but also how they become *constitutive* of his identity. One should not attempt to cancel all but one of them in order to arrive at the 'true' Larkin. The purpose of this exercise is not simply to undermine singular and reductive interpretations of Larkin (although this is necessary), but also to propose the model of constructed identity as a useful one for the literary works. If Larkin's epistolary identities *are* constructed, then the authenticity which critics either laud or slam evaporates, making the letters more valuable as literary artefacts. In turn, this destabilises and undermines the biographical foundations upon which the dominant understandings of Larkin have been built.

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<sup>26</sup> Throughout Part I, I have sought to transcribe Larkin's letters as faithfully as possible, in terms of typography, spelling, and grammar. Although he makes errors, Larkin also sometimes plays with language in order to be more expressive; consequently, the scholar who seeks to make decisions regarding what to correct and normalise treads upon precarious ground.



## 2

### James Ballard Sutton

Larkin's correspondence with his Coventry school friend James (Jim) Ballard Sutton splutters to a start in 1938, with a letter by Larkin written from a family holiday in Sidmouth; it trickles to a halt in the early 1950s, when Larkin worked at Queen's University Belfast. The correspondence intensified during the Second World War, when Larkin was studying at Oxford, and Sutton – who otherwise would have been studying at the Slade – was fighting in the conflict.

#### **'Stuff my poems in your cavernous pipe': an intimate relationship?**

Prior to and during the war, Sutton was one of Larkin's most frequent correspondents, and there is plenty in the letters to suggest closeness and intimacy. Indeed, critics often see these letters as open expressions of the young Larkin's mind-set: Motion characterises them as 'extraordinary [...], intimate, spontaneous, vital'.<sup>1</sup> It is easy to see why: 'Permit me to observe that during the last eight days I have received 6 (six) letters from you [...]. In other words, I resemble a man who has consumed 6 bots [*sic*] of beer in swift succession' (12 April 1943). Here, Sutton's friendship is likened to intoxication, language arguably reserved for a lover. In 1943 – the year after the Wannsee Conference – Larkin and Sutton began to sign off their letters with a Star of David. Larkin even had a personal bookplate printed which contained a Star of David, something he tells Sutton (16 March 1943). Perhaps the inspiration for this came from

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<sup>1</sup> Motion, *A Writer's Life*, 39.

one of Larkin's heroes, Louis Armstrong, who wore a Star of David pendant as a gesture of respect and gratitude for the Jewish family which unofficially adopted him. Larkin and Sutton's imitation, then, is clearly an intimate shared gesture and an act of solidarity with the suffering of an oppressed ethnoreligious group (Jews) and an oppressed race (African-Americans) – and a detail which challenges the later charges of racism.

As was true of millions of relationships during the 1940s, there is a strong sense of the war as an interruption, and this leads to feelings which border on sexual yearning: 'Ah, if only we could get together again and you stuff my poems in your cavernous pipe, and I put my feet through your canvases two at a time as of old', Larkin wrote three years into the conflict (5 August 1942). 'I long for you to come back', he wrote the year after; 'I feel you are a particularly good book or record I have voluntarily locked away and some time in the future shall take out and read or play again – if you see what I mean. Of course you are much better than a book or record. But it's almost the sense of something saved up. I hope you come back, soon' (12 August 1943). Could this be the language of flirting, and of sexual desire? Even if one rejects this notion, what comes through strongly in these letters is a sense of homosocial bonding.

For Larkin, however, the war was not just an interruption to their companionship, but also to their artistic destinies. Time after time, Larkin presents himself and Sutton as the next generation's Great Artists working in the novel form and painting respectively: '[T]here has been a change in English psyche. The wind is blowing "in a new direction of time", and I feel that you & I, who will be if anyone the new artists, are onto it' (6 July 1942). On 7 May 1945, Germany signed an act of military surrender, and euphoria spread across the United Kingdom. The following day, however, Larkin's mind was focused on another topic altogether: 'I hope the end of the European War means that we

shall meet again soon, and be able to get going on affairs of mutual and eternal interest. By this I mean the appreciation and creation of temporal and timeless ART' (8 May 1945). Three months later, this was still his concern:

Yes, I look forward to our meeting again, I do really. [...] I need someone who consciously accepts mystery at the bottom of things, a person who devotes themselves to listening for this mystery – an artist – the kind of artist who is perpetually kneeling in his heart – who gives no fuck for anything except this mystery, and for that gives every fuck there is. Is this you? I believe it is. (16 August 1945)

Far from celebrating Victory in Europe, Larkin obsessed with the narrative of his and Sutton's shared future of artistic greatness. The visibility of Larkin's narrative creations should at least warn us that the correspondence is not as clear-cut as critics tend to believe; more on this later.

### **'I saw a horse last night': the war and proxy experience**

The wartime context of these letters is vital to our understanding of Larkin's construction of the relationship. He has no interest in nationalist discourse, or the implications of the war, or its specific battles and developments. In the same V-E Day letter, he has this to say: 'I listened to Churchill blathering out of him this afternoon, and the King this evening. But all day I have had a headache and felt despondent. The second draft of the novel has reached p.22. I have had some bad meat for supper which gives me a thoughtful expression. And the weather has turned enervatingly warm' (8 May 1945). Here, the great war leader Churchill is portrayed as a blatherer, the King is

no better, and the Allies' victory is narrated as casually as Larkin's headache, the drafting of his novel, bad meat, and the weather. Clearly, Larkin has concerns more important to him than the fate of Europe.

Jenny Hartley has argued that 'During a war letters assume a heightened significance, and the Second World War can be seen as the last golden age of letter-writing'.<sup>2</sup> She goes on to discuss the important role women, and particularly mothers, played as letter-writers during the conflict:

In their letters, mothers reproduced the kind of dailiness we find in women's fiction. The creation of the everyday, the 'study of provincial life', to borrow *Middlemarch's* subtitle, is a project which the letter-writing mother shares with the writer of domestic fiction. [...] If mothers were the domestic realists of the war, they also had to practise the novelist's arts of editing and selecting. Letters might offer space for creativity and enable the writing self to gain in confidence, but they had to be carefully angled and controlled with the reader in mind. Mothers could not forget for long the function of their letters as surrogate maternal comfort.<sup>3</sup>

Larkin – neither a woman nor a mother – was in the privileged position of studying at Oxford, having been deemed unfit for military service. In this context he seems to have assumed that 'surrogate' role. This manifests itself in rich, present-tense descriptions of Oxford, which are in line with Hartley's idea about the 'study of provincial life'. This is Larkin's letter to Sutton of 21 May 1941, penned in the gardens of St John's College:

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<sup>2</sup> Jenny Hartley, "Letters are *everything* these days": mothers and letters in the Second World War', in *Epistolary Selves*, ed. Earle, 183.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 186-7.

Round the base of a tree trunk there is a wooden circular seat. The tree (unknown tree) lets its branches fall around on all sides so that anyone sitting on the seat is mainly obscured. A thin veil of ~~green~~ and sun-green leaves flick and mottle in the wind: this page is shadowed by endless changing. Farther, bells debate the exact moment of 2 o'clock. Due to the wind and the curious tree there is always a rustling, like constantly blowing leaves in Autumn streets, or, on a scorched headland, the distant sound of the sea.

This is impressive prose, and has even been edited to achieve maximum impact. The passage shows genuine poetic promise: 'flick and mottle [...] shadowed by endless changing' is redolent of Hopkins, and 'bells debate the exact moment' is a strong metaphor. What are we to make of it all? Is it designed to put Sutton back in touch with home, with England? Exiled far away in an environment he did not choose, the letter momentarily carries him from his present reality. But Larkin expands his letter-writing role beyond the mere provision of comfort; convinced, as he was, that Sutton was the art world's Next Big Thing, Larkin often seems to write in order to appeal to his friend's visual imagination, lest it wither away, trapped in a military environment which was both horrific and banal. In one letter, Larkin appears to participate in a kind of *ekphrasis*:

I saw a horse last night, standing at the edge of a field, being patted on the nose by some people, and lifting its long proud head away, again & again, proudly; but gently the shape of its skull surprised me. It was a black one. And then the fields, in slopes and little hills, sunlit and hedged. And the clouds, small, pearly

blue-grey sea-shells, drifting along the blue horizon, like Paul Nash. And the feeling of people out in their Sunday things on a summer evening. (6 July 1942)

I call this passage *ekphrastic* because of the way Larkin renders something visual into words, and passes on those words to Sutton for him to re-produce as something visual again, whether in his imagination, or with pencil and paper. Larkin himself compares the vision to a Paul Nash painting, so that life imitates art. What purpose could this serve, other than to keep Sutton's imagination kindled? In another letter, Larkin even gives Sutton a tantalising glimpse of the kind of work he *could* go on to produce:

I think you might make a name as 'the painter of the brickyards' – blue sky, red bricks, yellow sun. Scaffolds, shadows, comic labourers, brown tea, and the rarified ice-wind blowing through the grass. Or just one enormous [...] picture entitled 'The Builders' with about 50 builders running & jumping and falling and shouting and building and climbing and conveying with the wind against them. It would be richly beautiful and also richly humorous [*sic*]. (12 April 1943)

Larkin's vision of Sutton's individual aesthetic is a blend of Ford Madox Brown's *Work* and Stanley Spencer's Cookham paintings. This is not simply a case of vague encouragement. The stimuli, the provocations and inspirations, the reminders of home and normality, all these must have been life-affirming for an aspiring painter forced to

focus his entire being on fighting a war in far-flung places.<sup>4</sup> It is an early example of Larkin's desire to textually connect with, even inhabit, other identities.

### **Portrait of the artist as a young man?**

Presumably the visual stimuli and encouragement contained within these letters would have occurred with or without a world war, for it was part of a much bigger project, the construction of this pair as artists, or more specifically as *the* great artists of the future. As I have argued, *construction* is an important word, since it signifies a conscious effort, a knowingness, which results in a deliberate crafting of one's material (in this case, words). This, we know, is the job of a writer. Is it so strange, then, that a person whose daily work involves the creation and manipulation of fictions might do something similar in *supposedly* 'transparent' forms of writing, such as a personal correspondence? Sometimes this manipulation can simply take the form of self-reflexive writing: 'One page gone. You poor thing, having to endure the gabblings of a demented megalomaniac', or 'Pause while I finger your letter like a man fingering a letter on the pictures' (6 September 1939[?], 7 May 1941).

Elsewhere, Larkin theorises extensively on literature and painting, in language which feels as though it is aware of posterity:

I am not trying to imitate Auden: I am juggling with sounds and associations which will best express the original vision. It is done quite intuitively and

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<sup>4</sup> This is borne out by Julie Maylon's article on Sutton's letters to Larkin. Maylon discusses a sketch by Larkin, which shows him sending a literal 'lifeline' to Sutton, stretching from England to the Middle East, where Sutton was based; see 'The other side of a friendship: letters from James Sutton to Philip Larkin', *About Larkin*, 7 (April 1999), 16-17.

esoterically. That is why a poet never thinks of his reader. Why should he? The reader doesn't come into the poem at all. (20 December 1940)

I think you said that you expected to understand some artistic question better when you knew more about sex. I have come to the conclusion that nothing, no abstract word, has anything to do with art. [...] I am occupied entirely with problems of expression – style. I know I am a mirror – a curious concave mirror that makes everything small and distinct – a mirror that must be polished by ceaseless artistic creation. (22 March 1944)

Painting I should think is more impersonal than writing: one is not forced at every turn to invent what you are copying, so to speak. (28 October 1947)

As well as the direct reference to Auden, Larkin's 'I know I am a mirror' echoes 'I am a camera', the famous phrase from Christopher Isherwood's 1939 novel *Goodbye to Berlin* (Isherwood being one of Larkin's literary heroes at this time); seemingly, a pantheon of great writers is being invoked in order to aid Larkin's negotiations with his art. It is not the aim of this chapter to discuss how consistently (or inconsistently) Larkin applied these theories, whether in those early years or later, but rather to show how precociously he engaged, early in his writing career, in the construction of roles, personae, and identities. This involved recourse to what is *between* (surely one of the most ambiguous words in the English language) two separate selves. Larkin told Sutton that 'In you there is a pure cubic inch of painting, and in me a pure cubic inch of writing, and around these our characters mysteriously join' (12 April 1943). What was between himself and Sutton, what brought their two distinct selves together, was art;



this desire to construct identities through writing is a common concern of Larkin's and of this study. And if their artistic identities split at the juncture where novels and paintings divide, what they both had firmly in common was a passion for D. H. Lawrence, the single most important presence in this correspondence. Again and again, Lawrence functions as common ground for the pair:

I fully agree about the importance of Lawrence. To me, Lawrence is what Shakespeare was to Keats and all the other buggers. (6 July 1942)

I have been thinking recently that Lawrence's beliefs are pure (in the sense of utter, most sensitive and refined) aestheticism. (5 April 1943)

Oh, and another thing about Lawrence. Lawrence has been the world to me. Now the world is beginning to enforce itself through experience, and Lawrence will have to go, or at least be modified by experience. (23 May 1943)

As well as the explicit naming of Lawrence, Keats, and Shakespeare, the point about 'experience' is surely proof that Larkin had already digested 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'; whilst his declaration that 'Lawrence will have to go' could be an echo of Oscar Wilde's reported final and camp words: 'Either this wallpaper goes or I do'. But it is Lawrence who becomes the yardstick of genius and aesthetic achievement which Larkin and Sutton aspire to reach in their own lives and careers. Larkin reserves his most impassioned language for Lawrence: 'I have been reading "Sons and Lovers" and feel ready to die. [...] Cock me! Nearly every page of it is absolutely perfect' (20

March 1942). A passion and obsession, Lawrence operates as a meeting point for two selves separated by geography and the artistic medium.

Lawrence is also important because he represents the model of an artistic life with which Larkin flirts, but eventually rejects. The entire correspondence with Sutton can be read as an extended and collaborative essay on what it means to be an artist. Larkin's vivid definition of a true artist – cited earlier as someone 'perpetually kneeling in his heart – who gives no fuck for anything except this mystery, and for that gives every fuck there is' – seems to establish the centrality of art as a consensus. But whereas Lawrence experienced no essential difference between his art and life (as evidenced by his *wanderlust*, his love of beauty, his unadulterated embrace of the senses), Larkin eventually came to realise that such a life would not be available to him: 'What mainly worries me', he wrote in 1946, 'is a strengthening suspicion that in my character there is an antipathy between "art" and "life". [...] Time & time again I feel that before I write anything else at all I must drag myself out of the water, shake myself dry and sit down on a lonely rock to contemplate glittering loneliness' (7 April 1946). The answer was not to choose completely between them, but to compartmentalise: Larkin the writer would simply have to work different hours to Larkin the librarian (as he would become). This compartmentalisation would take effect in other ways, manifesting itself as much in his love life as in the different discourses of the letters. In terms of *textual* identities, the artistic type represented by Lawrence is one Larkin desires to emulate but decides to adapt. He rehearses this discourse of the aspiring artist, and eventually becomes successful; Sutton collaborates in that discourse, but ends up becoming a landlord and a pharmacist. This explains why their correspondence does not last beyond the early 1950s: the flame of the artist's discourse and identity, with nothing to feed on,

simply expires. Recognising the strategically constructed nature of this particular correspondence enables us to understand Larkin's literary development.

Because of all this theorising, and the discussions about art, life, and Lawrence, a number of critics have called Larkin's correspondence with Sutton a portrait of the artist as a young man.<sup>5</sup> Rarely, however, do they seem to grasp the implications of this phrase, or of the *Künstlerroman* tradition which includes James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and the cherished *Sons and Lovers* (two modernist works which inform the supposedly anti-modernist Larkin's literary development). A *portrait* is itself the product of artistry, a conscious creation and a conscious *version* of a life. If this were not so, anyone who could adequately wield a paintbrush would be commissioned to paint the Queen. The shape and focus of the *Künstlerroman* implies a life which, even in youth, is teleologically directed *towards* art, rather than an innocent account *after the event* of a person who happened to become an artist. Consequently, I would concur with those critics who characterise this correspondence as a portrait of the artist as a young man, but for different reasons: *not* because the letters are full of useful biographical plunder from the period of the artist's life when he was at his most open, transparent, and intimate; rather, because the letters provide an early and sustained example of Larkin's lifelong project, which was the artistic construction of diverse textual identities.

### **'Hence my cock': self-reflexivity and self-distancing**

The argument that Larkin engaged in the careful construction of an artistic persona and narrative to match is backed up by the presence of self-reflexive writing, itself the hallmark of an artist. We have seen this already in the image of Larkin fingering a letter

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<sup>5</sup> Thwaite, for instance, writes: 'They are very much a portrait of the artist as a young man' (*SL*, xii).

from Sutton ‘like a man fingering a letter on the pictures’ – a nice artistic touch. But the self-reflexive nature of Larkin’s letters to Sutton goes beyond humour and showboating. As we might expect of any aspiring artist, there is a great deal of anxiety and self-analysis. The teenage Larkin describes one early poem as ‘Full of gloom and adolescent self-conceit and windbag sentimentality and pseudo-Keatsian mush’ (6 September 1939[?]); two years later, typing out poems both depresses and impresses him: ‘Depressed me because they were just like any other shit by Day Lewis or anyone else: impressed me because the words seem to come easily (“My fatal gift for pastiche” – Ch. Ish<sup>6</sup>) – odd phrases just like Auden. pastiche means copying, youse iggerant cunts’ [*sic*] (16 April 1941). Such astute self-criticism often tips into agonising self-analysis, and one device Larkin sometimes employs is a dialogue between different parts of himself: the ‘Self’ and the ‘Better Self’, or the ‘Mind’ and the ‘Bowels’ (see, for instance, the letters of 6 September 1939[?] and 7 May 1941). The mind/bowels dichotomy is very amusing, but reveals a particular concern of Larkin’s, which is his ability (or not) to write letters. In turn, this anxiety shows Larkin’s perception of letter-writing *as an art*, rather than a straightforward transmission of gossip or information. He yearns to be a writer, but does not think he can write letters; *ergo* he is not a writer. This is another sign that readers need to be more attentive to the artifice, artistry, and fictionality of Larkin’s letters.

And another detail about the Larkin-Sutton letters acts as an important qualifier to the commonly-held view that they ‘expose’ Larkin: the way in which an act of self-reflexivity often morphs into an act of distancing or obscuring. In a letter of 1943 (yet another which partakes in aesthetic theorising), Larkin writes: ‘Shelley similarly did not believe in Heaven, and completed the circle on earth when the ideals of liberty,

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<sup>6</sup> Christopher Isherwood – whom we have already seen Larkin ‘pastiche’.

democracy & justice should be put into action. Hence “Prometheus Unbound” (JBS “Hence my cock”)’ (9 July 1943). It is as though Larkin, conscious of the encroaching pretentiousness of the sentence, disarms the recipient’s inevitable attack by anticipating it. Insert a crude response – and it is safe to proceed.

But his acts of distancing can be darker. Another letter outlines Larkin’s writerly woes: ‘Sometimes all this problem weighs very heavily on me, till I feel absolutely without hope. But then something crops up, and life goes on’. Underneath this, Larkin has scribbled ‘Have just reread this. Hope it amuses you’ (2 January 1943). Later, mired in a troubled relationship with Ruth Bowman, Larkin writes a long letter detailing his unhappiness, of which there is only space to give a flavour:

It’s not much of a talent that can be overthrown by deeper contact with other people. [...] Keats said once and for all that if poetry come not as naturally as leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all. [...] Nevertheless, I can’t help being a little worried [...] and I sometimes worry if you have felt the same thing, or whether it’s peculiar to my own nature. (7 April 1946)

Written in the top left-hand corner of the first sheet is this comment: ‘P.S. On rereading this letter sounds rather priggish. Sorry!’ Two modest post-scripts throw into doubt the sincerity of emotion of the previous passages – or seek to. These moments of vision and revision are some of the most fascinating in the Sutton correspondence. Larkin, going back over his letters before he posts them (does this not suggest a self-consciousness?), clearly feels the need to modify, qualify, and muddy the waters. Why? Is it an anxiety about giving too much away, baring his soul too nakedly? A sense that he has lost control of his narrative, that the constructed persona has lost direction and bled into

another? These are not questions we can answer, but the distancing (which recurs in other correspondences) is yet another example of Larkin's manipulation of the realities he wishes to project, 'a shifting of emphasis', as he wrote of Hardy's manipulations.

### **Coda: the case of Maeve Brennan**

If further proof is needed of the complexity and variety of Larkin's constructed personae, his erstwhile lover Maeve Brennan movingly provides it. A close acquaintance for three decades, Brennan had a love affair with Larkin which lasted eighteen years, on and off. She has more right than most to claim she 'knew' Philip Larkin.

However, following Larkin's death, Brennan learned much about him from the *Selected Letters* and biography. The traumatic nature of this experience led her to write her own memoir, *her* statement about the man *she knew*. In one significant passage, Brennan writes: '[I]t was not until I read his letters to his school friend, Jim Sutton, that I began to have some appreciation of Larkin's extraordinary complexity and chameleon-like characteristics'.<sup>7</sup> And she later draws attention to what she calls Larkin's 'Moment of Ecstasy letter', written to Sutton in 1943:

When I first read the letter I had been astonished to see set down in logical progression his views on society, sex, love and marriage, in precisely the same language as he had imparted them to me twenty years later. [...] This incident, more than any other, restored my faith in Philip and in the love we shared, confirming that the part I had played in his life had been not merely romantic

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<sup>7</sup> Brennan, 2.

and exhilarating, but as he himself described it: ‘something that ... did at one time seem a different kind of experience from anything hitherto’.<sup>8</sup>

Brennan’s story is a fascinating one: never doubting during Larkin’s lifetime that she had the measure of him, suddenly she was faced with a crisis of knowledge about his identity. Reading the letters to Sutton, she is both shocked by what she did not know, and comforted by ideas and language she could recognise. To be so intimate for so long, only to discover shocking revelations, but then to discover recognisable traits in a correspondence with someone else – all this strongly suggests a complex identity which was not only split but also strategically and dialogically constructed and compartmentalised. The Sutton correspondence contains *some* of Larkin’s many textual identities, but by no means is it able to tell the whole story. For a greater sense of their diversity, we must explore others.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 79.

# 3

## Colin Gunner

In 1971, decades after they had left school, Colin Gunner struck up a casual correspondence with his old friend Larkin, which lasted until the poet's death in 1985. This was a highly infrequent correspondence: in 1972, for example, Larkin wrote to Gunner only once; his next missive was not until April 1973. In itself, this pattern should warn us against expecting anything too serious from Larkin, in what looks to have been a perfunctory correspondence with little mileage, which soon ran out of fuel. Indeed, many of the letters involve a desperate scrabble for *any* news or gossip regarding school contemporaries: 'I can't offer much in the way of Coventry news. J. W. Linnett has become Master of some Cambridge College', and so on (13 October 1971). Nonetheless, it is worth analysing and qualifying the tone and content of these letters, not least because it is here that Larkin's critics locate large parts of their arsenal.

### **Larkin's politics**

Numerous letters by Larkin read like letters to the editor of the *Daily Mail*: Britain's entry to the Common Market, for instance, is fine so far as 'The Russians, Trade Unions, etc. don't want us to', but 'my instincts are against it' (26 October 1971). These chapters argue that Larkin *dialogically* constitutes his identities through letter-writing, and we can see this happening in the clearest terms with Gunner:



Your views on the state of the nation accord very well with my own. There will never be another Conservative government. What there will be is a series of Labour governments that will bankrupt the country so that we are all starving, at which point the Russkies will step in ('I am sure all members of the House will join me in extending a welcome to Mr. Breznev'). (16 August 1976)

Hysterical and reactionary as this may seem, that last line is particularly funny – as are hundreds, if not thousands, of the letters Larkin wrote. But is he serious? We tread on precarious ground when we try to second guess anyone's intentions, particularly those of the dead, but there is plenty of evidence to suggest Larkin is humouring an old friend known to possess right-wing views (and perhaps Gunner felt he was doing the same). It is in this correspondence, after all, that Larkin declares 'I adore [Margaret Thatcher], except for being a bit left-wing' (15 September 1984). It seems to me that to call Thatcher 'left-wing' either positions Larkin so far to the right of the political spectrum that he is aligned with Oswald Mosley, or he is jesting. The reader will decide for themselves which category they think Larkin falls into over the course of this chapter and study.

This is not to mention that Larkin was as inconsistent in his politics as he was in his aesthetic theories. Consider the letter about Britain's membership of the Common Market: this is fine if it irks the trade unions, but in the following sentence Larkin bemoans the likelihood of Coventry being infiltrated by non-British companies paying a fraction of current wages. Is this not the language of a trade unionist? It should also be noted that it was Larkin who (controversially) founded and developed a significant archive of socialist and labour movement material at the University of Hull – despite

what his successor at the Brynmor Jones Library has called his ‘crusty Toryism’.<sup>1</sup> Larkin comes in for huge praise from John Saville, former professor of Economic History at Hull, in *Memoirs from the Left*. Saville, who co-founded the *Socialist Register* with Ralph Miliband, and who has a string of un-Larkinesque publications to his name (*Marxism and Politics*, *The Consolidation of the Capitalist State*, etc.), celebrates Larkin for the instrumental role he played in developing this particular branch of historical studies.<sup>2</sup> Details such as these tend to go unremarked by those who attack Larkin in the press and in scholarly tomes.

Indeed, my own sense of Larkin’s wildly inconsistent identities was confirmed whilst trawling through his letters in the University of Hull archives. In the summer of 2013, I was spending my days reading passages like this:

I admire Mrs T for bringing British industry to the edge of beggary, but it won’t work unless the unions cave in and let people work for what their work will fetch. I don’t believe there’s any such thing as unemployment: just chaps who won’t work for what their work will fetch. The way to cure unemployment is to abolish national assistance. Simple as that. I want to see them starving, The so-called working class. Their wages yearly halving, Their women stewing grass, etc. (30 July 1980)

Remarkably, the assistant who had fetched this particular file – without knowledge of its specific contents, or my research agenda – casually mentioned that she had worked under Larkin in the Brynmor Jones Library during the 1980s. As one of the newer staff

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Mowat, ‘Preface’, in *The Labour Archive at The University of Hull*, Philip Larkin Memorial Series, ed. John Saville (Hull: Brynmor Jones Library, 1989) i.

<sup>2</sup> John Saville, *Memoirs from the Left* (London: Merlin Press, 2003) 138-45.

members, sadly she was one of the first to be made redundant following the Thatcher government's swingeing cuts to public spending. Larkin had invited her to his office, apologising profusely for the situation, and distancing himself from the politics of it. According to this assistant, Larkin had seemed genuinely upset. Two-faced callousness? Perhaps. I did not mention the contents of the file on the desk, but the contrast between them and her memories encouraged me to keep qualifying and complicating Larkin's textual identities.

One could go on and discuss Larkin's tirades against students (the 'Little subsidised socialist sods') in much the same way – these, too, clash with numerous accounts of kindness (25 September 1975).<sup>3</sup> In any case, the rants mostly read like they have been learned by rote: 'All the scrounging swindling pot-smoking young swine who are living off you and me, boy, living off you and me come swarming in and have to be dealt with' (13 October 1971). This is convincing mimicry, but its artificiality ('you and me, boy') makes it sound affected, and we should be alert to this. In fact, Larkin's phrase sounds suspiciously like William Empson's poem, 'Just a Smack at Auden', which riffs on its opening line, 'Waiting for the end, boys, waiting for the end', in order to parody Auden's fetish for the Apocalyptic.<sup>4</sup> Empson most likely had in mind Auden's 'Refugee Blues', which contains the same verbal riff ('Yet there's no place for us, my dear, yet there's no place for us').<sup>5</sup> If Larkin *is* consciously echoing Empson's echoing of Auden, then it transforms the way we read letters like this.<sup>6</sup> On the surface, Larkin is doing his

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<sup>3</sup> For counter-examples, see Jane Thomas's recollection, at <<http://philiplarkin.com/poem-reviews/love/>>; or Jonathan Raban's in *Coasting* (Basingstoke: Picador, 1987) 263.

<sup>4</sup> William Empson, 'Just a Smack at Auden', in *Poetry of the Thirties*, The Penguin Poets, ed. Robin Skelton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971) 64-6.

<sup>5</sup> W. H. Auden, 'Refugee Blues', in *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 2007) 263.

<sup>6</sup> Blake Morrison argues that Empson was an important influence on Larkin and his contemporaries; see *The Movement: English Poetry and Fiction of the 1950s* (London: Methuen, 1986)

best *we're-going-to-the-dogs* pose, but the verbal nod to Empson's parody of this school of thought surely raises questions about his sincerity.

## Race

More controversial and shocking than the clichéd barracking of students and trade unions has been the racist content of the Gunner correspondence:

Yes, we had a sit-in last week: Racist Fees Out. That is to say, my dear little brother in Christ, do not let us charge wogs and niggers what their education costs us, even when they are charging us god knows what a barrel, and have us over it. (9 February 1980)

And as for those black scum kicking up a din on the boundary – a squad of South African police would have sorted them out to my satisfaction. (15 September 1984)

I find the 'state of the nation' quite terrifying. In ten years' time we shall all be cowering under our beds as rampaging hordes of blacks steal anything they can lay their hands on. Enoch was right – can't see why you call him a fool. (18 October 1985)

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103. The Bodleian daybooks show that Larkin requested books by Empson during his time as an undergraduate; see Motion, *A Writer's Life*, 43. Jean Hartley recalls Empson's visit to the University of Hull in the '60s, which was instigated by Larkin: '[Empson] had clearly been too well fortified for the occasion. As the reading progressed, we watched him slowly sink like the setting sun and finally disappear under the desk'; see Jean Hartley, *Philip Larkin, the Marvell Press and Me*, 129.

As elsewhere, inconsistencies are scattered throughout these passages: in the same letter criticising ‘wogs and niggers’, Larkin tells Gunner he is amazed to hear that a mutual school friend seems cheerful in South Africa, ‘even though living under a racist dictatorship’ – the implication being that residing in a racist environment would surely make one miserable. Steinberg has incisively discussed the self-reflexivity displayed by Larkin in his racial comments (self-reflexivity being a quality already witnessed in the letters to Sutton), specifically in the following passage which has caused much offence:

Yes, I quite agree about life being better under the Conservatives. Let’s try

Enoch for a bit, I say.

Prison for the strikers,

Bring back the cat,

Kick out the niggers –

How about that?

Ooh, Larkin, I’m sorry to find you holding these views. (19 November 1973)

Steinberg writes:

That last comment is an apt precursor to what happened when the public actually did become aware of the letters’ content, but, again, readers of the letters seemed largely unable to read the context and instead read a kind of highlighted version of the letters, noticing the racism but not the self-mocking for and self-awareness of the racism. We should thus begin to recognize the important

subtleties in his unacceptable comments – not in the philistinism, as Swarbrick often calls it, but in the intelligence and social commentary behind them.<sup>7</sup>

That Steinberg should find ‘intelligence’ and ‘social commentary’ amidst the racial slurs is a sign of her sharp critical reading skills, and an indictment of those who read selectively. When Larkin puts pen to paper, he is almost always self-reflexive and self-scrutinising – this is a man who called a book *The Less Deceived* – and there is no reason why this should not be the case in letters to Gunner. ‘Why, then’, Steinberg asks, ‘should we read the racist passage as fully serious when the context of the passage demonstrates so clearly that Larkin is not revealing what he really believes but exaggerating his conservatism as a form of self mockery?’<sup>8</sup> Her argument acknowledges the presence of conservatism within Larkin’s thinking; this shows she is not trying to reconcile Larkin’s politics with her own, but *is* trying to complicate the simplistic portrait painted by many critics – as am I. In the remainder of this chapter, I wish to build on Steinberg’s subtle analysis by further complicating the picture.

### **Gunner replies**

If Steinberg has demonstrated how context is lacking in discussions of Larkin’s letters to Gunner, then reading the letters Gunner wrote to Larkin can help to address this. The two seem to have been engaged in a kind of chummy tussle, a competition to see who could and would express the most outrageous views. Larkin – by then a famous poet – was not the only one firing out offensive squibs in verse. Here is one of Gunner’s efforts:

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<sup>7</sup> Steinberg, 52-3.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

SHOOT THE COMMIES

HANG THE WOGS

SEND FOR ADOLF

WE'VE GONE TO THE DOGS. (date unknown)

In another letter, Gunner declares 'Idi Amin for Pope' (1 February 1980). There is a strong sense, in writing like this, of a challenge being laid down: how would Larkin top that? This is a contest of right-wing credentials. In one letter, Gunner rails against 'Blue Rinse Maggie, Slob Whitelaw and the rest of that stock jobbing gang', praying 'God send us Enoch ye Fates' (23 June 1978). He then presents Thatcher and her ministers as *not right-wing enough*, which explains Larkin's later characterisation of the Prime Minister as 'a bit left-wing'. As I have suggested, it would be strange to take such sentiments at face value.

In the previous chapter, I argued that Larkin and Sutton engaged in a sustained effort to construct their personae, with accompanying narratives, as the great artists of the future. In the Gunner correspondence we can see a similar attempt at persona-formation, but this time it is Larkin as your 'friendly local Library Führer' (Gunner to Larkin, 2 November 1971). 'Trust all is well with PAL and that cringing staff run screaming as you wield your Thatcher axe', he writes in one letter (1 February 1980). We have seen that Larkin is happy to participate in this myth-making, *despite* the realities of shrinking budgets and job losses at the library which affected him professionally and emotionally. All too often, critics like Paulin and Jardine have readily aligned Larkin's politics with the mini-Hitler on his father's mantelpiece, but there is further evidence which supports the case for a more complex understanding of the identity constructed by this correspondence. Although its provenance is unclear, there is an item at the bottom of the

Gunner file at Hull, to which I would like to draw attention. This is a letter Gunner wrote to a Catholic priest, Father Sean Quinlan, in 1981:

Larkin, my old school chum, wrote the foreword [to Gunner's war memoir] without being asked and we remain in touch AT A DISTANCE. He always was an odd bird but we shared a twisted sense of humour and outlook [...]. I agree with you and think that behind the agnostic, atheistic, pose there is something else. He is far too intelligent for it to be otherwise. (2 February 1981)

This is a fascinating letter, and one which also complicates the picture of the caravan-dwelling conservative who wrote it. He acknowledges that theirs was not an intimate correspondence, bound together only by a 'twisted sense of humour and outlook', and dismisses the idea that with Larkin, what you see is what you get – he is 'far too intelligent' for that. Although this remark is made in relation to religion (presumably Larkin's 'Church Going' pose), it is a telling one, which could apply to any of Larkin's textual identities – including the one Gunner receives in the post. This letter to a third party acts as an intriguing and significant qualification to all those sent between Larkin and Gunner; by acknowledging that all is not what it seems, Gunner licences us to read everything else with the altered perspective this study argues for. This is an important piece in the contextual jigsaw beginning to be assembled.

### **Risk assessment**

So far we have seen some prime examples of Larkin's apparent racism, class prejudice, and generally conservative politics. We have also seen numerous instances, often within the same letters, of inconsistency and oppositional attitudes. There is a danger of being



found guilty of employing the very model I have rejected – that is, using biography to counter biography. This is not my objective. I have drawn attention to those examples in order to show how more positive qualities like irony and playfulness are as much a part of his textual identities as those aspects which have been attacked. A further danger presents itself here: it could look as though this chapter (and study) is seeking to conjure a sanitised and Left-friendly version of the writer, one which can tick every box on the PC checklist and make me feel good about admiring his work. That is also not my objective, and here is as good a place as any to put on record a *personal* objection to some aspects of Larkin's correspondences. At the same time, this does not mean I am comfortable being complicit with critics who interpret the correspondences simplistically, often with an agenda. I am merely trying to interpret the letters in a more intellectually sophisticated way, in order to gain a better understanding of the complex matter of textual identity construction. If I cite counter-examples, it is only to show the weakness of biographical interpretation in the first place. In order to problematise the Gunner correspondence more persuasively, I want to consider it through the lens of the philosopher of language, Mikhail Bakhtin, and the contemporary British novelist, Howard Jacobson.

## **Bakhtin**

Larkin's work has already been subjected to Bakhtinian analysis, but it can be of further use in this context.<sup>9</sup> In 'Discourse in the Novel', Bakhtin argues that 'Literary language is a highly distinctive phenomenon, as is the linguistic consciousness of the educated

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<sup>9</sup> See Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, 77-81; Steinberg, 21-2; Andrew Swarbrick, *Out of Reach: The Poetry of Philip Larkin* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995) 156-6; and V. Penelope Pelizzon, 'Native Carnival: Philip Larkin's Puppet-theatre of Ritual', in *New Larkins for Old*, ed. Booth, 213-23.

person who is its agent'.<sup>10</sup> This is an argument which I have made in Chapters 1 and 2: the man or woman whose day job is the construction and manipulation of language and fiction (i.e. a writer) might reasonably be expected to show a similar 'linguistic consciousness' in more seemingly transparent modes of writing, such as the letter, since this is a 'highly distinctive phenomenon' which they are unlikely to switch on and off. Bakhtin sees every utterance as a complex of forces working to shape meaning, and this is even more true of literary language. But his objective in the essay is to establish a stylistics of the novel form, and he would reject the letter as an 'extra-artistic' genre, whereas I have been working to view Larkin's letters as products of artistry. As such, my analysis here is a modification or expansion of Bakhtin's.

Bakhtin explains that

any concrete discourse (utterance) [...] is entangled, shot through with shared thoughts, points of view, alien value judgments and accents. The word, directed toward its object, enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgments and accents, weaves in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others, intersects with yet a third group; and all this may crucially shape discourse, may leave a trace in all its semantic layers, may complicate its expression and influence its entire stylistic profile.<sup>11</sup>

Here Bakhtin is referring to the multiplicity of internal and external forces which act to shape the meaning of an utterance (and by extension all discourse). This phenomenon

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<sup>10</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, transl. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981) 294.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.

he calls heteroglossia, and it is its diversity which characterises the novel form. But this condition is also a useful way to think about Larkin's letters, especially those to Gunner; after all, the construction of fictions and personae is an activity close enough to that of the novelist. We have seen the co-existence of different interpretive possibilities in these letters (such as Steinberg's analysis of Larkin's 'self-mocking for and self-awareness of the racism'). There is much about the *style* and *tone* of Larkin's comments to Gunner – the competitiveness, the sense of them having been rehearsed, the clichéd affectedness – which suggests they are as much rejoinders to themselves as they are to Gunner. In short, I am pointing to the 'complex interrelationships' which seem to co-exist in Larkin's letters to Gunner. In practice, this manifests itself as the inconsistencies and contradictions we have seen, such as when Larkin's tone seems to attack students *and* attack the stale cliché of his attack on students ('All the scrounging swindling pot-smoking young swine who are living off you and me, boy, living off you and me'). There *is* dialogical diversity here. How many critics have been blind to those internal tensions?

Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia is not the full extent of his potential in reading Larkin's letters. In a later work, *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin describes the discourse of the medieval European marketplace, particularly during public festivities: 'Civil and social ceremonies and rituals took on a comic aspect as clowns and fools, constant participants in these festivals, mimicked serious rituals such as the tribute rendered to the victors at tournaments, the transfer of feudal rights, or the initiation of a knight'.<sup>12</sup> As such:

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<sup>12</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, transl. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1968) 5.

The marketplace of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance was a world in itself, a world which was one; all ‘performances’ in this area, from loud cursing to the organized show, had something in common and were imbued with the same atmosphere of freedom, frankness, and familiarity. [...] The marketplace was the center of all that is unofficial; it enjoyed a certain extraterritoriality in a world of official order and official ideology [...].<sup>13</sup>

In other words, the marketplace could become a transformed space, a ‘world in itself’, in opposition to order and regulation. He then explains the function of this:

Abuses, curses, profanities, and improprieties are the unofficial elements of speech. They were and are still conceived of as a breach of the established norms of verbal address; they refuse to conform to conventions, to etiquette, civility, respectability. [...] Such speech forms, liberated from norms, hierarchies, and prohibitions of established idiom, become themselves a peculiar argot and create a special collectivity, a group of people initiated in familiar intercourse, who are frank and free in expressing themselves verbally.<sup>14</sup>

This phenomenon, which Bakhtin calls the ‘carnavalesque’, is evoked in his study of the French Renaissance writer Rabelais, but I think it just as brilliantly explains Larkin’s letters to Gunner (as well as Kingsley Amis, Robert Conquest, and others), however different the historical contexts. In Larkin’s letters, we can see a more contemporary and secular version of the carnivalesque taking place. The correspondence with Gunner enjoys the same ‘atmosphere of freedom, frankness, and familiarity’ by partaking in

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 153-4.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 187.

non-sanctioned forms of speech which contravene the normative ideologies of the day in their offensiveness, disrespect, incivility – hence the racial slurs, the tirades against politicians and trade unions, and so on. A letter from Larkin or Gunner is, to borrow from Bakhtin, ‘a world in itself’, and while it lasts, ‘there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom’.<sup>15</sup>

This is not to say that the Larkin-Gunner letters were written in a vacuum somehow separate from the period’s political and social discourse, which was also endemically right-wing. Rather, it recognises that each letter was produced for one specific pair of eyes only, those eyes belonging to a person who implicitly understood, and had co-founded, the conventions of the correspondence. Whether Larkin subscribed to those conventions outside of the world of the letters is a question which this study does not concern itself with. The point is that Larkin and Gunner were the only ones present in that world, ‘initiated in familiar intercourse’, and ‘frank and free in expressing themselves verbally’. Now that events have conspired to make us privy to their world, we are obliged to be attentive to the circumstances in which their particular brand of carnivalesque was born. The textual identities constituted by these letters are much more complex than is generally acknowledged, and we should be wary of reducing them to something we might more easily understand. Bakhtin’s work can support us in comprehending the complexity.

### **Jacobson**

In turn, Howard Jacobson can reinforce the concept in a more contemporary and relevant context than Bakhtin. In *Seriously Funny: From the Ridiculous to the Sublime*,

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 7.

his target is Political Correctness, a phenomenon which began on American campuses in the 1980s, spreading its influence to the UK and establishing itself as an integral part of '90s culture to such an extent that its legacy is still being dealt with today. Whatever one's position on PC, in its full-blown state it can, in the words of Sarah Dunant, cause 'such absurdities as the Antioch College code of sexual behaviour which insisted on verbal agreement before any and every stage of sexual courtship, and to accusations that Andrew Marvell's ode "To his Coy Mistress" was simply a sophisticated piece of sexual harassment'.<sup>16</sup> Jacobson takes issue with the paradox of coerced tolerance which (some versions of) PC propagate. For him, as with Steinberg, context is everything: history would have reacted differently, he writes, had Hitler denounced International Jewry wearing goggles and dancing on his toes. A British Jew, Jacobson might be expected to revile the Roy Chubby Browns of stand-up comedy, but instead he condemns the 'transcendental chuckling' of 'badges and red noses': 'Innocuous laughter, by its nature, lacks potency. It is through comic obscenity that we triumph over the body's mortality. Where the body dies and its deathfulness is mocked, there it is reborn. The same process works for all our passions. We gain ascendancy over what is vile in us by relishing it with coarse laughter'.<sup>17</sup> This is a useful summary of Larkin's comedic ethic: innocent tomfoolery is fine, but real insight is achieved in our encounters with dark comedy. Poems like 'Sunny Prestatyn', 'Mr Bleaney', 'Faith Healing', and 'Posterity' exemplify this approach; besides, one should not have to argue that obscenity is simply part of the artist's palette. Jacobson writes: 'Clowns and jesters everywhere are parti-coloured, striped, part black and white, neither half a true mirror-

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<sup>16</sup> Sarah Dunant, ed. and introd., *The War of the Words: The Political Correctness Debate* (London: Virago, 1994) viii-ix.

<sup>17</sup> Howard Jacobson, *Seriously Funny: From the Ridiculous to the Sublime* (London: Viking, 1997) 38.

image of the other. It is of the essence of comedy to kaleidoscope extremes, to jam together opposites so that they are simultaneously true'.<sup>18</sup> If ever there has been a British poet who wore that outfit, who kaleidoscoped extremes, it is Philip Larkin.

### **Coda: Britain and Political Correctness**

The zenith of British PC was the 1990s, and although its legacy remains unresolved, we should now be in a position to appreciate the complexity of figures like Larkin. That does not mean sanitising everything that smells a bit rotten – the articulation and comprehension of complexity is one of the proper tasks of literary critics and historians, and an ethical one too. Jardine does not have to like the views she finds in Larkin's letters, but there is something dishonest about her simplified hermeneutics, and the silent value judgements and barely visible presuppositions which present themselves in her writings on Larkin. For instance:

In the weeks following the publication of my piece [on the *Selected Letters*] I learned to my cost what passionate commitment to Larkin's poetry could produce in the way of values. [...] I was genuinely astonished at the discourtesy, the intolerance, the deliberate aggression, and the absolute lack of humaneness of these letters. It was as if each of these correspondents had set out intentionally to confirm for me that if you steeped yourself in poetry of petty patriotism and celebration of low achievement, the values you learned were those of intemperate and embittered resentment.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 240-1.

<sup>19</sup> Lisa Jardine, 'Canon to left of them, canon to right of them', in *War of the Words*, ed. Dunant, 111.

Her formula conflates admiration for Larkin's poetry with intolerance, bigotry, and hatred, and precludes the possibility that some readers might value his work because they find in it antidotes to such vices. The essay is reductive, crude, and problematic. As an alternative to it, I have pointed to the co-existence of oppositional values and identities in the letters to Gunner, and the ways in which they modify, qualify, and complicate each other. This version of Larkin is distinct from the one we find in letters written to another old school friend, James Sutton. In the Monica Jones correspondence, we can experience a Larkin vastly different from any other, and one which truly problematises Jardine's critique.



## 4

### Monica Jones

After Larkin's correspondence with his mother, the one with Monica Jones is the most extensive we have, reflecting a long relationship which began when Larkin took up a library post at University College Leicester in 1946, deepening and lasting until his death. Approximately 2,000 letters, cards, postcards, and telegrams survive, with an unknown quantity having been lost.<sup>1</sup> And the correspondence is incomplete in other ways: Thwaite explains that from 1972, Larkin visited his mother in Loughborough almost weekly, which meant he saw much more of Jones (*LM*, xi). This, combined with their increasing use of the telephone, means the correspondence thins after that point. When Jones suffered a fall and then illness, in 1982 and 1983 respectively, she moved in with Larkin, leaving us with no correspondence from this period.

#### **Acting a different part**

This is, then, a partial correspondence, but one which critics tend to describe in excited and superlative terms, as the list of plaudits for *Letters to Monica* quoted earlier shows. This includes Thwaite himself, who tells us that the letters 'chronicle [Larkin's] life and attitudes more than anything else we have' (*LM*, vii). Indeed, in his short introduction to the edition, Thwaite twice uses the phrase 'pour out' to characterise them (*LM*, vii-xi). Behind this terminology is a philosophy of the self which believes there is such a thing as 'Larkin-ness', the essence of which may be inked onto a blank page, stuffed into an

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to express my gratitude to Thwaite, who thoughtfully deposited photocopies of the entire extant correspondence in the Larkin Estate Collection at the University of Hull.

envelope, and dropped in a postbox. In short, this elevates the correspondence to a special position within Larkin studies, as a collective document which is *more* open and *more* transparent about what it was like to be that man, Philip Larkin. Consequently, these letters are read and mined for intimate details about the poet, partly out of natural human curiosity, partly due to that powerful scholarly drive to find a nugget of information which might reveal something new about a particular work or, even better, the entire *oeuvre*.

It has, however, been the objective of these chapters to problematise this methodology by tracing some of the different textual identities constructed by Larkin, within and across numerous correspondences. In this one, there are some fairly explicit nods to the idea of separately constructed identities. From early on, Larkin creates an image of Jones to which his own projection of identity will respond: in October 1950 he writes: ‘Truly I shall always remember the fireplace & the cricket-bin & all the battery of things on the mantelpiece, Fifi & blue Neddy & the flowered lamp. Your life there has come into extremely sharp focus for me now: heating milk, singing in the kitchen, drying stockings, etc.’ (1 October 1950). A week later, he wonders ‘what you’re doing tonight: sitting on the floor in your dressing gown, reading the Oxford Book of Victorian Verse?’ (7 October 1950). In a study of epistolarity, Janet Gurkin Altman describes how ‘In the absence of the real addressee, one creates an image of a present addressee, with whom one can converse comfortably. Imagination substitutes what reality cannot supply’.<sup>2</sup> Here, Jones’s identity is imagined as a sweet and gentle femininity, one which takes pleasure in the domestic and the natural (heating milk, drying stockings, surrounding herself with creatures and floral patterns). In Larkin’s speculative description of Jones sitting on the floor, in a gown, reading from the *Oxford*

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<sup>2</sup> Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982) 139.

*Book of Victorian Verse*, she could be the subject of a sentimental poem from that anthology. As this chapter will show, that kind of portrait is extremely influential in terms of the identity which Larkin constructs dialogically within this correspondence.

Larkin's repeated comments about personae confirm Gunner's dismissal of the what-you-see-is-what-you-get school of thought; he tells Jones in one letter: 'You are nicer than you seem to want to let anyone know: I suppose I mean I prefer you to your persona (in the Jungian sense) but fortunately there is more Monica than that' (22 February 1951). He is alert to the manipulations of self-presentation, and knows he does it too: apologising for keeping Jones away from his other friends, he confesses that 'I acted a different part with them from my behaviour with you, and since I couldn't do both at once it was well not to try' – the theatrical language pointing to the idea of a performed self which I am arguing for (3 May 1955).

Larkin is well aware of his persona, both public and private. In one letter he complains that 'the thought of anything beyond next week [...] fills me with dread, a dull foreboding', before adding in brackets 'How tired you must be of words like dread, foreboding, misery, wretched, unhappy, howl, wish, think, feel – in my handwriting!' (5 June 1955). He is, it seems, under no illusions about the particular 'Larkin' verbally constituted by language in these letters. In another, he describes a trip to 'rather a pretty Victorian cemetery in Beverley. Quite a Larkin afternoon, in fact' (13 August 1972). Again, this demonstrates a self-consciousness about the Larkin persona which exists in the public domain – the Larkin who is obsessed with death, who cycles into the countryside and wanders through Victorian graveyards, as vividly presented by the BBC *Monitor* programme, *Down Cemetery Road*, broadcast eight years prior to this letter, and discussed in depth in Chapter 12.

In 1962, having finished reading a biography of Stanley Spencer, Larkin picks out two key details in his enthusiastic account to Jones. The first is Spencer's lack of interest in abroad, surely recounted as an endorsement of his own position. The second is this:

He wrote that after a session at Cliveden with Lord Astor, saying 'Yes, yes, very interesting, yes' he was relieved to get back home where *all his selves* could reemerge 'like children let out of school'. *Don't I know it!* Don't you! 'Oh! What a good idea!' Band of elastic. (my emphases) (22 May 1962)

Having spent time in painfully polite conversation with an aristocrat, Spencer (or anyone) might be expected to show relief at being able to return to his *normal self*, but the relief was in allowing 'all his selves' to 'reemerge'. Larkin's excitement at this is palpable, and this, too, is surely an endorsement of his own 'elastic' view of selfhood – 'Don't I know it!' – as diversely plural, flexible, relative; in fact, my own argument in a nutshell. In short, what we have already is a series of passages – straight from the horse's mouth – which more or less directly confirm the concept of identity as constructed, performed, contextual, and various. This is a useful starting point.

### **Apolitical Larkin**

So what selfhood(s) does Larkin construct here? Which particular textual identities does he employ in his thirty-odd years of correspondence with Jones? Given the posthumous uproar about Larkin's politics – at best seen as a 'crusty Toryism', at worst as 'quasi-Fascism' – one almost feels obliged to discuss the matter.<sup>3</sup> Should one attempt to

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<sup>3</sup> Mowat, i; Paulin, letter, 15.

establish Larkin's private politics (which this study does not), the letters to Jones would provide an important challenge to those charges. Some of the obscenities found in the Gunner letters are re-produced. In one of his countless rants about noisy neighbours, Larkin tells Jones: 'The swine above me is not one swine but two, & they are not dirty Irish micks but a filthy gum-chewing Yankee from Syracuse & some black bum from the West Indies' (7 October 1950). In 1961, he sends her a postcard of Hull's city centre, doodled with two bodies hanging from a lamppost which are annotated 'Castle' and 'BJ' (i.e. Labour MP Barbara Castle, and Hull's Vice-Chancellor, Brynmor Jones) (15 June 1961). My discussion of Larkin's obscenity in Chapter 3 applies just the same here.

However, there are other political views expressed which never seem to enter the radar of his denouncers. Telling Jones about the Queen's planned visit to Belfast in 1951, he says he should like to go, 'if only to see Belfast's 13,000 special constables wriggling in their illfitting uniforms – the hated "B specials", Orangemen to a man, a force in existence solely for the suppression of Catholic nationalism. However I'm no nationalist myself for the matter of that' (27 May 1951). This is a strange thing to see penned by a card-carrying Little Englander, if you believe Jardine, and a card-carrying Orangeman, if you believe Paulin.<sup>4</sup> Later that year (the year of the Festival of Britain, and part of a period of British decolonisation), Larkin criticises Kipling for his 'predilection for expressing public themes, common emotions in the sense of conventional ones; I am at odds with him in his role of "singer of the tribe", Laureate of

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<sup>4</sup> Paulin has written that '[Larkin] has more in common with Spenser than might appear. Both are English Protestant royalists whose nationalism was intensified by their experience of Ireland'; see 'She Did Not Change: Philip Larkin', in *Minotaur: Poetry and the Nation State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992) 234.

the Empire' (12 November 1951). Again, if Paulin's account of Larkin's politics is to be believed, one would expect Larkin to be Kipling's pasty post-imperial nephew.

Finally, there are numerous letters in which Larkin explains his total lack of interest in, and knowledge of, politics: 'the idea of my brooding & fretting over your political opinions is enough to make a Staffordshire cat laugh. You know I don't care at all for politics, intelligently' (5 August 1953). He even goes on to relate how he grew up reading and admiring 'either non-political or left-wing' writers, and 'couldn't find any right-wing writer worthy of respect', although he does then call the former 'awful fools or somewhat fakey, so I don't know if my prejudice for the left takes its origins there or not' – surely a sign that Larkin is no more a poster boy of the Right than he is of the Left. 'But if you annoy me by speaking your mind in the other interest', he concludes, 'it's not because I feel sacred things are being mocked but because I can't reply, not (as usual) knowing enough'. It seems Larkin was politically at odds with Jones, not on the question of where his politics lay, but on the question of *whether he really cared*. This is a politically apathetic textual identity.

#### **'Four rolls of pink toilet paper': the everyday**

Of course, there are two kinds of politics: the politics of Westminster and the *New Statesman*, and the deeper, more fundamental politics of identity and basic human relations. To assert Larkin's lack of interest in party politics is not to confirm a Boothian view of him as pure aesthete. Larkin's textual identities can be radical in political terms. But in thinking about the particular identities constructed by Larkin in this correspondence, attention must be paid to what is arguably its biggest theme: the demotic and the everyday. As I remarked in Chapter 1, the published selections of Larkin's correspondences tend to privilege their extra-ordinary aspects: comments on

public figures, discussions of poems in progress, or their genesis, and so on. In *Letters to Monica*, Thwaite writes: ‘What is particularly fascinating is the sharing with Monica of progress (or otherwise) on particular poems’ (*LM*, x). Having also pored through the entire extant correspondence, I have found less evidence of this occurring than I anticipated: only a small percentage of the 2,000 items Larkin sent clearly enter into dialogue about works-in-progress. Following the death of his father in 1948, Larkin wrote this to Jones:

My holiday was rather as I expected – my poor father grew steadily worse & died on Good Friday. Since then mother & I have been rather hopelessly looking at the stock in the house – this morning I shifted 100lbs of jam – 1945, 1946, & 1947 years – and about 25 Kilner jars of bottled fruit, seventeen dozen boxes of matches, a shoebox of chocolate – all this from one small cupboard. (4 April 1948)

The reader may recognise this as the genesis of ‘An April Sunday brings the snow’. Interestingly, Thwaite’s edition of the *Collected Poems* gives that poem’s composition date as 4 April 1948 – the same as the letter (*CP*, 21). But Larkin gives no indication that his experience has been worked into art, let alone share the poem. Instead, he simply and movingly tells Jones: ‘I don’t know what will happen to it all – I don’t like sweet things, you remember’.

Instead, Larkin is *far* more likely to write about the prose than the passion. These letters drip with moaning, misery, and self-reproach, often regarding what to do with his widowed and ailing mother: ‘I feel a bit sad today, really because my mother has returned home & I know she’s alone [...] Well, if you feel like that about it, why not do

something to help her? Why don't you? Why don't you? Why don't you?' (14 September 1952). But this is by no means the only source of unhappiness, Larkin itemising a litany of regular complaints: colds, bad food, bad beer, colleagues, Jones's 9 o'clocks ('it seems hard that you should have two' – 12 February 1963). Sometimes no reason is needed: 'Feel dull & peevish today though the weather is fine' (15 March 1959). 'Send me as many wails as you like, if it helps, though I hate hearing of things hurting you', he writes on 12 July 1951. I agree with Thwaite that 'They fed each other's misery' (*LM*, viii).

More generally, the everyday pervades this correspondence, and depending on your disposition, can be a source of delight or a cure for insomnia:

7.15pm. I have just darned 2 pairs of socks & am sitting at my window again. (7 October 1950)

In a fit of irresponsibility I have bought 2 yards of white flannel & intend making 2 long warm scarves of it, suitably dyed. (24 January 1951)

Tonight I seize half an hour after darning 7 prs of socks. (17 January 1952)

I have four rolls of pink toilet paper on my low table, more or less at my elbow, but their only significance is that I've been too lazy to put them away. Pink is a new departure for me [...]. (26 November 1959)



Often, Larkin even inserts his shopping lists:

Then went out shopping with Graham. I bought:

1/2lb mousetrap cheese

1/4lb blue cheese

1 gollywog loaf

1 sandwich tin, to keep cheese in

2lbs of oranges ('balanced diet'). (11 November 1950)

So incredibly detailed is the content that the social historian David Kynaston cites Larkin's letters in his attempts to re-construct the texture of everyday life in post-war Britain.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the letters can be *painstakingly* detailed: 'I never sit in the armchair, because my feet slip on the lino' (7 November 1950). This eye for detail is clearly a skill Larkin would deploy in his literary work, such as his description of the cold rising up Katherine's skirt in *A Girl in Winter* – a minute inhabiting of female consciousness (AGW, 27).

This connection with the feminine is no coincidence, for these examples demonstrate well how much this epistolary identity invested in the 'old maid' or 'spinster' cultural type. One wonders how many men in this period darned socks, and bought flannel or pink toilet paper, let alone wrote to women about it. Larkin's imagining of Jones as a kind of Neo-Victorian 'old dear', cited earlier, seems to have powerfully influenced him, and it is a similar persona which he reciprocates in the projection of his own textual identity. It is interesting to note that many of the denunciations following the publication of the *Selected Letters* targeted Larkin's offensive masculinity: Jardine, for

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, *Modernity Britain: Opening the Box, 1957-1959* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

instance, called him ‘an easy misogynist’, and Greer had already labelled him ‘sexist’. That edition – nearly 800 pages in total – contained just 13 extracts from Larkin’s letters to Jones.<sup>6</sup> This did not prevent some sweeping generalisations about Larkin’s sexual politics. But since the publication of *Letters to Monica*, which puts 450 pages of the correspondence into print, there have been no retractions or reconsiderations, despite the overt femininity, in total sympathy with Jones’s own, constructed by Larkin. If Jardine were truly interested in ‘considered thought, the ability to frame measured judgments, to evaluate an issue [...] and intellectually to assess an argument’ – as she claimed to be in her review of the *Selected Letters* – then she ought to explore the subtly-gendered experience of the everyday found in this correspondence.<sup>7</sup> She should also take note of its more radical sexual politics, to which I shall now turn.

#### **‘This sounds like Wolfenden’: gender, sex, and sexuality**

Larkin’s missives to Jones fit awkwardly into the tradition of love letters. This is not to say that his letters are devoid of conventional romantic themes or language; there are moments when Larkin tries out the discourse of a lover (‘Sometimes there clings about your letters a faint redolence of perfume’), and some passages are tender and touching (such as when he praises ‘the tiny creases your pink shoes make by squeezing your toes together’) (14 October 1950, 22 April 1956). But rarely do his dispatches have the same ‘sexiness’ as those to Patsy Strang, with whom he had an affair in the 1950s. When Strang fell pregnant by Larkin, he told her he was ‘sorry & alarmed & guilty’, but also

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<sup>6</sup> This is not a criticism of Thwaite; the vast majority was simply inaccessible at the time, partly because of Jones’s reluctance to contribute, partly because so many letters were scattered; see *LM*, vii-viii.

<sup>7</sup> Jardine, ‘Saxon Violence’, 4.

found it all ‘rather thrilling’.<sup>8</sup> That was in July 1952; in October of that year, Jones wrote to express *her* pregnancy fear. Larkin’s reply first discussed his lack of writing, then recent social engagements, library work, a joke about sociologists, a film he had seen; only then, *finally*, does he reach the issue of Jones’s potential pregnancy:

Well, anyway, I’m glad you wrote – worries are always better shared, especially such formidable ones, but really I must say I think the chances are extremely slender & remote of there being anything in the air. To my certain knowledge I was never within a mile of endangering you, and it’s only a disinclination to tempt fate & the fact that I don’t know much about such things except generally that prevents me from saying flatly that it’s out of the question – you do understand that I personally think it is. I’m not surprised you feel sick, with all the worry & gins & salts. Surely it’s not unknown to miss a time? especially if you are worrying about missing a time? (22 April 1956)

The contrast in Larkin’s response to his two lovers, Strang and Jones, is clear to see in this episode. In fairness to Larkin, it appears, from reading between the lines, that he and Jones had not engaged in the intercourse necessary to conceive. Nonetheless, his tone here modulates between sexually-uninformed male (a faux-naïf pose) and concerned mother, but contains none of the sinful *frisson* of his letters to Strang. As Larkin himself put it in another missive to Jones, ‘I don’t often write a letter you can’t leave lying about’ (22 April 1956).

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<sup>8</sup> Quoted in George H. Gilpin, ‘Patricia Avis and Philip Larkin’, in *New Larkins for Old*, ed. Booth, 70.

When he does, the sock-darning, pink-toilet-paper persona cannot help but deflate his own efforts:

I wish you were here. I should be all over you. I had better disappear into bed. I've started leaving off my pajama top, which means I burn my chest when smoking my nightly cigarette. (18 October 1954)

You and your bottom – you never believe me when I say that while there certainly is a point of no return in that quarter, you haven't anything like reached it. I lay in bed one morning last week remembering one after-breakfast time when you were looking out of my kitchen window, and let me tuck your skirt up round your waist to be admired. You were wearing the black nylon panties with the small hole in! In consequence of this memory I was guilty of what I believe the Confirmation Books called 'impure thoughts', and, worse, late for work. (22 October 1954)

Any excitement Jones might feel from Larkin's new lifestyle choice to sleep topless is instantly dashed by the image of him dropping cigarette ash onto his chest; whilst his paeon to her bottom collapses into a bathetic self-parody of the late-for-work onanist. In fact, his writing about sex hardly ever manages to get off the ground at all:

I was very glad to know what you feel about (this sounds like Wolfenden) love-making, or relieved, I sh<sup>d</sup> really say, since often I'm quite uncertain whether you are feeling anything or not, and it seems so unfair if you aren't. It isn't that you seem uninterested (or disinterested), but that you rarely seem to like anything

more than anything else. I think, if you analysed it stroke by stroke, my – or anyone’s – way of making love is directed as much towards pleasing you as displeasing myself, and probably it grows a little by learning what you like – so if you don’t give any definite signs in this direction, it makes it a little – a little what? Less straightforward? Less confident? (8 December 1956)

I feel a little irritated that this particular sort of sexual intercourse should be attracting attention in the weeklies, for while I can’t claim any personal stake in it exactly, and while it seems much too difficult technically, all things being equal it would please me to share it with you, as fit expression of a feeling you’re well aware of, and I regret finding myself in the van of intellectual progress along with the boys. I can’t imagine there is much in it for you, though. I imagined it was the custom in Catholic-ridden countries where it was the only way girls could keep their fiancés happy & the priests at the same time. I never supposed that what they wanted was this piercing, rather awful sensuality. Ogh ogh. Hagh. (23 January 1962)

One could not put it better than Larkin himself – all this ‘sounds like Wolfenden’ (author of the 1957 Wolfenden Report on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution) – that is, dry and scholarly rather than teasingly erotic (who really wants to analyse it ‘stroke by stroke’?). The second quote in particular, presumably referencing media interest in anal sex following the 1961 publication of an unexpurgated *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, is almost comically academic, describing the act as ‘difficult technically’ and analysing it within a socio-cultural context! Larkin’s language at the end (‘piercing, rather awful sensuality’) does echo Lawrence’s prose, but overall the letter does not read like the

product of a decade in which, culturally speaking, ‘Sexual intercourse began’ (*TCP*, 90). What these letters do construct, though, is a concern for *women’s* sexuality, already present in the 1943 Brunette Coleman works (discussed in Part II), in the closing passages of *A Girl in Winter*, and to which he would later return in poems like ‘High Windows’ and ‘Annus Mirabilis’ (discussed in Part III). In short, the identity constructed by Larkin in this correspondence is utterly un-masculine. From his absorption in the domestic to his total lack of sexual prowess, he violates just about every code of conduct in the *Blokes’ Handbook*.

What is more fascinating is Larkin’s own analysis of this situation, which is yet to be properly digested by Larkin scholarship. In a 1957 letter, Larkin sums up his shared affinities with Jones: ‘we are both shy, withdrawn, anti-social, anti-sex (you hate “woman-ish” behaviour & I hate “mannish” behaviour)’ (11 January 1957). Under the biographical, letter-citing model employed by most critics, such an anti-essentialist statement ought to refute the view that Larkin’s is a poetry of ‘easy misogyny’. A year later, Larkin wrote this:

I can quite honestly say I don’t think nearly so much of qualities lacking in you as qualities lacking in me. It seems more to me that what we have is a kind of homosexual relation, disguised: it w<sup>d</sup>n’t surprise me at all if someone else said so, only there’s no one in a position to do so, except you. Don’t you think yourself there’s something fishy about it? [...] I mean I like you and think you are unique & enjoy being with you, but not in the way commonly associated with girls – I mean, I seem entirely lacking in that desire to impose oneself that is such a feature of masculine behaviour: by marriage, by ‘sexual intercourse’.

Bothering people. Inflicting oneself on people. I'm devoid of all that, & it leaves a sort of central motiveless vacuum. (29 January 1958)

A homosexual relation, disguised? This reaffirms the epistolary identity which I have been drawing out of this correspondence: more of a spinsterish old maid than a virile man, one whose feminine sensibilities put him in sympathy with the remarkably similar Jones – more of a woman-to-woman dialogue than a heterosexual encounter. Here, Larkin seems to verbally emasculate himself, confessing a total lack of desire to inhabit the normative masculine role of (as he sees it) imposing and inflicting, whether by sex or marriage. His characterisation of this condition as one of ‘lack’ effectively renders him a eunuch – defined by what he does not possess. The alternative identity he constructs is that of a loving but radically *de-sexualised* partner, who might as well be another woman. In his recent biography of Larkin, Booth picks out this letter for discussion, describing the remark as bizarre, and suggesting that, ‘On another interpretation, these subtle wrangles show that they were perfectly matched. Both had sex in the head, and they were involved in an absorbing erotic *agon* which neither would have wished to end’.<sup>9</sup> But in this letter and countless others, Larkin is keenly aware that theirs is not a conventional heterosexual relationship, and that he is not a paragon of masculinity, no more of a shag-happy authority figure than she was. And it was by writing about pink toilet paper, bunnies, and sexual failure that Larkin constituted this identity. In the catalogue of possible ‘Larkins’ (which this study seeks to inaugurate and expand), the performance of a particular version of lesbian femininity is a highly significant aspect, under-explored by Larkin scholarship, but leading into a

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<sup>9</sup> Booth, *Life, Art and Love*, 231-2.

more sophisticated discussion of the Brunette Coleman works (in Part II); for now, though, I want to muddy the waters of the Jones correspondence.

**‘This almost-Russian verbiage’: revealing and concealing**

Why do I want to do this? Because the extracts I have discussed so far act as revelations about Larkin’s character and his views on sex, sexuality, gender, and identity. This endorses the plaudits which adorn the covers of *Letters to Monica*, all of them celebrating the open and intimate pouring-out of ‘Larkin-ness’. Those comments ignore one major aspect of the correspondence, which is the constant process of concealing, retracting, and complicating – Larkin being a consummate professional. In one sense, the anxieties of communication within this correspondence are nothing but manifestations of a problem endemic to all correspondence, and all communication. Linda S. Kauffman has described epistolarity as a ‘destabilizing’ category in modern fiction, but this is only true because actual letters destabilise and problematise notions of identity and meaning.<sup>10</sup> It is no coincidence that when Derrida sought to complicate these issues, he did so by recourse to the epistolary event. In *The Post Card*, he challenges Lacan’s statement that a letter always arrives at its destination. For Derrida, the possibility that a letter might not arrive at its destination – it could get lost in the post, or be sent to the wrong address – is a possibility inherent to its structure:

Not that the letter never arrives at its destination, but it belongs to the structure of the letter to be capable, always, of not arriving. And without this threat [...] the circuit of the letter would not even have begun. But with this threat, the

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<sup>10</sup> Linda S. Kauffman, *Special Delivery: Epistolary Modes in Modern Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 263.



circuit can always not finish. Here dissemination threatens the law of the signifier [...]. [It] broaches, breaches the unity of the signifier [...].<sup>11</sup>

Derrida's terminology ('dissemination', 'the signifier') shows that his chief concern is not with the post that ends up languishing in a provincial dead letter office; rather, the potential for epistolary failure becomes a metaphor for all forms of communication, which are dispatched into the world only to be altered by *différance*.<sup>12</sup> Whilst *The Post Card* is primarily a critique of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, its message can be fruitfully applied to letters, and to the letters Larkin sent to Jones, in which he is frequently aware of – and sometimes actively ensures – the instability of the signifier, regardless of whether he would ever use such terminology.

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<sup>11</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, transl. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) 444.

<sup>12</sup> As the term crops up on more than one occasion during the course of this study, it is prudent to gloss it here. 'Différance' is Derrida's theory of the production of textual meaning. His coining of the term exploits the ambiguity of the French verb *différer*, which means 'to differ' and 'to defer'. For Derrida, differing is 'discernibility, distinction, deviation, diastem, *spacing*', whilst deferring is 'detour, delay, relay, reserve, *temporalizing*'; see 'Différance', in *Margins of Philosophy*, transl. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) 18. The former sense relates to Saussure's philosophy of language, which posits that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is not a referential one backed by the existence of a material thing or an intrinsic essence; rather, the relationship between them is relational, as one sign can only make sense in relation to all other signs. The clichéd example is that of a sheep: there is nothing *inherently* 'sheep-ish' about this four-legged woolly creature, but the word means something to us precisely because it is scripturally and acoustically different from 'cow', 'dog', or 'machine gun'. Derrida develops this by pointing to ambiguities which exist *within* signs (whether a single word, an image, a phrase, a sentence, etc.). Because of various contextual differences which exist between the person who utters and the person who receives the utterance, the intended signification may not transfer without change or loss. One person's idea of a 'house' can be a stately pile, whilst another person may think of a semi-detached bungalow. In other words, there is no fixed or universal centre for meaning to attach itself to. This is only one way in which meaning can be deferred; the phenomenon becomes much more multifaceted in the case of more complex modes of writing, such as philosophy, or imaginative literature, or letters.

I have already argued that Larkin's letters, like his literary works, are heavily citational; however, in this correspondence, citation is not something from which alternative meanings can be teased, but something which obscures meaning. Reviewing *Letters to Monica* in the *Spectator*, Philip Hensher described the pair as 'two of a kind', and as 'soulmates'; yet, from early on in the correspondence, Larkin wrote anxiously about the difficulties of them really ever knowing each other.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, he seems to have done a lot to prevent it. In July 1950, he warns Jones that she would like him less if she 'had more opportunity of learning my general behaviour-patterns', fearing she has '*constructed* an over-favourable image of me' (my emphasis) (23 July 1950). In case this might reveal too much, Larkin then compares himself to various literary figures (and twice *by negation*), including two from *The Death of the Heart*, Elizabeth Bowen's novel about the anxiety of relationships: 'Not le divine Marquis, not Captain Hugh, but a good deal more like Mybug or Portia's Eddie – or even Portia's father – than's compatible with your idea of the Good Man'. The ostensible purpose of this exercise might be to rid Jones of any potential deception, but does it really make things any clearer? Later that year, Larkin questions the quality of some poems he is looking to publish privately; reading Thwaite's introduction to *Letters to Monica*, one might expect Larkin to share some, ask for advice, and so on – instead, he lampoons them as 'Thrice holy is my Garden now Since it is sown by Thee kind of stuff: O Man! thy purblind eyes are sightless yet! type of tack. On seeing Lucinda with her hair in curlers ("Say, pretty Nymph"): Parting: a sonnet sequence ("we did not say goodbye: shunting, the trains")' (1 November 1950). As a parody of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century verse, this is highly amusing; of Larkin's own work, it reveals almost nothing.

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<sup>13</sup> Philip Hensher, 'Two of a kind', review of *Letters to Monica* by Philip Larkin, *Spectator*, 23 October 2010, at <<http://www.spectator.co.uk/books/6391178/two-of-a-kind/>>.

We have seen in his letters to Sutton how Larkin mediates their artistic identities, and their attitudes to art and life, through the towering figure of Lawrence. There, Lawrence was a useful point of reference. He appears many times in Larkin's letters to Jones, but in this new context he acts as a blurred and coded warning: 'You don't know what ways I think my D.H.L. will have given you fresh light on my mind. Do you?' (7 November 1950).

In the same letter, he goes on:

There are plenty of things I could say about myself, and the more serious & more sincere I sounded the less likely they are to be true. The only thing I will say is that I don't think much of myself, & that I have absolutely no idea of life at all, no idea at all. How it happens, & how people stand living, ordinarily, & how anyone dare pull out the plum that brings the whole edifice toppling down on him...But this is turning into a psychological document. Basta! as DHL used to say at the end of his letters: for ages I thought it meant 'beast', but it turns out it's Italian for 'enough'.

Whether or not Jones was grateful for the Italian lesson, it is unlikely that she moved any closer to knowledge of Larkin's personality, despite his dangling of Lawrence before her as a potential aide to achieving such knowledge. He does this again and again:

About DHL – a suitable symbol for any mild discord between us: one half of my assumption was simple: if you knew anything of my character, you wouldn't have to do with me. The other half: my idea of yr idea of the Good Man was

based on yr expressions of moral disapprobation over several years – a sort of negative image. So I suppose is yr idea of my idea of a Good etc. [...] I think the porter has had a good deal to do with all this. (15 November 1950)

You mustn't think of me as a perpetual introspector. What I am really trying to do is warn you, as I did in my first summer letter to you, however silly it sounded. I know I am capable of emotional deceit, dishonesty and even cruelty [...]. I remember being very struck by you once saying DHL was – what was it? Cruel, insensitive, was it? It had never occurred to me before?

Another saying of yours that struck me was the one concerning my baldness. I bought a bottle of Silvikrin today. (30 May 1951)

In the first quote, Larkin grammatically complicates Jones's construction of him as a Good Man ('my idea of yr idea of', 'yr idea of my idea of') via an unspecified connection to Lawrence, before deploying everyone's favourite avoidance strategy of blaming the drink. In the second, Larkin tries and fails to recall something Jones once said of Lawrence, before lapsing into another self-parody, this time on the theme of encroaching baldness (which also acts as shorthand for his lack of virility and masculinity, discussed earlier). In a long letter of 3 June 1955 (twenty-four sides of writing), Larkin launches a rhapsodic declaration of his love for Jones: 'Oh my dear, how can you believe I love you if I don't marry you? That's what I wonder constantly. And yet I do love you, really'; in his next letter, written two days later, he is up to his usual trick of scribbling a qualifying and retracting comment in the top left-hand corner of the first sheet: 'Long, yes, but not so hysterical' (5 June 1955). In 1964, he tells Jones 'I wish I were more open with you: we are now, but I'm rather like Sir John at the

beginning of The Crooked Hinge, not knowing whether he is an impostor or not' (29 April 1964). This is a reference to John Dickson Carr's 1938 murder mystery novel; one notes that such novels typically achieve knowledge and resolution, whereas Larkin's comments here do the opposite: is he an impostor or not? Why can't he be more open? And in another letter, he suggests that the world of small and furry critters which he and Jones created and sustained throughout their correspondence (with nicknames like 'bun', doodles of rabbits and hedgehogs, and the recurring character of Dr G. F. Pussy) is simply an excuse to avoid dealing with reality: 'I grow stiff and silent, & never move off the ground of rabbithood, which is all very well but which prevents discussion of the real situation, don't you think?' (27 April 1955). As is usually the case with Larkin, he puts it best himself when he describes 'this almost-Russian verbiage, probably nothing but funk' – a succinct summary of vast quantities of his letters to Jones.

What these examples show is that this was a fraught relationship, complicated and damaged, of course, by his infidelities, his being tied to his mother's apron strings, and the to-and-fro of his many implied and quickly retracted marriage proposals. From the earliest stages of the correspondence until the end, Larkin seems terrified of giving too much away, of revealing his hand, and the result is decades of obfuscating letters, of smoke and mirrors, and muddied waters. The idea that we now have intimate access to the poet's mind and soul ignores the hundreds of pages – now in print – of going nowhere fast.<sup>14</sup> Like Sir Thomas Wyatt in the court of Henry VIII, Larkin seems to have mastered the art of revealing and concealing. The portrait I have painted here adds to the ever-swelling list of 'Larkins', but does not present itself as somehow revealing the

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<sup>14</sup> Although the two ended up living together in Larkin's home in Hull from 1983 until his death in 1985 – in what Thwaite calls 'something close to marriage' – this arrangement was arguably one of necessity (Jones's poor health) (*LM*, xi). Though clearly caring and loving, Larkin wrote numerous letters in which he sought to evade the dreaded questions of marriage and cohabitation.

‘true Larkin’. This will be disappointing to those who read editions such as *Letters to Monica* in order to get closer to ‘the real Philip Larkin’. Paying attention to what Larkin himself called ‘funk’ is not a criticism of his letter-writing, but rather a criticism of naïve reading practices which glide over interpretive difficulties in search of ‘truth’ and ‘authenticity’. Larkin’s letters to Jones are, in the end, important, beautiful, and fascinating documents, and there is still every reason for scholars and interested readers to appreciate them – just with a sharper critical eye.

## 5

# Conclusion: Will the Real Philip Larkin Please Stand Up?

These chapters have explored in depth some of the different textual identities which Larkin essentially wrote into existence in his correspondences: the aspiring novelist who worships Lawrence and negotiates art and life, and who invokes a pantheon of great writers in order to establish an aesthetic identity (the Sutton correspondence); the nonsense, Thatcher-adoring obscenity connoisseur (the Gunner letters); and the domesticated, caring but troubled, feminine-lesbian lover (the Jones correspondence). The stark differences between them should at least set off alarm bells in the minds of those who have repeatedly written, or repeatedly read, critical accounts of Larkin as two-dimensional: onanistic misogynist, left-bashing Thatcherite, embodiment of Englishness, Hermit of Hull, and so on. At the same time, these must also challenge the redeemed and saintly Larkin of Booth's biography.

Some critics have sought to improve those reductive accounts by drawing attention to what they see as Larkin's fondness for masks. Richard Palmer, for instance, argues: 'it is essential to identify and understand the many masks he used, consciously or otherwise, in order to come closer to what he felt was his authentic voice'.<sup>1</sup> Edna Longley, whose approach to Larkin is a troubling one, suggests that 'his medium is

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Palmer, *Such Deliberate Disguises: The Art of Philip Larkin* (London: Continuum, 2008) xv.

surely the mask-lyric'.<sup>2</sup> And István D. Rácz has more than once argued for a consideration of Larkin's masks, which he defines as 'the poetic expression of that feature in the personality which creates a temporary, conscious and artificial unity between the internal self and external self'.<sup>3</sup> The problem I have with the mask-trope is its emphasis on faking it: the poet simply puts on and takes off a mask as s/he chooses, a strategy designed to hide the reality of the 'true' self which lurks behind it. If Larkin does this, then it implies that the job of the critic is to get behind the mask and reveal who he truly was – as though, like every un-masked villain of the *Scooby-Doo* cartoons, he would have gotten away with it if it wasn't for those meddling kids. For Palmer, the authentic Larkin is a jazz freak, whilst Longley has nothing to say about jazz, but thinks the real Larkin was a decadent aesthete suffering from narcissism. M. W. Rowe sees different selves expressed in Larkin's letters and poems, but considers the 'aesthetic element' the 'most important'.<sup>4</sup> And Booth, eager to dispel the myth of Larkin's cruelty, devalues the currency of the Mr Nasty version by showing the quantity of appearances by Mr Nice, quoting with approval Colm Tóibín's description of Larkin as 'a great big sour softie'.<sup>5</sup> My account differs in its insistence that Larkin *produced* his multiple and co-existing identities in the act of writing, rather than using masks to hide a singular and authentic self which critics should attempt to uncover. Other correspondences would present other versions – for the letters to Jones are by no means the final word on Larkin's relation to gender and sexuality, nor are the letters to Sutton exhaustive of

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<sup>2</sup> Longley, 29.

<sup>3</sup> István D. Rácz, 'Agnosticism, Masks and Monologues in Philip Larkin', *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, 1:2 (Fall 1995), 93.

<sup>4</sup> M. W. Rowe, *Philip Larkin: Art and Self: Five Studies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) 1.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Booth, *Life, Art and Love*, 11.



Larkin's attitude to art, no matter how many critics think they have the measure of these things after reading his letters.

In 2007, the director Todd Haynes released a biopic of Bob Dylan which eschews the conventions of biography in favour of a radical new structure. In *I'm Not There*, Haynes dramatises the complexity of Dylan's character by juxtaposing presentations of seven different personae, each one of which constitutes the overall enigma of the Dylan identity. Over the course of two hours, viewers are presented with 'a poet, prophet, outlaw, fake, star of electricity, rock and roll, martyr born-again Christian', each one played by a different actor, within a typically postmodern non-linear and unconnected narrative.<sup>6</sup> Some of the personae are themselves composite identities: the 'poet', for instance, is called Rimbaud, but lives in the twentieth century, interrogated by an invisible commission interested in his subversions; whilst the 'prophet' goes by the name of Woody Guthrie, but takes the physical form of a young African-American boy. Reviewing *I'm Not There*, Roger Ebert wrote: 'we have been left not one step closer to comprehending Bob Dylan, which is as it should be' – an ethic close to the one expressed by these chapters.<sup>7</sup> For not only have we seen a handful of the different identities constructed by Larkin, but also the way in which each one is built up from the ground by textual devices, such as citation, tone, or a particular lexicon. Given the complexity of these identities, Larkin's next biographer might do well to take inspiration from the Haynes film, rather than trot out the usual cradle-to-grave life in the hope of revealing 'the real Philip Larkin'.

Critics like Longley, Paulin, and Jardine, who seek to draw a line through the long list of *Larkins* in order to arrive at the true *Larkin* are, at best, taking a huge leap of

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<sup>6</sup> Weinstein Company production notes, at <[www.twcpublicity.com/movie.php?id=70#production](http://www.twcpublicity.com/movie.php?id=70#production)>.

<sup>7</sup> Roger Ebert, review of *I'm Not There*, at <[www.rogerebert.com/reviews/im-not-there-2007](http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/im-not-there-2007)>.

epistemological faith; at worst, they are mistakenly, and perhaps brazenly, presumptuous. If we reject biography and psychology as the conceptual underpinning of any of Larkin's texts – letter, novel, poem – and instead think of the identity of a text's narrator as constituted by the act of writing, then we open up immense new possibilities in the interpretation and reception of his work. Given the radical gender and sexual politics of the Monica Jones correspondence, yet to be properly explored by Larkin scholarship, where better to test these new possibilities than on the strange and controversial writings of Larkin's lesbian heteronym, Brunette Coleman?

## **Part II**

### ***The Brunette Coleman***

#### ***Heteronym***

## 6

# Introduction: What To Do With Brunette Coleman?

What to do with Brunette Coleman? For Jenny Diski, ‘Reading “Trouble at Willow Gables” and “Michaelmas Term at St Brides” is up there with stuffing mushrooms’, prompting a ‘blinding awareness of the precious hours wasted on Larkin’s schoolgirl stories or mushrooms when I might have done something more positive with them such as sleeping or filing my nails’.<sup>1</sup> Selflessly deciding to forego sleep, stuffed mushrooms, and manicured nails, I intend to take an alternative view of these early works, described by the headline of Jonathan Bate’s review as ‘Very juvenile, this juvenilia’.<sup>2</sup> Larkin’s heteronymous creation, developed during his final months at Oxford in 1943, does not offer up immediate or easy suggestions regarding classification and interpretation.<sup>3</sup> It is easy to dismiss – indeed, many critics do, dedicated Larkin scholars amongst them. Palmer – in a study which focuses on Larkin’s masks and disguises – pauses just once

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<sup>1</sup> Jenny Diski, ‘Damp-Lipped Hilary’, review of *Trouble at Willow Gables and Other Fictions* by Philip Larkin, *London Review of Books*, 23 May 2002, 22.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Bate, ‘Very juvenile, this juvenilia’, review of *Trouble at Willow Gables and Other Fictions* by Philip Larkin, *Daily Telegraph*, 28 April 2002, at <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/4727749/Very-juvenile-this-juvenilia.html>>.

<sup>3</sup> Given that Brunette Coleman has a back story and separate identity, I concur with Osborne’s categorisation of her as a *heteronym*, rather than a pseudonym, which merely refers to an author’s fictitious name. This is in contrast to the majority of critical accounts; see *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, 165.

to reject the Coleman works as ‘prolix arch nonsense’.<sup>4</sup> For the assistant librarian who catalogued them at the Brynmor Jones Library, they are ‘like the jokers in a pack of cards’.<sup>5</sup> These chapters seek to overturn such perceptions, by exploring Larkin’s radical approach to genre, gender, and sexuality – concerns which arise organically from the texts themselves – as well as the positive influence which these works had on the later Larkin. As with the letters, I want to see what can be done if biography is eschewed, and a *textual* focus on the construction of identity is foregrounded. Before that, however, it is important to consider how Brunette Coleman has been assimilated into the scholarship on Larkin so far. Not every critic has chosen to dismiss these works, but the handful of existing accounts has been mostly problematic.

Although Larkin made a few brief references to the Brunette Coleman works in his lifetime, it was Andrew Motion who first brought them to wider public attention. In his 1993 biography of Larkin, he claimed that ‘They drove him to write more fluently than he had ever done before’:

Within a matter of months he had produced two novels (one of 143 typed pages called *Trouble at Willow Gables* and one of exactly the same number of handwritten pages called *Michaelmas Term at St Bride’s*), a ‘sheaf’ of six poems (*Sugar and Spice*), and a fragment of autobiography. All were finished by the following October [of 1943], and all written under the pseudonym Brunette Coleman. (The name seems to have been adapted from a jazz band of the period – Blanche Coleman and her Girls’ Band.)<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Palmer, *Such Deliberate Disguises*, xxi.

<sup>5</sup> Rebecca Johnson, ‘Philip Larkin as Brunette Coleman’, *About Larkin*, 2 (October 1996), 10.

<sup>6</sup> Motion, *A Writer’s Life*, 86. There are in fact *seven* poems in the sheaf.

Summarising these works, he describes their diet of ‘eroticism’, ‘voyeurism, sado-masochism, and a pleasure in taking advantage of those who [...] cannot easily defend themselves’.<sup>7</sup> A few pages later, Motion also introduces Coleman’s essay on the schoolgirl story genre, ‘What Are We Writing For?’<sup>8</sup> He describes the works as ‘facetious’, but goes on to argue that ‘facetiousness is also a kind of unguardedness. By turns comic and silly, they allow us to see some aspects of Larkin’s mind that he normally kept hidden, and others that he didn’t know existed’.<sup>9</sup> These hidden corners of Larkin’s mind are, for Motion, psycho-sexual. Seizing on a handful of vague references and Chinese whispers regarding Larkin’s apparently nascent homosexuality, Motion constructs the Coleman writings as Larkin’s unconscious attempt to work through feelings of guilt and repulsion, before he finally settled the matter of his sexuality: ‘With Brunette shielding him and guiding his hand, he could see that his attraction to men was a thing of the past, and that his attraction to women was sincere but severely complicated’.<sup>10</sup>

Although it would take a while for the Coleman works to be digested by scholars, Motion’s account appears to have set the tone. A seven-year almost-silence was broken in the new millennium by a decade’s worth of essays by various critics. First to break the ice was M. W. Rowe, who followed Motion’s psycho-sexual approach: ‘To understand the Brunette problem [...] we need to begin with Larkin’s sexual history’.<sup>11</sup> Drawing on the biography, Rowe pointed to several factors which triggered Larkin’s

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>8</sup> Motion erroneously calls this essay ‘What We Are Writing For’.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>11</sup> M. W. Rowe, ‘Unreal Girls: Lesbian Fantasy in Early Larkin’, in *New Larkins for Old*, ed. Booth, 82.

traumatic relationship with women, but asks: ‘why should Larkin be so interested in *lesbian* fantasies?’ He presents three reasons:

First, Larkin had had great difficulties in getting close to women. [...] If he could not approach women in reality, as a man, perhaps he could approach them in fantasy, as a woman. [...] Secondly, his attempts to establish heterosexual relationships had been painful failures, yet when he turned to homosexual affairs, he felt stricken with guilt, self-loathing and remorse. Sexual relations *between* women were the one kind of sexual relationship which was not sullied. [...] A third reason why he may have wished to imagine himself as a woman is that the strength of his sexual desire was so insistent, his imagination of his object so powerful, that he wanted *to be* the object of his desire.<sup>12</sup>

Rowe’s position can be summarised thus: Larkin was utterly inept when it came to girls, but he felt disgusted by his burgeoning homosexuality, and his sexual perversions were such as to render him the object of his own desire. A year later, Rowe produced a follow-up essay, this time purporting to deal with ‘a number of the philosophical reasons why Larkin might have been attracted to Brunette’.<sup>13</sup> Despite this stated aim, the essay actually continues the heavily psychoanalytical project of the previous one, arguing that ‘The imagined sweetness, limit and order of middle-class girls’ lives’ in ‘a boarding school and a residential Oxford college’ was Larkin’s jealous and vicarious attempt to achieve ‘the *emotional* certainty and order of their lives. [...] Their

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 86-8.

<sup>13</sup> M. W. Rowe, ‘On being Brunette: Larkin’s schoolgirl fiction’, *Critical Quarterly*, 43:4 (December 2001), 43.

institutions give Larkin a way of annulling in fantasy the pains of his own upbringing'.<sup>14</sup> The chaos of Coleman's childhood home (described in her autobiographical fragment, *Ante Meridian*) is, according to Rowe, 'the very antithesis of the Larkin household, with its carefully guarded eventlessness, waxed furniture, hushed conversations and cleared toys'.<sup>15</sup> In short, Rowe's two essays present Larkin the pervert, and Larkin the fucked-up child.

Two years later, Jin-Sung Choi's essay on Coleman explicitly and transparently adopted a psychoanalytical approach: 'My interpretation [...] will rely on his letters viewed in the light of psychoanalysis'.<sup>16</sup> My contentions in Part I challenged the use of letters for such ends, and Choi's argument – that Larkin unwittingly adopted a 'defensive homosexuality' before therapeutically writing himself straight – is indeed undone by the hermeneutic instabilities of the letters which I have discussed. Whether correct or not, Choi is, for instance, forced to admit that 'it seems [...] Larkin was not particularly sympathetic towards homosexuals'.<sup>17</sup>

The sexual-psychological profiling which Motion, Rowe, and Choi adopt is perhaps understandable, given the context in which Brunette Coleman was created. Larkin was a young undergraduate with a burgeoning sexual consciousness, and the works do contain sexual undertones. Psychoanalysis offers the most obvious way in. Indeed, all three accounts, Rowe's in particular, are intellectually neat and tidy, pulling a wide range of biographical sources into the slipstream of their argument. But there are serious problems with the approach. One is an issue already covered in Part I: the way critics

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 50-1.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>16</sup> Jin-Sung Choi, 'Defensive Homosexuality and Lesbianism in Philip Larkin's Two Girls' School Stories', *Philip Larkin/British Studies*, special issue of *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, 9:1 (Fall 2003), 107.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 108.



barge into a dead writer's mind, brazenly claiming they can speak for the writer's unconscious. One thing about the unconscious is that it is *unconscious*; even if one accepts the view of professional psychoanalysts that it produces symptoms, no one (let alone those with doctorates in English literature) can claim to be its spokesperson. Would these critics feel comfortable if readers interpreted *their* writings using the same methodology? Perhaps *their* interest in the Coleman works demonstrates an unconscious proclivity towards sexual deviancy.

The other issue is more prosaic, but just as significant: a lack of (clear) evidence. Scrutinising the Motion biography, it seems to me that his initial account of Larkin's temporary homosexuality relies far too heavily on a very small amount of very imprecise source materials (such as Philip Brown's slightly embarrassed, slightly defensive *perception* that Larkin once had a crush on him).<sup>18</sup> Like a dodgy car sold by a dealer who then disappears, the homosexuality narrative seems to have been handed down from critic to critic, the dubiousness of the original source forgotten about. Is it too much to ask that critics who make such fundamental pronouncements about a deceased author's character do so using much firmer evidence – or else abstain?

In between Rowe's and Choi's interventions, however, the works were published, so that, for the first time, readers could 'decide for themselves how they should be classified' (*TWG*, vii). The editor, James Booth, deserves praise for making them available, and for his exemplary editorial scholarship. His introduction, too, successfully advances the debate beyond the purely psychoanalytical. One myth debunked by Booth is that of the works' highly erotic nature: 'the novel will give thin satisfaction to a reader in search of explicit pornography or sadism', he writes (*TWG*,

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<sup>18</sup> 'Philip may have been in love with me. [...] I was very keen on a medical girl student, as it happens. But there were a few messy encounters between us, yes. Nothing much'; quoted in Motion, *A Writer's Life*, 65.

xvi). Similarly, he dismisses the too-easy notion that these works are mere private jokes, perceptively cutting through Larkin's 'coarse masculine nonchalance' in letters to Kingsley Amis, affected in order to 'dispel the embarrassment he feels at having spent so much energy on the *genre*':

[Larkin's] mixture of dissatisfactions [with the genre] is very revealing. He deplores the shortage of lesbianism but he is just as impatient with purely literary faults: tedious style and lack of humour. The two novels he singles out for approval reinforce this duality. Vicary's [*Niece of the Headmistress*] does indeed have an unusually legible erotic subtext, but Breary's [*Two Thrilling Terms*] is sexually innocuous, being distinguished from similar stories by its sophisticated farce and irony. (*TWG*, xiii-xiv)

Booth also intelligently identifies the Coleman essay as 'Larkin's own key' to the works, pointing out that, 'Were it not for his careful preservation of this essay we would be unaware how well-read in girls' fiction Larkin was' (*TWG*, xii). Booth's intervention is, then, a welcome one, since he gives more credence to the *literary* aspects of the Coleman heteronym than to the pseudo-psychological. In his attempt to explain why Larkin created Coleman, however, Booth unfortunately falls back on the homosexual psychology narrative, which fails to adequately account for the choice of a specifically *lesbian* heteronym, particularly when Larkin could easily have made use of the male homosexual writers he so admired, such as Christopher Isherwood and Julian Hall.

Nonetheless, Booth's work successfully progressed the conversation, and the two substantial essays on Coleman written since 2002 appear to have benefited from the change of focus. Stephen Cooper, writing against the grain in search of a subversive

Larkin, argues that the stories offer ‘a thoughtful probing of conventional opinion on matters such as authority, gender and moral judgement’.<sup>19</sup> ‘What constitutes the novella’s most searching discussion’, he writes, ‘is its analysis of conventional perceptions of right and wrong’. This is intriguing, although he too endorses the (by now clichéd) orthodoxy that the works answered ‘a sexual and psychological need’.<sup>20</sup> He goes on to read the unfinished novella in Jungian terms, but does not address the question of why it splutters to a premature end, and also fails to account for Larkin’s decision to create the Coleman heteronym in the first place. On this latter question, Terry Castle – perhaps the world’s preeminent expert on the lesbian Western canon – positions the Coleman works within the literature of Sapphism, having failed to be persuaded by the numerous accounts of Larkin’s *male* homosexuality:

It seems important to emphasize from the start the *lesbianism* of the Larkin persona. Unconvincing, in my view, is the attempt of Larkin scholars to explain away the Larkin fantasy by associating it (vaguely enough) with male homoeroticism. [...] Yet the theory depends – rather too patly in my opinion – on a view that male and female homosexuality are, libidinally speaking, but two sides of the same coin and that one can automatically stand in for the other.<sup>21</sup>

This is a powerful argument. Castle rightly distinguishes between the experiences of male and female homosexuality, and criticises the vagueness of the standard homosexual account. (This raises an interesting point in itself: how exactly does the

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<sup>19</sup> Stephen Cooper, *Philip Larkin: Subversive Writer* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2004) 7.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>21</sup> Terry Castle, ‘The Lesbianism of Philip Larkin’, in *The Movement Reconsidered: Essays on Larkin, Amis, Gunn, Davie and Their Contemporaries*, ed. Zachary Leader (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 83-4.

writing of schoolgirl fiction turn an almost-gay man straight?) Summarising that narrative with characteristic wit – ‘After “Normal” Schoolboy Crushes British Male Writer Goes Straight and Stays Straight (More or Less)’ – Castle ridicules it as ‘a bit cursory and cartoonish’.<sup>22</sup> ‘I’m not sure men had much to do with it’, she writes; ‘To be interested in lesbianism is, de facto, to be interested in *women* – in liking women and thinking about women liking other women’.<sup>23</sup> For the first time, then, a critic reading these works was willing to explore their *lesbianism*, without recourse to the usual gay rumour mill of the Motion biography. Her addition of Larkin to a personally-curated list of ‘famous people whose sexual proclivities I myself find *inexpressible*’ – where Larkin rubs shoulders with Virginia Woolf, Greta Garbo, Marlon Brando, and Michael Jackson – is entirely consistent with Chapter 4’s finding of a lesbian-feminine identity constructed in the letters to Monica Jones.<sup>24</sup> Castle’s essay is a useful one, to which I will return later, but it seems a shame that it also resorts to amateur psychological profiling: Larkin, ‘a peculiar wanker’, used the works to ‘[plumb] his own well of loneliness’; the Creature in *Michaelmas Term at St Bride’s* is a fictional version of Larkin, ‘studious, melancholic, rapidly balding [...], partial to alcohol, jazz, and adolescent girls’; and the essay ends with a brief but bizarre discussion of whether or not Larkin was ‘made for sex’.<sup>25</sup>

More recently, Booth has returned to the Coleman works in his 2014 biography of Larkin. His position – that there are literary impulses behind this *oeuvre* – seems to have been reinforced. Denying ‘sexual timidity’ as the driving force behind the works, Booth describes them as a respectful and ‘affectionate homage’ to the genre; he also

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 79-80.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 82-83, 93, 105.

tentatively suggests they could be read as *écriture féminine*.<sup>26</sup> This is a refreshingly open attitude, but a sustained analysis of Larkin's radical genre/gender refashioning is still yet to be written.

The critic who looks at Coleman's works today, then, inherits a small canon of essays, each one having more or less been lured by the false promises of psychoanalysis, and each one suffering from crucial gaps. It seems the appeal of speculating about Larkin's sexuality has far greater magnetism than the application of rigorous textual scholarship. Not only does this imply that the Coleman works are interesting primarily for what they tell us about Larkin's sexual predilections, one also gets a sense of some critics' delight in watching from afar the apparent horror show of Larkin's attempts to bed women. Maintaining the conviction that a literary approach is both more interesting and more reliable, I want to subject these works to the same kind of textual analysis as the letters, in order to further develop the understanding of Larkin's radical textual identities. After all, the main trope of these works when read together as a package – far greater than anything pornographic – is that of reading, writing, and genre. To relegate this concern to secondary importance, or ignore it altogether, misses an opportunity to explore Larkin's progressive literary and identity politics. In these chapters, then, I want to look at Coleman's exercises in and on genre, and to think about the effect this has on gender; I then want to consider why Larkin chose to do so using a female *and* lesbian heteronym; and to account for why the heteronym slips into disuse with the breakdown of *Michaelmas Term at St Bride's*. If Larkin was 'a peculiar wanker', as Castle says, then he was a wanker thinking ahead of his time in terms of literary and identity politics.

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<sup>26</sup> Booth, *Life, Art and Love*, 64, 72. The term, coined by Hélène Cixous, refers to writing which inscribes the experience of the feminine within language and the text; see 'The Laugh of the Medusa', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 1:4 (Summer 1976), 875-93.

# 7

## Genre

Books – buying them, reading them, discussing them or hiding them – represent one of the major tropes of the Coleman *oeuvre*. In *Trouble at Willow Gables*, Marie finds herself furiously plotting revenge as she reads *The Merchant of Venice* (TWG, 16). In the follow-up novella, *Michaelmas Term at St Bride's*, she purchases a copy of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* 'during a delirious afternoon in Blackwell's' (TWG, 141).<sup>1</sup> Hilary, an important character in both novellas, has a second bookshelf in her room at Willow Gables, 'In addition to the regulation bookcase', and the narrator takes the time to provide a *précis* of its contents:

As well as her school text-books, she possessed many shelves of well-known and classical authors, and had a whole bottom shelf devoted, curiously enough, to popular school-stories for girls, and other, less innocent, productions, often with heavy binding concealing their original continental paper covers. (TWG, 16)

One book for which Hilary feels a particularly strong attachment is *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, Théophile Gautier's scandalous 1835 novel. Each of these instances of books as rebellion should be sufficient to suggest a connection between reading, writing, and subversion.

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<sup>1</sup> Although, for reasons of verisimilitude, Larkin deleted this from the text, as an unexpurgated edition was not published in Britain until 1960.

### **‘Why are these books so bad?’**

Booth describes Coleman’s essay ‘What Are We Writing For?’ as ‘Larkin’s own key’ to the *oeuvre* – rightly so, because this essay, too, is explicitly concerned with books (writing and reading them). And the key to the key comes right at the start: Coleman’s secretary, Jacinth, mentions over breakfast that she has been reading ‘a very interesting essay’ by George Orwell on boys’ stories, and suggests that Coleman write her own version about the girls’ genre (*TWG*, 255). Coleman’s first instinct is to dismiss both Orwell, and Jacinth’s idea:

Now, Jacinth, you know I don’t like you to read in bed when you ought to be getting your beauty sleep. And in any case, what do I know about girls’ stories? Don’t splutter in your coffee like that – it’s very bad manners. I mean, this Mr Orwell or whatever his name is probably spent two months or more in the British Museum reading up all the stuff – back numbers and obsolete works and so forth. I haven’t time to do that – you know we’re due to start on *Wenda’s Worst Term* this morning. (*TWG*, 255)

The tone is both modest and patronising, but even by this third paragraph we can recognise Coleman’s tongue-in-cheek nature: her mild rebuke comes immediately after she has noted what a ‘very clever and widely-read girl’ Jacinth is, Coleman having found her ‘through the Oxford University Appointments Committee’ (*TWG*, 255). And although her tongue is in her cheek, Coleman’s response is telling: unlike ‘Mr Orwell or whatever his name is’, she does not have the time to spend conducting extensive research for an essay – as a single woman, and denied access to various professions, financial necessity implores her to keep producing her books. There is a whiff of

Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* in this passage, and it is precisely Coleman's individual brand of feminism which I want to excavate in these chapters.

In fact, Coleman does spend time after breakfast mulling over Jacinth's suggestion, confessing to the reader that she is 'too familiar with Mr Orwell, and others of his kidney', to pay 'any attention to their ephemeral chatter' (another early sign that she is far more intelligent than she cares to show) (*TWG*, 256). Perusing her shelves – clearly important markers of identity for her – full of 'books for and about girls', she wonders 'Why are these books so bad?' (*TWG*, 256). What follows is her attempt to answer that question, and in the process, Coleman produces an essay similar in many respects to Orwell's. If we pay close attention to this piece, and take seriously (at least for the moment) its gender and literary politics, it is possible to uncover a hinterland of reading and thinking on the subject of genre – generally, and specifically in relation to the girls' school story. In it, Coleman expresses some remarkably progressive ideas which get to the heart of contemporary literary debates, and look ahead to second-wave feminism; I want to tease out these values by considering the issue of genre as it bleeds into the entirely related issue of gender.

### **'Sir, you formed me!': Connolly and Orwell**

I have called Orwell's essay the key to the key, because we can better understand Coleman's project here by looking at Orwell's own. 'Boys' Weeklies' was published in an early issue of Cyril Connolly's *Horizon* magazine, and this publication history is important: *Horizon* was founded during the first months of the Second World War, with the explicit aim of unabashedly sustaining a cultural continuity at precisely the moment when culture was being so violently contested. 'At the moment civilization is on the operating table and we sit in the waiting room', Connolly wrote in his inaugural



editorial; ‘Our standards are aesthetic, and our politics are in abeyance’ – at the outset, Connolly had announced his magazine’s art-for-art’s-sake ethic.<sup>2</sup> Of course, set against the backdrop of a brutal world war, such a stance *was* deeply political: to assert one’s aestheticism in a time of conflict was to think about the culture and society one wanted to exist after the conflict. ‘Boys’ Weeklies’ was not the kind of de-politicised, aesthetically-charged writing Connolly had in mind, but its publication was evidence of Connolly’s willingness – eagerness, even – to include the kind of ideological writing which made his own literary temperament shudder. It was one means of enacting the democracy being fought for across the globe.

In fact, Connolly is an important figure in Larkin’s own literary development. Like Larkin, he was born in Coventry, and educated at Oxford. According to Motion, the Bodleian’s preserved daybooks ‘show that of the fifty-one entries relating to Larkin during his time as an undergraduate, the majority have nothing to do with his tutorials’, a number of them being works by Connolly. ‘Larkin later admitted that he spent most of his time straying from the path [Gavin] Bone [his tutor] intended him to follow’, Motion writes.<sup>3</sup> Once again, books become acts of subversion and rebellion. *Enemies of Promise*, Connolly’s 1938 tract on the making of a good book, includes an autobiographical sketch of the author’s youth, and would have greatly interested the young Larkin, who may well have read it by 1943. Years later, at Auden’s 1973 memorial service, Larkin apparently blurted to Connolly, ‘Sir, you formed me!’<sup>4</sup> *Horizon*, then, would have been a project close to Larkin’s own heart (particularly given his own sitting-out of the war), and one can easily imagine this voracious reader absorbing Orwell’s ideological critique of the boys’ stories he once read, eventually

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<sup>2</sup> Cyril Connolly, ‘Comment’, *Horizon: A Review of Literature and Art*, 1:1 (January 1940), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Motion, *A Writer’s Life*, 42-3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 438.

feeding it into the Coleman essay during his final months at Oxford. Orwell's essay considers both the abiding fascination, and the shortcomings, of the popular boys' school story genre. One major failure is that 'these stories are fantastically unlike life at a real public school' (he would know). The boys are almost exclusively 'the clean-fun, knock-about type', "'good" in the clean-living Englishman tradition'. The stock horde of "'bad" boys' are really not that bad: 'no one is ever caught out in any really serious offence' – no stealing, for instance, whilst drinking and smoking are regarded as 'disgraceful'. Most interesting for Coleman would be Orwell's observation that 'Sex is completely taboo'. He considers it 'probable that there was a deliberate intention to get away from the guilty sex-ridden atmosphere that pervaded so much of the earlier literature for boys', works like *Tom Brown's Schooldays* being 'heavy with homosexual feeling, though no doubt the authors were not fully aware of it'.<sup>5</sup> Orwell cannot view all this good, clean fun as coincidental or naïve. Characteristically, he sees a pernicious political ideology at work: 'Naturally the politics of the *Gem* and *Magnet* are Conservative, but in a completely pre-1914 style, with no Fascist tinge', he writes; 'In reality their basic political assumptions are two: nothing ever changes, and foreigners are funny'.<sup>6</sup> He goes on to describe how the working-class only ever appears as comical or villainous, whilst foreigners are equally ludicrous. But this is no laughing matter:

It is probable that many people who would consider themselves extremely sophisticated and 'advanced' are actually carrying through life an imaginative background which they acquired in childhood from (for instance) Sapper and Ian Hay. If that is so, the boys' twopenny weeklies are of the deepest importance.

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<sup>5</sup> George Orwell, 'Boys' Weeklies', in *Selected Essays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957) 179-81.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

Here is the stuff that is read somewhere between the ages of twelve and eighteen by a very large proportion, perhaps an actual majority, of English boys, including many who will never read anything else except newspapers; and along with it they are absorbing a set of beliefs which would be regarded as hopelessly out of date in the Central Office of the Conservative Party. All the better because it is done indirectly, there is being pumped into them the conviction that the major problems of our time do not exist, that there is nothing wrong with *laissez-faire* capitalism, that foreigners are unimportant comings and that the British Empire is a sort of charity-concern which will last forever. Considering who owns these papers, it is difficult to believe that this is unintentional. [...] The *Gem* and *Magnet* [...] are closely linked up with the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Financial Times*. This in itself would be enough to rouse certain suspicions, even if it were not obvious that the stories in the boys' weeklies are politically vetted.<sup>7</sup>

In short, Orwell's ire with the genre is not just that it is unrealistic; much worse, the genre is deliberately, ideologically, unrealistic.

Larkin, who read weeklies like these as a grammar schoolboy, must have read Orwell's analysis with great interest.<sup>8</sup> All three of the epistolary identities discussed in Part I exhibited apathy for organised politics, and it would be surprising to see Larkin-as-Coleman produce a socialist counter-attack on the conservative boys' genre – unlike Orwell, who asks 'why is there no such thing as a left-wing boys' paper?'.<sup>9</sup> Instead, Coleman appears to have sought as much as possible to purge the *girls'* genre of hidden

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>8</sup> See Booth, *Life, Art and Love*, 20.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 201.

and pernicious ideological influences, although the progressive politics of this intervention are, of course, an alternative ideology. Indeed, there are good reasons for this to be done within the genre of the girls' school story: as Booth argues, 'They generate little sense that the British Empire was won on the playing-fields of Roedean or Wycombe Abbey', and therefore provide a foil to the boys' weeklies which Orwell discusses (*TWG*, xii). Before exploring her intervention in the politics of gender and sex, however, it is necessary to explore Coleman's *literary* politics, as set out in 'What Are We Writing For?'

We have already seen Coleman place her cards on the table: she is a *popular* writer, producing books for a wide audience – girls – in order to make a living. This is in contrast to the kind of work Connolly promotes: more intellectually and aesthetically ambitious, but with a much narrower appeal in terms of audience (and therefore a significantly reduced financial return). Yet the dichotomy becomes much less stark in her work. Coleman may well protest that she must crack on with *Wenda's Worst Term*, but it is surely significant that she does not, choosing instead to pause work on her latest genre quick-fix in order to contemplate the state of the genre, and eventually issue a literary call to arms. Coleman's actual reason for dismissing Orwell and 'others of his kidney' is her common-sense mentality that renders it 'a self-evident fact that Art cannot be explained away – or even explained – by foreign policy or trade cycles or youthful traumas, and that these disappointed artists whose soured creative instinct finds an outlet in insisting that it can are better ignored until Time has smoothed away all that they have scribbled on the sand' (*TWG*, 256). Even if Orwell could have his way and get young British boys reading stories about economic cycles and trade union struggles, Time would soon see to it. Coleman seems entirely comfortable with the ephemerality of literature – but is there any reason why an ephemeral work cannot be a good one?

## The 'Ideal Book'

After all, even Connolly could only attribute a figure of ten years to a great book's longevity. Over the next few pages, Coleman produces a dossier of the girls' genre's failings, some of which align with Orwell's equivalents. Underpinning them all is what she calls 'market-writing': the deliberate dumbing-down for a young audience. Citing Samuel Johnson's childhood reading habits, Coleman delivers another dose of common sense: 'If a child of reasonable intelligence has nothing but Shakespeare to read, it will read Shakespeare – and will benefit, I venture to say, far more than if its parents had supplied it with books from the Christmas catalogues – "suitable for 8-10 years", "girls, aged 14-15"' (this atomisation of young people's books will still be familiar to anyone buying from a high-street bookseller or catalogue) (*TWG*, 257). Market-writing is responsible for all kinds of flaws in the genre. Coleman criticises the exclusively virtuous nature of the heroines; the neglect of minor characters; the incursion of other spaces outside of the 'private world' of the girls' school; the moralising, instructional nature of many books; the over-reliance on realism; the cheap psychoanalysis (*TWG*, 256-7). As she works her way through each problem, Coleman displays an impressive array of thinking and reading: her mind tours Shakespeare, the Old Testament, Johnson, Milton. In one fascinating section, she applies Aristotle's theory of 'the Classical Unities' to the genre (*TWG*, 269). She also has a wide scope of reference within her own genre. This is particularly significant; as Booth writes, 'Were it not for his careful preservation of this essay we would be unaware of how well-read in girls' fiction Larkin was' (*TWG*, xii). Those who have dismissed the works as nothing but a private joke must account for why Larkin read so widely within this genre.

Perhaps Coleman's essay again provides the key: 'I have learnt as time goes on to be more tolerant and open-minded on questions of literature[;] there are many mansions in

the house of literature, and [...] the small half-acre of the human spirit I have chosen as my special province deserves as much respect as any' (*TWG*, 263). Her attitude to literature is fundamentally democratic: she feels no distaste for common readers consuming common subjects. In her vocabulary, 'popular' is not a dirty word. Again, the charge that she is the butt of a Larkin/Amis joke might be made. But that would ignore the importance of the demotic and democratic in Larkin's mature poetry: the incorporation of everyday speech, popular culture (Westerns, photograph albums), ordinary people (Mr Bleaney, 'uncles shouting smut'), and, ultimately, the popularity of his poetry. Larkin never wrote an *Essay on Man*, or about fallen monarchs, but from the early works of the 1940s to the late poems, his subject and enduring fascination was the 'ordinary' man and woman.<sup>10</sup> The fact that Coleman explicitly shares that interest does not make for a particularly hilarious joke.

Coleman's attitude leads her to issue a call to arms, addressed to the sisterhood of fellow genre writers, but first she must pre-empt their inevitable protestations:

But I hear an objection, the voice of any one of the authors I have named in this short essay. [...] 'We are not Shakespeare or Milton, we are not dealing with the Unities or any other scholastic claptrap, we are hack writers, yes, even the best of us, even you, and we are dependent upon the markets we supply.' (*TWG*, 270)

But Coleman is a woman with a vision:

To which I reply: Yes, I know it. I know that when I've finished *Wenda's Worst Term*, I shall start *Madcap Mona*; and I know too that in all these books I shall

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<sup>10</sup> Although it should be noted that Coleman's girls are *public* school girls, and are therefore privileged members of a social elite.

be forced to disregard my own rules because of the simple necessities you mention. But nevertheless, I think there is one book that still remains to be written, a book to end all books. [...] But this is merely shooting in the dark. It is not me, in all probability, who will discover it, not me upon whom the task will fall to reveal the statue already potential in the rock. The point is, that the book remains to be written, in which, once and for all, what we are writing for will be fully expressed, fully realised in all its beauty and exciting charm. When that has happened, we can relax: the ideal will be achieved: we can write as badly as we choose. But in the meantime, in every book we produce, we must make an effort to do better. Every story must add just a little to the progress made towards the Ideal Book, until suddenly, one day, one of us will say to herself with a quiet thrill: It's happening. This is the real thing. (*TWG*, 271-3)

Here, Connolly's influence can be detected again, for *Enemies of Promise* was 'a didactic inquiry into the problem of how to write a book which lasts ten years', just as Coleman has produced an essay exploring the problem of the 'Ideal Book'.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, her first-person polemic, which praises and dismisses various literary predecessors in order to arrive at that hypothetical Ideal, seems just as indebted to Connolly's book as it is to Orwell's essay.<sup>12</sup>

Once again, for those inclined not to take these works seriously, the excavation of literary debts must seem far-fetched, but none of it requires much speculation, if any at all. We know Larkin read Connolly's work; we know he had read the boys' stories

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<sup>11</sup> Cyril Connolly, *Enemies of Promise* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979) 9.

<sup>12</sup> It may also be the case that Coleman's autobiographical fragment, *Ante Meridian*, was influenced by 'A Georgian Boyhood', the final, autobiographical third of *Enemies of Promise*. Both adopt the convention of describing childhood as a fantastical and mystical time – the very convention Larkin would later negate in 'I Remember, I Remember'.

which Orwell critiques, as well as that critique; we know he also read extensively within the girls' school story genre. As Booth argues, Larkin's 'reading was as wide and deep as Eliot's'.<sup>13</sup> Such a well-balanced literary diet meant Larkin was ideally positioned to take on the girls' genre in a way Orwell could only dream about. Coleman's call to arms does, however, end with a tone of defeatism: 'And now I must ring for Jacinth, and begin *Wenda's Worst Term*' (TWG, 273). But it is worth noting that there is no *Wenda's Worst Term* for us to read; no *Brenda's Best Friend*, and no *Madcap Mona*. What we do have are the two novellas, a sheaf of poems, and an autobiographical fragment.

Coleman has short-changed herself; yes, in the hypothetical *Wenda's Worst Term* she might have simply reproduced the usual generic conventions with a view to 'market-writing', but in *these* texts, she has produced an impressive, intelligent glimpse at the 'Ideal Book' which she longs to see. In other words, not only did Coleman care enough about the genre to survey the field, she also went some way to revolutionising it. She is as able a practitioner as she is a theoretician. And, by logical extension, so is Larkin.

### **Fiction, the Reading Public, and the Leavises**

Before turning to look at her exercises in genre, I want to add a little more context, in order to show just how progressive were her literary politics. The importance of Connolly's work, especially *Horizon*, has already been noted. In this period, the other major contender for the attention of literary intellectuals was *Scrutiny*, the quarterly founded in 1932 by L. C. Knights and F. R. Leavis, and dominated by the latter until it folded in 1953. During these years, Leavis became an incredible force in the re-shaping of literary values and the canon, acting as a megaphone for modernists like Eliot and

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<sup>13</sup> Booth, *Life, Art and Love*, 33.



Lawrence. Edward Greenwood summarises both the attitude, and reception, of the Cambridge controversialist:

In view of the not wholly unjustified accusation that *Scrutiny* in its later years was hostile to contemporary literature, it is worth stressing that the young Leavis was in the vanguard in this matter. He incurred the displeasure of the university authorities and the English Faculty by lecturing on *Ulysses* to his classes in the mid 1920s. He recalls 'conventional academics' saying of him at the time of Lawrence's death in 1930, 'We don't like the kind of book he lends undergraduates'. At this time the Faculty Librarian sanctioned the withholding of D. H. Lawrence's and T. F. Powys's works from undergraduates who wanted to borrow them or read them in the library.<sup>14</sup>

In 1943, Larkin was working towards his Finals, immersed in what he knew to be Oxford's conservative English Literature curriculum; he was also busy rebelling against this with a private literary diet of modern writers. We know Larkin worshipped Lawrence, and he was also a huge fan of Powys; so he may well have read Leavis with total absorption (despite some of the negative comments about him scattered through the *Selected Letters*). The idea of Leavis lecturing on *The Rainbow* at Cambridge whilst he struggled through Anglo-Saxon at Oxford must have been exciting and infuriating in equal measures. Although Leavis suffered professionally (his applications for promotion beyond probationary lecturer were routinely rejected), he played an enormous role in dragging the academic discipline of English Literature into the twentieth century. In 1932, the year *Scrutiny* was founded, he also published *New*

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<sup>14</sup> Edward Greenwood, *F. R. Leavis, Writers and their Work* (Harlow: Longman, 1978) 9.

*Bearings in English Poetry*, a radical revision of the poetry canon, and his wife, Q. D. Leavis, published *Fiction and the Reading Public*, a major study of reading habits in contemporary Britain. We know Larkin was aware of this book: he later wrote a poem of the same title which returns to the theme of market-writing, and he possessed a 1939 edition. No doubt Coleman's democratic instincts would be irked by Leavis's sometimes condescending elitism:

[In] general those who are enterprising and affluent enough to subscribe to a circulating library are prepared to have their reading determined for them. And 'reading' in this case means fiction. It is not an exaggeration to say that for most people 'a book' means a novel. This becomes apparent if one watches the process of selection, in which the assistant is generally consulted in some such formula as 'Another book like this one, please', or 'Can you recommend me a nice book?' The assistant glances at the novel held out and produces another novel which is accepted without question. She may ask 'Have you read this?' and the answer will be 'I can't remember, but I'll take it'. Where criticism is offered, it almost invariably betrays a complete ignorance of values, *e.g.* a common complaint: 'I can't read Conrad, sea-stories bore me', or alternatively: 'I like Conrad because I'm so fond of stories about the sea'.<sup>15</sup>

Leavis's 'anthropological' observations led her to pronounce 'the disintegration of the reading public', and issue her own call to arms: 'If there is to be any hope, it must lie in conscious and directed effort. All that can be done, it must be realised, and take the

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<sup>15</sup> Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1932) 6.

form of resistance by an armed and conscious minority'.<sup>16</sup> Here, she is referring to a small army of academics and highbrow novelists, an army tasked with reclaiming standards in fiction and thus society. At its worst, *Fiction and the Reading Public* displays scorn for the lowbrow and the pulp, and represents the pervasive cynicism of the period's literary elite. Its theme is precisely the one Connolly engaged with six years later in *Enemies of Promise*, which advocates the 'Mandarin' style (long, complex, erudite) over that of modern journalese.<sup>17</sup> This context is important, because it places Coleman's own literary critical and creative practice within a contemporary critical landscape of debate and pessimism – a landscape familiar to Larkin the reader, student, and aspiring writer. What unites Connolly, the Leavises, and Orwell is their preoccupation with *culture*, in its present and future manifestations. What the Leavises and Connolly fear is its dilution, its resort to the lowbrow, and their answer is a shameless defence of the highbrow. Although they deserve immense credit for their modernisation of that category, its elite status remained unchallenged.

Coleman's essay shares remarkably similar concerns, but calls for a more progressive response – and she later produces one. Coleman wants to fiercely protect the core of the schoolgirl fiction genre: it must always be about English schoolgirls, and their mistresses; it must always concern itself with their hopes and desires, their trials and tribulations; it must always delight in their stockings and ponies and hockey training. But, crucially, she sees no reason why this popular (or lowbrow) subject cannot be presented in a more sophisticated way. In other words, the market must remain, but the women behind the stalls should be more literate; their customers will follow suit. This is a financially viable collective ascent, rather than a financially competitive race to the genre's gutter. Her stance is conspicuous in the *Sugar and Spice*

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., xv, 270.

<sup>17</sup> Connolly, *Enemies of Promise*, 21.

poems, which are dedicated ‘to all my sister-writers, with the exception of Margaret Kennedy, who wrote in *The Constant Nymph*: “English Schoolgirls are not interesting.”’ (*TWG*, 243). For Coleman, English schoolgirls *are* interesting, and they justly occupy one of the many small rooms in the expansive house of literature she describes in her essay. To prove the point, in *Sugar and Spice* she charts their supposedly trivial lives within the traditional literary form of the lyric poem, so that they are exposed (or perhaps elevated) to the same poetic treatment as Keats’s nightingale, or Tennyson’s grief.

In the first novella, too, Coleman tightly hugs the conventions of the genre she so clearly adores. Following her own advice about maintaining the ‘Copernican universe’ of the school, she refuses to be lured by the superficial glamour of trips to foreign countries (*TWG*, 268). Indeed, the school feels like a bubble-wrapped world: in the Prologue, the narrator cinematically zooms in to the school’s grounds, following the postman as he brings (what will turn out to be perilous) evidence of the outside world, letters that will disrupt the established, regimental order. Considering the novella was written in 1943, there is almost no sense at all of the war, other than the threat of being sent to the Auxiliary Territorial Service for Women which looms over Hilary’s head when she is expelled from the school (*TWG*, 124). The ‘Unity of Place’ is maintained by keeping the story within the school grounds, with the exception of a necessary excursion into the local village. The ‘Unity of Time’ is maintained, with the entire story taking place within one school term. And the ‘Unity of Action’ is maintained, because each and every aspect of the plot is a contribution towards, in Coleman’s words, ‘the advancement of the story’ (*TWG*, 269). Numerous other generic conventions are followed. Booth lists the ‘two-in-a-bed scene, endemic to the *genre*’ (*TWG*, xv); he also

notes the ‘age hierarchy’, and the girls’ ‘innocent pre-adolescent narcissism’.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, in a review of Booth’s edition, the editor of *Folly* magazine (an acronym for ‘fans of light literature for the young’) remarked on how these pieces so closely resemble the established girls’ genre.<sup>19</sup>

But Coleman’s novella would not be so noteworthy were it not for her *improvement* of the genre. Each chapter contains an epigraph taken (in the majority of cases) from canonical literature: Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, Pope’s *Essay on Man* (thereby matching her essay’s literary erudition). There are also allusions throughout to the moderns: Gautier, Eliot, Shaw, Baudelaire, Maupassant, and more. Not only does the inclusion of such works fire the genre into a different kind of intellectual galaxy, it can tell us something else about Coleman’s mission. The *Paradise Lost* citations, for example, draw attention to Milton’s Satan – namechecked in her essay – as a complex portrayal of evil; given Coleman’s criticism of exclusively virtuous heroines, we can see that she wants to shake up the dusty complacency and intellectual laziness of this genre’s sickly-sweet characterisations. Indeed, like Larkin’s letters and poetry, Coleman’s novellas indulge in citational practice. Marie’s cross-dressing is surely (though only partially) a nod to Shakespeare’s gender-bending plays (*As You Like It*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and so on), whilst Hilary’s indecisiveness about whether to make amorous advances on Mary echoes Prufrock’s erotic paralysis. All this can be said to make the work more literary, more intelligent, more sophisticated; in short, a better book. And one can easily imagine young female readers developing the same qualities, had the novellas been made commercially available.

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<sup>18</sup> Booth, *Life, Art and Love*, 64.

<sup>19</sup> Sue Sims, review of *Trouble at Willow Gables and Other Fictions* by Philip Larkin, *About Larkin*, 14 (October 2002), 38.

It must be said, however, that such changes only really represent an exercise in literariness. What is more remarkable about Coleman's improvements is her radical representation of gender and sexuality, although this is *closely* connected to the issue of genre, as she explodes the existing parameters of this genre's gender sensibility. Orwell clearly took the boys' genre seriously; Coleman takes the girls' equivalent seriously too – and if we are willing to take Coleman seriously, then it is possible to detect a literary-feminist programme within her *oeuvre*, and therefore within Larkin's early writings.

# 8

## Gender

An undoing of genre is also an undoing of gender. Traditionally, popular genre works arrive already gendered: the hardboiled male sleuths of detective fiction and the Italian Stallion lovers of pulp romance are evidence of their gendered readerships and ideological implications. This begins during childhood: discussing girls' fiction of the early twentieth century, J. S. Bratton argues that 'A century of writing for girls had established the norm of the domestic tale, in which the trials of the heroine were involved with the learning of discipline, the internalisation of the feminine values of self-abnegation, obedience and submission'.<sup>1</sup> Mary Cadogan and Patricia Craig make a similar point in their study of girls' fiction:

Before girls are old enough to go to school they are familiar with Polly Flinders, who is whipped for spoiling her nice, new, feminine clothes, with the other Polly who is encouraged endlessly to put the kettle on and take it off again; they learn that Miss Muffet has an irrational fear of spiders, and see how the little girls who are kissed and reduced to tears by offensive Georgie-Porgie lack the courage to chase him off, and have to wait until the 'boys' come out to rescue them.

Popular fiction over the last hundred years has drawn heavily on images which

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<sup>1</sup> J. S. Bratton, 'Girls' Fiction 1900-1930', in *Imperialism and Juvenile Literature*, ed. Jeffrey Richards (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989) 197.

are extensions from these, representing girls essentially as passive, domesticated, brainless and decorative.<sup>2</sup>

The previous section explored Coleman's attitudes to, and experiments in, the girls' genre, revealing a remarkably progressive *literary* politics. In this section, I want to carry that through to an exploration of her reworking of gender constructions, in order to draw attention to Coleman's remarkably progressive *gender* politics. Judy Simons comments that by the time of the immediate post-war era,

so familiar had the features of the girls' school story become [...] that authors such as [Dorita Fairlie] Bruce and [Elinor] Brent-Dyer could modify what had already become a standard narrative format in order to suggest that their pictures of school life were more authentic than those of their pioneering predecessor [Angela Brazil].<sup>3</sup>

Writing heteronymously in 1943, Larkin was also familiar with those formats and conventions. By paying close attention to Coleman's treatment of gender in these texts, we can see how her modification of the genre significantly outstripped those of the period's most beloved exponents – her sister writers – in progressive ideological terms.

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<sup>2</sup> Mary Cadogan and Patricia Craig, *'You're a Brick, Angela!': A New Look at Girls' Fiction from 1839 to 1975* (London: Gollancz, 1976) 10.

<sup>3</sup> Judy Simons, 'Angela Brazil and the Making of the Girls' School Story', in *Popular Children's Literature in Britain*, ed. Julia Briggs, Dennis Butts, and M. O. Grenby (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008) 174-5.



## Characterisation

In the previous chapter, I noted how Coleman lifts material from canonical literature in order to raise the standard of writing within her genre. But her citations and allusions do more than vaguely boost the novellas' literary street-cred – they also provide clues about some of Coleman's more specific intentions. The Prologue to *Trouble at Willow Gables* opens with an epigraph taken from *Paradise Lost*, with Satan arriving at the borders of Eden, at this point yet to decide whether he will seek redemption or spread corruption (*TWG*, 6). We have seen Coleman bemoan the lack of morally complex characters with inner conflicts; this epigraph, therefore, signals her intention to explore the fuller possibilities of characterisation, as Milton did with Satan. And if Milton's innovation in characterisation had theological and political ramifications, then for Coleman, the impact is on gender ideologies.

At this point, it is worth summarising her characterisations in *Willow Gables*, and recalling the situation of girls and women in 1943. Although their public role had altered because of the national crisis of war, women effectively remained squarely within a first-wave feminist society – suffrage had been won, but a culture of propriety and protective limitations remained in place. They could now attend Oxbridge, for instance, but only as members of all-women's colleges, and they were not awarded full degrees at Cambridge until 1948 – five years after Coleman produced her *oeuvre*. Literature played its part in this culture; the social linguists Murray Knowles and Kirsten Malmkjaer have described how:

Adults see it as their task to socialise children, that is, to make them behave in ways that are generally acceptable to adults – in ways that will fit the children to take their place in society, as adults perceive it. Obviously, adults have many

means towards this end available to them. [...] However, they [...] inevitably influence children more subtly, often subconsciously, and, many would argue, most effectively, through language. [...] The language of social texts – including those texts which we read to our children or give them to read for themselves – is therefore a particularly effective agent in promoting the acceptance by the child of these customs, institutions and hierarchies.<sup>4</sup>

They go on to discuss how children's literature galvanises the process of socialisation through narrative legitimation and normalisation. It is within this context that Coleman's exercises in characterisation should be comprehended. A *précis* of the main characters in *Willow Gables* would read something like this: Mary, regarded by her older peers as intelligent, receives illicit private tuition, instigated by Philippa, who sees Mary's potential to reach university – but Philippa wants to focus on her own Higher Education ambitions, so asks Hilary to take over the tuition; Hilary, a prefect with a taste for subversive literature, agrees to do so, but is motivated by her sexual attraction to Mary; Margaret, always battered and bruised from her exploits, whose bad language is prolific, constantly searches for ways to make a quick buck, eventually becoming an astute gambler; Marie, a mischievous girl, is determined to spend her own money as she wishes, triggering the novella's central sticky situation, which in turn leads her friend Myfanwy, generally a sweet and kind-natured girl, to become a kind of detective seeking justice in an unjust world.

When considering the significance of genre in this *oeuvre*, Myfanwy's characterisation is particularly interesting. Glenwood Irons, the editor of a volume of essays on feminism and detective fiction, notes that 'The popular representation of [the]

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<sup>4</sup> Murray Knowles and Kirsten Malmkjaer, *Language and Control in Children's Literature* (London: Routledge, 1996) 43-4.

male detective-as-urban-cowboy who stands out against the rottenness of society has a powerful appeal'.<sup>5</sup> He then points out that 'since the late 1960s, it can no longer be argued that such an image is the only one informing the popular imagination with respect to the detective. Even those who ignore the plethora of women detectives in popular novels cannot help but recognise the change in TV and cinema depictions of this character' – offering up the volume of essays as a corrective to the outdated masculine archetype.<sup>6</sup> But as early as 1943, more than twenty years before the sea-change identified by Irons, Coleman had re-gendered that archetype. Admittedly, *Trouble at Willow Gables* has never achieved the phenomenal popularity (and therefore impact) of Joan Hickson's Miss Marple, or Angela Lansbury's Jessica Fletcher, but the thought was there, decades earlier, and credit should be given where credit is due. Of course, some of the popular screen characters which Irons mentions were adaptations of earlier fictional ones, such as Agatha Christie's Miss Marple. Without wishing to overstate Coleman's use of a female detective, it is nonetheless interesting to note that by the time she wrote her works, the Miss Marple character had only appeared in two of Christie's novels – *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930) and *The Body in the Library* (1942); a third, *The Moving Finger*, came out the same year (1943) in the United Kingdom. Coleman's female sleuth was not the first, but she was novel.

In itself, Coleman's exploration of several characters becomes a modification of the genre, which normally focuses on a single heroine, but the result in terms of gender is the more significant change. Implicitly, this strategy recognises the value of all girls, rather than a single and somehow exceptional girl, presenting and legitimising a number of different models of girlhood and femininity, each model containing its own

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<sup>5</sup> Glenwood Irons, ed. and introd., *Feminism in Women's Detective Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995) x-xi.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

possibilities and limitations. The implied importance of *all* girls is then reinforced as Coleman follows their lives through school (Willow Gables) and into college (St Bride's), although, as we shall see, this transition becomes difficult for Coleman, and consequently, this chapter focuses on the first novella rather than the unfinished second.

### **Plot**

The brief summary of the Willow Gables girls' personalities should be sufficient to demonstrate Coleman's fashioning of young female characters as strong and active agents of their own destiny. The title of the first novella's opening chapter, 'Trouble in Envelopes', is a useful place to start thinking about plot, given the significance of letters and identity, as discussed in Part I. Marie is the recipient, not the author, of a letter delivered in the Prologue by a postman wearing cycle-clips, but that letter is still imbued with importance, leading Marie to ask herself questions about who determines her actions and behaviour, and about her relationship with authority and the wider community in which she lives. Another letter, intended for Margaret, is 'from one Arthur Waley, Turf Accountant, saying that he would be pleased to oblige Miss Tattenham at any time and odds' – another sly cultural reference, Arthur Waley being a famous twentieth-century translator of Chinese and Japanese poetry (*TWG*, 9). It is these aspects of the plot which form the essence of *Trouble at Willow Gables*; the sexual element, which has obsessed critics, is fairly negligible, although still important and related to the issue of gender, as will be seen. Consequently, active and wilful girls are all over the place in this novella. From early on, the narrator is at pains to show their individuality. Although the school corridors are flooded with girls 'all dressed in maroon tunics, white blouses, and black stockings', 'The effect, curiously enough, was not one of uniformity':

[S]o many different faces paraded past, so many colours of hair, complexions, eyes, different hair-styles, contrasts in age, build and height, that an observer would have been dazzled by variety rather than dispirited by any impression of mass-production. Girls pushed different ways[;] all had a destination and were impatient to reach it. [...] All chattered, laughed, and squealed at the tops of their voices, pushing and pinching as the crowd jostled this way and that. Prefects tried vainly to introduce some order into the squabble. (TWG, 10)

It is significant that the narrator, also an ‘observer’, does not project arousal onto the scene of bustling schoolgirls in their uniforms, but rather a dazzling and spirited display of activity and diversity. The description of each girl having ‘a destination’ and being ‘impatient to reach it’ is as much a comment on their ambition and energy as it is a narration of their journeys to classrooms and dormitories. This focus on headstrong and self-governing girls is relentless. After Hilary confiscates a five pound note posted to Marie by her aunt, Mary asks “‘Can’t you *do* anything about it?’”; *doing something about it* becomes a central theme of the plot. But Margaret’s comment – “‘One’s got to make some sort of a stand against the bitches of this world’” – also indicates that the story will not slide into a realm of idealised sisterly solidarity (TWG, 15). For at Willow Gables, the limiting force is not immediately one of patriarchy, but the authoritarian rule of the Headmistress, Miss Holden.<sup>7</sup> The name suggests she has a ‘hold on’ the girls’ lives, and indeed, it is she who holds on to Marie’s five pounds, and decides how they will be spent. Similarly, it is a female peer, Hilary, who delights in confiscating the

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<sup>7</sup> Although Rosemary Auchmuty has argued that the headmistress in schoolgirl fiction ‘becomes, in a sense, a surrogate male figure governing her surrogate community, the school’, I think it is also important to consider female characters as females – Coleman has no desire to idealise women, who can also be ‘bitches’, to borrow Margaret’s phrasing; see *A World of Women* (London: The Women’s Press, 1999) 110.

money and delivering it to Miss Holden. Hilary certainly suffices as the novella's baddie, but she is also the best example of Coleman's Miltonic characterisation; she is, by far, the most interesting and conflicted character in the *oeuvre*. Once the girls' indignant reaction against Hilary has been narrated, the focus shifts to Hilary's study, where the 'original chaste nudity' has been worked into a luxurious harem of decadence:

The carpet was soft, the furniture well-sprung, and there was an abundance of silken cushions: a reading lamp trailed a heavy fringe, and there were several unobtrusive and lightly-coloured pictures and engravings on the walls, culminating in a studio-photograph of Hilary herself over the mantelshelf, heavily chiaroscuro'd. In addition to the regulation bookcase, Hilary had supplied a second, for she was a voracious reader [...]. (*TWG*, 16)

The narrator then describes the contents of Hilary's illicit bookcase (cited earlier). As a prefect, Hilary is the long arm of Miss Holden's law, but this does not stop her from privately undermining the Headmistress's iron rule of austere uniformity. Hilary's most treasured literary possession is her disguised copy of *Mademoiselle de Maupin*. In this novel – a French literary scandal in its day – the cross-dressing swordswoman Julie d'Aubigny falls into a love triangle involving a man and his mistress. Has this novel taught Hilary the importance of metaphorically donning trousers in order to cut through patriarchally-imposed limitations on women? And has the novel legitimised, in her mind, a philosophy of free love, including love between women?

Not that she is the only girl willing to subvert the stringent school regime. Everything about Willow Gables is set up to maintain order and uniformity. As the

postman approaches the 'grey façade', there is 'complete silence'; 'The trees are very tall and shut out the light', and the lawn has a "Keep Off the Grass" notice (*TWG*, 7). The girls lead a martial life: 'Regularly at a quarter past nine every night the Fourth Form trooped off to bed, up the stairs and along corridors to the long, low dormitory. It was a large room, with a row of washbasins at one end, and beds ran down both walls'. Each night, prefects patrol the dorm, shouting "Everybody in bed!", at the same time sweeping up and down the lines of beds, flicking the dawdlers [...] with the end of a leather belt' (*TWG*, 22-4). The school's structure is a hierarchical and divisive one, separating girls not just according to age but also pedagogy: Philippa and Hilary, for example, although both prefects, members of the same form, and 'intellectual equals', meet 'very seldom', as their subjects separate them in temporal and spatial terms as much as mental ones (*TWG*, 18-19). But within this environment, Coleman has every girl display a personality of her own, pushing against the school's regulations in small but expressive ways. This can be in their sartorial choices (Philippa is known for always wearing belts), or in more explicit transgressions like smoking, and poker games for penny stakes after Lights Out; Coleman even takes care to reproduce schoolgirl slang ('Is she getting bunked?', 'Pretty cool of Philippa to split on her', and so on), including Margaret's 'coarse' language, which is not merely an act of dialogic verisimilitude, but also a further means of creating a sub-culture – that is, a vernacular community separate from, and resistant to, the dominant one (*TWG*, 74). Collectively, these features of the narrative build up an atmosphere of low-level resistance and transgression, an important foil to the established and Establishment boys' and girls' genres which Orwell and Coleman critique. This atmosphere then provides a platform for the plot's more risqué elements.

This centres on the confiscation of Marie's five pound note, which she indignantly decides to take back. The subversive power of literature is once again registered when Marie resolves to do so whilst studying *The Merchant of Venice*; Shakespeare's complex portrayal of a wronged and revengeful Jew germinating in a hitherto innocent mind thoughts of reprisal. As a punishment for taking back the money, Miss Holden coerces Marie into donating it to the school's Gymnasium Fund; this act of pressuring the individual to abnegate her own wishes in the interests of the collective mimics authoritarian regimes – Margaret is contemptuous about this coercion, and the narrator describes it as a 'subscription to the democratic heresy' (*TWG*, 38). Once again, Miss Holden has wielded her authority arbitrarily, but given the nature of these girls, her decision will spark further transgressions. When the note goes missing a second time, Marie is wrongly accused and violently searched in the Headmistress's office (in fact, Margaret has taken it to invest in her budding gambling enterprise). This injustice infuriates Myfanwy, who takes it upon herself to solve the crime – and, as discussed, an early female detective prototype is born. The sections of narrative relating to Myfanwy then begin to inhabit the language of detective fiction:

True, the evidence was strong against her, but there was such a difference between the first offence and the second that Myfanwy felt sure that Marie would never have ventured so near a crime not only against Miss Holden, but against the Gymnasium Fund and the whole school. (*TWG*, 49)

Myfanwy briefly retailed the facts of the case as she had learnt them from Philippa Moore. Marie listened intently.



‘So it must have been taken between prayers and about half-past two,’  
Myfanwy finished. ‘That’s quite a long time. Can you prove where you were all  
that time?’ (*TWG*, 50)

True to detective fiction (and games of *Cluedo*), the solving of the crime hinges on a  
crowbar. In short, Coleman inhabits a genre within a genre, mimicking the conventions  
of detective fiction, but crucially inserting a sleuth-hero who is a young girl, spurred  
simply by her keen sense of (in)justice.

Meanwhile, Marie has been solitarily confined on the top floor of the school as the  
search for the missing money continues. Once again recalling Shakespeare, she plots an  
escape with Pat (a servant): “‘You must bring me some other clothes – trousers, and a  
shirt. People might take me for a boy if I tied my hair up,” she added, with vague  
memories of a school production of *As You Like It*’ (*TWG*, 78). The symbolism is  
obvious: Marie must pretend to be a member of the male sex in order to escape; her  
freedom depends on cross-dressing. Perhaps this is a self-referential nod to the Coleman  
*oeuvre*, a question about the possibilities of cross-dressing, for these works are, after all,  
a product of Larkin’s own transgender authorship. Indeed, Marie’s decision is echoed  
elsewhere in the novella, when Myfanwy – a prodigious swimmer – wishes a ‘more  
masculine’ costume could be permitted: ‘There is something about shoulder-straps that  
impedes a first-rate crawl. What a nuisance being a girl, she reflected’ (*TWG*, 115).  
Myfanwy is not impeded as a swimmer merely by *being a girl*, but by having to wear a  
girl’s costume; Marie must dress as a boy in order to escape punishment for a  
misdemeanour (as defined by authority) which she did not commit; Margaret must  
conduct her gambling operations covertly; Hilary must disguise the books she loves to  
read – throughout the narrative, the girls repeatedly show that a young woman’s lot is

not a happy one, and consistently strive to push at the limits of their world. Coleman creates great pathos in showing how their vivacity is persistently threatened by an authority modelled on and propping up the patriarchy. Perhaps the most symbolic scene comes when Margaret also decides to escape from the school, this time on the groundsman's horse. Once out of the school grounds, she must ride through a river, prompting her to remove her wet clothes. Hilary and two other girls are sent out to find Marie, but the moment they locate her, the noise of 'thundering hooves' is heard; they turn and see that 'the horse was not filled with motiveless malignity after all, but was bestridden by a hatless, coatless, stockingless, blouseless, saddleless, stirrupless, bridle- and reinless Margaret Tattenham, who cantered up [...] briskly, and brought her blowing mount to a standstill' (*TWG*, 107). The image of a naked woman astride a horse can only bring to mind the story of Lady Godiva, the Anglo-Saxon noblewoman who rode nude through the streets of Coventry in order to protest against her husband's repressive tax system.<sup>8</sup> Nakedly straddling horses, what Margaret and Godiva have in common is a determination to resist patriarchal authority where it is wielded arbitrarily.

Soon after, the girls are confronted with a crisis, as Myfanwy (who has been swimming in the river) is swept downstream, and looks set to drown, but the girls work together to save her. This is part of the novella's Unity of Action, contributing towards an overall resolution; but it also shows the girls' potential to survive outside of the protective and limiting school regime. Throughout *Willow Gables*, Coleman is careful not to idealise girls, refusing to create a sentimental world of feminine solidarity (both Miss Holden and Hilary can be repugnant characters, perfectly willing to manipulate others in order to advance their own agendas). Her approach to gender in this novella is

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<sup>8</sup> Coventry is also, of course, Larkin's hometown; images of Lady Godiva are found throughout the city, including a permanent collection at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, so the young Larkin was well aware of this early feminist tale.

a radical one. We know from ‘What Are We Writing For?’ that Coleman is eager to inhabit and protect the core elements of the schoolgirl story genre; but in her constructions of gender, she provides a counter-model to that genre. In her quest to see the Ideal Book realised, Coleman uses a number of strategies to raise the quality of the genre, and the most radical means of doing so is her re-presentation of femininity. At the levels of plot and characterisation, both crucial elements of fiction, she creates girls who, in minor and major ways, wilfully obliterate the limits imposed on them simply by virtue of having been born into a patriarchal society. In *Radical Larkin*, Osborne argues that Larkin’s poems enact the Derridean paradox of fidelity and betrayal to his literary masters, such as Hardy:

[To] follow in the footsteps of a person one admires for originality is to betray that originality by being a replica rather than a prototype, an emulator where the role model was an instigator. To truly follow an original master one must still commit an act of betrayal, overthrowing his or her example in order to be comparably *sui generis*. Either way, one’s pledge of loyalty, one’s vow to follow, is simultaneously an act of perjury, a refusal to follow.<sup>9</sup>

This also neatly encapsulates Coleman’s work as the author of schoolgirl fiction: determined to preserve the elements of a genre she so dearly loves, she must also be true to that genre by improving it rather than merely replicating it. Once again, an important aspect of Larkin’s later poetics can be traced back to this heteronym. Radically, it is Coleman’s significant enrichment of the genre’s gender representations which allows

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<sup>9</sup> Osborne, *Radical Larkin*, 152.

her to be that uncommon thing in literature, the writer who betrays lovingly and faithfully.

### **Narrative mode**

Coleman's literary reworking of gender also extends beyond plot and characterisation to include the narrative mode. The narrative mode of Coleman's novellas is that of Free Indirect Discourse (FID), one favoured by some of the most important women novelists, most notably Jane Austen and Virginia Woolf, each of whom innovated FID with important consequences for literary history. In this sense, Coleman aligns herself with some of the most influential women writers in English literature. Of course, this could be another Larkin/Amis scoff. But given Larkin's adoration of Woolf, and her clear influence on *A Girl in Winter* (written within three years of the Coleman *oeuvre*), that is difficult to accept.

Austen's stamp on FID was chiefly her exploitation of its potential for irony, but FID would later become a tool which enabled novelists to explore the consciousness and inner lives of their characters. To narrate a character's life in such an intimately interior way is, implicitly, to assert their value, and their potential to fascinate. When Woolf used FID in *Mrs Dalloway*, flowing in and out of numerous major and minor characters' minds on that day in June 1923, the implication was that each and every one of them, from society hostesses and Members of Parliament, to forgotten war veterans and passing pedestrians, was somehow interesting and somehow mattered; likewise when James Joyce used FID in *Ulysses* to narrate Leopold Bloom's bowel movements, the passage (no pun intended) scandalised precisely because it suggested that a Dubliner taking his morning shit on 16 June 1904 mattered enough to be endowed with the permanency of art. We have already seen Coleman fight the corner of English

schoolgirls – silly Margaret Kennedy, for thinking them uninteresting – so it should come as little surprise that FID might be deployed as yet another way for her to be loud and proud. The Woolf connection becomes clearer if we briefly consider *Ante Meridian*, Coleman's autobiographical fragment which describes her childhood. The influence of Connolly's *Enemies of Promise* has already been noted, and Booth detects the influence of a possible sister-writer, Daphne du Maurier (*TWG*, ix). However, the coastal Cornish setting could be indebted to Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, her most obviously autobiographical work.<sup>10</sup> Although *To the Lighthouse* is set in Scotland, Woolf's descriptions of place are based on St Ives, where the Stephen family had a summer home for ten years of her childhood. Certainly, Coleman's father is as austere and imposing a man as Woolf's Mr Ramsey, or Leslie Stephen himself. Given that Larkin abandoned Coleman's autobiography after just a few pages, it is difficult to attach much importance to it, but at the very least, *Ante Meridian* plays its own small part in the construction of a wider web of *gendered* literary influences which, taken together, makes it harder still to dismiss this *oeuvre* on the basis of either literary or gender politics.

### ***Sugar and Spice***

Where the undoing of gender by literary-generic means occurs most concisely is in *Sugar and Spice*, Coleman's sheaf of seven poems for and about English schoolgirls. In her poetry, Coleman continues the project of elevation – the elevation of girls through representation in art, *and* the elevation of that art. Coleman's fiction is part of the highly marketable genre of the girls' school story, but seeks to improve the quality of that genre in various ways, which we have already seen, including a more intelligent

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<sup>10</sup> Coleman is clearly a Woolf fan: she cites *The Waves* on the first page of *Ante Meridian* (*TWG*, 235).

approach to gender constructions; Coleman's poetry maintains the subject – English schoolgirls – but instead enters into the long and prestigious tradition of lyric poetry. And just as in her fiction she adopts the narrative mode of major novelistic innovators (Austen, Woolf, Joyce), in her poetry she exposes the girls' lives to the same lyric treatment as literature's Big Themes of Life, Love, and the Passing of Time.

It is interesting to speculate about Coleman's ordering of the poems, particularly when we consider the 'great care' which *Larkin* gave to the collections published under his name: 'I treat them like a music-hall bill: you know, contrast, difference in length, the comic, the Irish tenor, bring on the girls' (*FR*, 55). *Sugar and Spice* opens with two poems which *seem* to set the tone of the volume: the first, 'The False Friend', expresses the girl-narrator's anger at her friend, Elspeth, who has betrayed her by telling Miss LeQuerne that her 'liking for French prose was nothing but a pose'; the second, 'Bliss', has another girl excitedly cycling to W. H. Smith & Son to purchase Colonel Stewart's book on handling horses (*TWG*, 244, 245). Were the remaining poems to continue in this vein, one could simply make the argument that Coleman is, true to form, unashamedly celebrating schoolgirl friendships, experiences, and emotions as being equally worthy of lyrical expression as, say, Wordsworth's nature worship – the roomy house of literature school of thought. But Coleman throws something unexpected into the mix when she then produces two renderings (which are, in her view, improvements) of poems by Baudelaire and Villon. (Once again, this fits with Osborne's point about fidelity and betrayal.)

'Femmes Damnées' is Coleman's reworking of Baudelaire's poem about doomed love between women. Coleman has substituted the French Neo-Classical heroines Delphine and Hippolyta, and the luxuriant setting – 'softest cushions soaked with heady scent' – for a more Anglicised and demotic version, with Rachel and Rosemary set

amidst ‘Cushions from Harrod’s’, ‘The *Guardian* in the letter-box’ (TWG, 246).<sup>11</sup> But she has kept (or translated) the same regular, well-wrought lyricism, and tone of gorgeous damnation, which mark Baudelaire’s original. This theme of impossible love between dark, almost-Satanic women, has been lifted straight from the pages of *The Flowers of Evil*, and at first appears to be at odds with the rest of *Sugar and Spice* (and perhaps the entire *oeuvre*), but if this *oeuvre* celebrates schoolgirls – their liveliness, energy, optimism, ingenuity, and capacity to change their world – then there is a sense in this poem of what awaits them when they grow up, particularly since the fiction seems to affirm the possibilities of love and relationships *between* women. This is precisely the aspect which Castle discusses in her essay:

What almost all the works in the Western lesbian canon share – including even the more worldly or forgiving – is a sense of the *unviability* of female same-sex love. [...] In the literature of the *amor impossibilis* – the brutal and bittersweet narratives of lesbian desire – Larkin found, I believe, a doom-laden prediction of what was to become the central and most painful theme of his imaginative and emotional life: *no girls for you*.<sup>12</sup>

Although Castle is incorrect to consider ‘*no girls for you*’ as the central theme of Larkin’s life, imaginative or emotional – after all: Ruth, Monica, Maeve, Patsy, Betty... – it is interesting that an authority on the literature of Sapphism should detect a *feminine-* and *lesbian-*centred poetics present in his work. Coleman’s insertion of her girls into the lyrical world of Baudelaire and the wider universe of Sapphic poetics is a

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<sup>11</sup> Charles Baudelaire, ‘Condemned Women: Delphine and Hippolyta’, in *The Flowers of Evil*, transl. and ed. James McGowan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 239-45.

<sup>12</sup> Castle, 93-6.

radical act in both literary and gender terms. Once again, an innovation and intervention in genre is also an innovation and intervention in gender.

The poem which follows ‘Femmes Damnées’ is another rendering, this time of the medieval French poet Francois Villon’s ‘Ballade des Dames du Temps Jadis’ (‘Ballade of the Ladies of Times Past’). Villon’s poem is a traditional *ubi sunt* lyric, one which recalls famous historical women (the Roman goddess Flora, Joan of Arc, and so on), asking, Where are they now? Coleman maintains something of the Middle Ages aesthetic – ‘into what far lands’, ‘in what fairy-land’ – and the formal, elegiac tone, but here, too, she updates a traditional form by bringing into it her beloved English schoolgirls: ‘Where is Valerie, who led / Every tom-boy prank and rag’, ‘And Julia, with violet eyes, / Her cool white skin, and sable hair’ (*TWG*, 247-8). The strategy is an obvious one: a poem about major historical women is rendered as a poem about schoolgirls – and Coleman considers this an *improvement*. But the central elegiac impulse – ‘it has all gone too soon’ – is a genuinely touching one, and an emotion common to countless school-leavers across the generations. Indeed, technically, these are very accomplished pieces, elegant in form and tone, and some critics have noted their strength – supposedly all part of a joke – including Booth, who even suggests they might be the best work Larkin produced during the 1940s, ‘with an assured delicacy of tone far beyond anything in *The North Ship*’ (*TWG*, xvii). Reading them seriously from a literary *and* gender perspective strengthens that case.

The three poems which complete the sheaf – ‘Holidays’, ‘The School in August’, and ‘Fourth Former Loquitur’ – all follow the elegiac tone introduced by Coleman’s two renderings of French poems. Although ‘Holidays’ sets out with a jovial tone (‘Let’s go to Stratford-on-Avon, and see a play!’), the poem ends with a dark sadness redolent of Keats and Shelley, as summer turns to autumn, and then winter, ‘when the wind



endlessly grieves / For all it has lost, the youth, the joy, the pain' (*TWG*, 249). These lines in particular could easily find a home in a number of Larkin's mature poems ('Sad Steps', 'Dockery and Son', 'Aubade'). And in 'Fourth Former Loquitur' we can detect a characteristically mature-Larkinesque pun: 'Here they lay, / Wenda and Brenda, Kathleen, and Elaine, / And Jill'; the description of the girls lounging on the grass foreshadows their eventual and inevitable loss of youth, innocence, and life, punning on *hic jacet*, the Latin phrase chiselled into countless gravestones. Time will pass, and the girls will lie *beneath* the grass (*TWG*, 251-2). In other words, a recognisably Larkinesque poetics is already present in these works. They also seem to show Larkin working through influences. 'Fourth Former Loquitur' has an uncanny Eliotic ring to it, even if the allusions are oblique rather than direct – really a mash-up of 'Prufrock' and *The Waste Land*: 'The unsuspected hollows', 'When it is all deserted', 'The sunlight lay like amber wine', 'And talked of mistresses and poetry', 'The filmy clouds drew out like marble veins', and so on. As such, these poems are far more interesting as a stage in Larkin's literary development than as explosions of anger at women and sex, and far too interesting to be regarded as mere jokes to tickle the comedic palette of Kingsley Amis.

## **Sex**

So far, extensive discussions of Coleman's literary and gender politics have sought to shake up the consensus which has settled around this *oeuvre* – the consensus which overwhelmingly focuses on sex, whether Larkin's sexual impulses for producing it, or its sadistic-pornographic nature, what Motion calls its 'diet' of 'voyeurism, sado-masochism, and a pleasure in taking advantage of those who [...] cannot easily defend themselves'. Only Booth has strenuously challenged this, and his qualification, which is worth repeating – 'the novel will give thin satisfaction to a reader in search of explicit

pornography or sadism' – is a crucial one: to read these works afresh, unencumbered by the critical orthodoxy, is to discover a distinct lack of eroticism; moreover, when the works are read as a coherent package (something Motion does not do), alternative themes like genre and gender come to the fore much more insistently than that of sex. This is not to say sex never appears, but when it does, its treatment is far more intelligent than the critics want to allow.

The first passage which can in any way be described as erotic comes in the second chapter of *Trouble at Willow Gables*, when prefect Hilary clears out the changing-rooms after cricket:

She was [...] surprised to see, on glancing cursorily into the showers, one girl still splashing about in the wet. She learnt later that it was Mary Beech, but at the time she had merely glanced appreciatively at the strong young body that shuddered under the cold shower, and had told her to clear out and not slack about in the changing-room. As the girl had scurried past her out of the tiled shower-room, Hilary had emphasised this warning by a smart slap on the behind, and the imposition of fifty lines. (*TWG*, 17)

The example is representative of the novella's scarce and soft eroticism; that this passage barely provides the mildest of titillation hardly needs to be stated. And although sexual in nature, Hilary's interest in Mary has an unusual emphasis:

Hilary was very conscious of the absurdity of it all, particularly as Mary was not, judged by ordinary standards, beautiful. She was a sturdy girl, with auburn hair and freckles, grey eyes, and a sensible, cool expression that exactly

mirrored her character. To Hilary she had the tawny strength of a young lioness [...]. [W]hen they happened to come face to face Hilary would feel a voice shouting in her head ‘strong young lioness! strong, tawny young lioness!’ which embarrassed her so much that she had to look away. (*TWG*, 18)

What absorbs Hilary is not conventional feminine beauty – the quality these girls are expected to possess – but precisely the opposite: Mary’s strength, sturdiness, coolness; qualities associated with traditional masculinity. This also mimics Baudelaire’s imagery in ‘Femmes damnées’, where Delphine is ‘Like a strong animal’. Although the encounter *is* voyeuristic (and therefore one-sided), can we, as modern readers, unconditionally condemn Hilary’s burgeoning sexuality? Such a treatment of sex, like Coleman’s treatments of genre and gender, seems to be far more intelligent than her sister writers manage, and another part of her game-raising strategy for the genre.

This does not mean that the fictions are completely devoid of sado-masochistic eroticism; such moments are rare, but they do occur, and must be accounted for. Perhaps the most explicit comes in the fifth chapter of *Willow Gables*, when (the innocent) Marie is violently searched in Miss Holden’s office for the missing five pound note:

As Pam finally pulled Marie’s tunic down over her black-stockinged legs, Miss Holden, pausing only to snatch a cane from the cupboard in the wall, gripped Marie by the hair, and, with a strength lent by anger, forced down her head till she was bent nearly double. Then she began thrashing her unmercifully, her face a mask of ferocity, caring little where the blows fell as long as they found a mark somewhere on Marie’s squirming body. (*TWG*, 43)

The passage is disconcerting to read, but once again critics have been reluctant to look beyond the obvious and suggest alternative readings. The fact that this search takes place against the backdrop of an ostentatiously Gothic pathetic fallacy ('Lightning flashed, and the globe reeled upon its pedestal, bouncing heavily as thunder crackled like sheet-metal overhead') renders it kitsch, and a little difficult to take seriously (*TWG*, 43). But there is a seriousness here. The search, and ensuing violence, is instigated by Miss Holden, the personification of authority against which these girls systematically and idiosyncratically rebel. If there is a sense of delight in the sado-masochism, it is *hers*, but the violent descriptions are undercut by an affecting sadness and overwhelming sense of injustice: Marie's 'little body was shaken with tempestuous sobs, and tears trickled from her tightly-shut eyes' (*TWG*, 43-4). Indeed, as a development in the novella's plot, it seems more important as the experience of injustice and abusive authority which will now spur Marie to fight against injustice and authority (the chapter ends here, with the subsequent one called 'What Is to Be Done?'). It should be remembered that Coleman is careful to obey the Unity of Action; if this scene *only* served an erotic purpose, it would fail her own test of good fiction. Motion believes the novella conveys 'a pleasure in taking advantage of those who (because they are young or servants) cannot easily defend themselves', but Marie's caning is necessary to the plot's emphasis on the girls' development as rebels and active agents of their own destiny. Marie can only fight Authority because Authority has waged a war on her independence and individuality.

Sex, in other words, is another part of the text's radical gender *coup* – and, in this sense, sex plays a part in Coleman's overall project of working towards that Ideal Book. We have seen Orwell complain in his essay on the schoolboy genre – the key to the key – that the tales are 'fantastically unlike life at a real public school', because, amongst

other things, ‘Sex is completely taboo, especially in the form in which it actually arises at public schools. [...] Even the bad boys are presumed to be completely sexless’.<sup>13</sup> Orwell even speculates that such sex-free writing might be a ‘deliberate intention to get away from the guilty sex-ridden atmosphere that pervaded so much of the earlier literature for boys’. Sex, then, which is a reality of life in public schools as much as anywhere, is *repressed* in the boys’ story genre. In turn, we have seen Coleman criticise the schoolgirl genre’s heroines as ‘too frequently “good”’; Dorita Fairlie Bruce’s Dimsie, for instance, ‘repels us by being [...] the little angel of joy that sets everyone’s problems right’. For Coleman, ‘by making the heroine unrelievedly “good” [...] the author almost inevitably fails to make her attractive’. In ‘What Are We Writing For?’ she introduces the vice of ‘greed’ as one neglected by her fellow authors: ‘there is rarely a greedy girl’ (*TWG*, 258-61). The example she gives pertains to sandwiches and cream buns, but one can easily imagine Hilary having been written as an exercise in *sexual* greed (following her attempts to seduce Mary, she transfers her lust to Margaret).

Hilary, then, fulfils Coleman’s desire for characters who are neither exclusively good nor exclusively bad, and who suffer, like Milton’s Satan, from inner conflict – sex being one manifestation of this. And just as Orwell ridicules the idea of schoolboys who do not think about (let alone practise) sex, Coleman makes sex in girls’ fiction conspicuous by its semi-absence. For some readers, the wider girls’ school story genre can be twee, even sickeningly so: Cadogan and Craig comment that ‘there is nearly almost something flaccid and sentimental about stories which have been described as “much-loved”’ – but others have pointed to the presence of sex lurking with embarrassment just below the surface of these stories.<sup>14</sup> Even Angela Brazil, whose books sold phenomenally well across the world, and who is generally credited with expressing the

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<sup>13</sup> Orwell, 180.

<sup>14</sup> Cadogan and Craig, 10.

schoolgirl mind better than any of her fellow genre writers, has been found guilty of this kind of accidental innuendo. Gillian Freeman, Brazil's biographer, notes that boys never 'stir the girlish breasts. With only a few half-hearted exceptions they remain brothers'.<sup>15</sup> When it comes to relations between girls in Brazil's fiction, Freeman writes: 'of course there are the friendships between the girls (and sometimes between teachers and girls) with passions, jealousies and misunderstandings, demands of loyalty and honesty, and kisses and embraces which today would be interpreted both sexually and psychologically'.<sup>16</sup> Judy Simons describes how:

The passionate relationships which flourish between Brazil's adolescent girls clearly overflow into the sentimental and romantic, yet without the overt eroticism that would make them threatening. [...] Girls climb into bed together, cuddle and kiss unashamedly and develop ardent friendships that can be interpreted in different ways by different readers. [...] Inevitably the physical intimacy of the girls and the heady sensationalism of their exploits has encouraged aficionados, detractors and parodists of the school story to insert the sexuality that Brazil left out.<sup>17</sup>

Brunette Coleman is cited as an example, although Simons does not specify which category she falls into. The judgements of Freeman and Simons are interesting: with a tut, Freeman blames a cruder and corrupted contemporary sensibility, whilst Simons suggests that Brazil deliberately sentimentalised and de-sexualised intimacy in order to

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<sup>15</sup> Gillian Freeman, *The Schoolgirl Ethic: The Life and Work of Angela Brazil* (London: Allen Lane, 1976) 74.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>17</sup> Simons, 173.

protect her readers. Either way, both critics feel compelled to deal with the faint and underlying eroticism of Brazil's stories. This appears to be characteristic of the wider genre, and something Coleman, an expert, has noticed and addressed. The issue is an occupational hazard for the girls' story writer: Cadogan and Craig argue that 'Often it has been difficult to see beyond the stories' unintentional humour: this becomes more apparent as their literary quality declines'.<sup>18</sup> But Coleman boldly tackles it head on. Indeed, this is the other aspect of Coleman's practice which Castle finds particularly notable:

[In] a genre notorious since the late nineteenth century for its barely sublimated Sapphic inflections [...] what Larkin seems to have prized [...] was not so much any outright kink as an odd, overall, seemingly *unintended* suggestiveness: the comic way that novelists like Vicary and Bruce managed to set up titillating suggestions without ever seeming to be aware that they were doing so.<sup>19</sup>

Those 'barely sublimated Sapphic inflections' can still be found in Coleman's work, such as when Myfanwy comforts the caned Marie: 'For a second they clung together, Myfanwy's lips pressed against her chum's hair. Then Marie gave an uneasy wriggle, and slid down onto her side' (*TWG*, 49). But the more explicit passages which critics have read in terms of Larkin's sexual dissatisfactions and perversions (which in any case refuse to satisfy or pervert) seem to be directed more towards the overall improvement of the genre, as a recognition of the fact of blossoming sexual consciousness in girls and girl-readers. It is another example of Coleman's undoing of both genre and gender: by allowing the repressed and embarrassed theme of sex to

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<sup>18</sup> Cadogan and Craig, 10.

<sup>19</sup> Castle, 85-8.

surface, Coleman directly represents and legitimises female sexual expression (countering the de-sexualising myth and stereotype of feminine modesty and passivity), and in doing so, improves the genre by bringing its representations closer to the inner lives of its readers. Peopled with girls who feel anger at their limitations, who set out to challenge those limitations, who are sometimes good but sometimes bad, who experience sexual desires, or conversely end up at the wrong end of voyeurism and lust – Coleman’s texts consistently engage in an undoing of the established genre which is also, importantly, an undoing of established gender roles and expectations. Behind this endeavour stands the ‘easy misogynist’ Philip Larkin.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Jardine, ‘Saxon violence’, 4.



## 9

# Camp

If the Brunette Coleman heteronym is *not* Larkin's way of working through his own confused sexuality, nor is it the depraved mask of a lustful undergraduate with a penchant for schoolgirls, then what is it? There have been various attempts to explain Larkin's heteronym (discussed in Chapter 6), but these either get caught up in the clichéd homo-turns-straight narrative – in which case, why not simply use a *male homosexual* heteronym? – or fail to answer the question at all. Various factors help to explain why the heteronym had to be *female*: Larkin's personal taste for the schoolgirl genre, his democratic desire to elevate that genre, and to explore gender more intelligently and radically. But why *lesbian*? Coleman's lesbianism could, of course, be a form of titillation, but as we have seen, titillation is pretty thin on the ground in these texts. The reason for Larkin's *lesbian* female heteronym, I wish to suggest, is that it allows him to exploit the possibilities of the camp.

This decision has far-reaching consequences, entirely in keeping with the experiments in genre and gender explored so far. The various summaries of, and quotations from, Coleman's work should be sufficient to suggest its main flavour of delicious camp. The camp sensibility can be notoriously elusive to pin down, but it emanates pinkly from page after page of Coleman's writings. Her po-faced assertion that 'Femmes Damnées' and 'Ballade' are not 'renderings' but, 'In my opinion [...] improvements' is a camp one, as is her subsequent put-down of Margaret Kennedy (*TWG*, 243). Her sarcastic chastising of Jacinth in the essay ('you know I don't like you

to read in bed when you ought to be getting your beauty sleep’) is another trace of her camp sensibility, and the conclusion to that essay, with its purple prose building to the climactic concept of the ‘Ideal Book’, is so excessive and exaggerated that it is nothing if not camp (*TWG*, 255, 272-3).

### **Sontag’s ‘Notes on “Camp”’**

Indeed, much of Coleman’s attitude and style tallies with the definitions of camp offered by Susan Sontag in her wonderful 1964 essay, ‘Notes on “Camp”’, probably the first concerted attempt to define the sensibility. For Sontag, ‘All Camp objects, and persons, contain a large element of artifice’, and its taste in people ‘responds particularly to the markedly attenuated and to the strongly exaggerated’.<sup>1</sup> Coleman, a heteronymous creation, *only* exists as artifice; in her very being she is a statement of camp, and her exaggerated-ness attests to this. Not only that, but Sontag sees camp as a contrary style: ‘It is the love of the exaggerated, the “off”, of things-being-what-they-are-not’, which ‘draws on a mostly unacknowledged truth of taste: the most refined form of sexual attractiveness (as well as the most refined form of sexual pleasure) consists in going against the grain of one’s own sex’.<sup>2</sup> These descriptions certainly characterise Coleman: on one hand the rather quaint and respectable author of stories for girls, but on the other, a lesbian with a punk ethic, looking to explode that genre. With her razor-sharp sense of humour and a love of the exaggerated, Coleman is a beautifully camp creation.

Not only is *she* camp, but so is her work. We have already seen Coleman endorse the ‘many rooms in the house of literature’ view, arguing that her genre deserves a room

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Sontag, ‘Notes on “Camp”’, in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1967) 279-80.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 279-80.

there as much as any. Sontag would call this a camp pose, because ‘Camp taste turns its back on the good-bad axis of ordinary aesthetic judgment’ by acknowledging ‘other creative sensibilities besides the seriousness (both tragic and comic) of high culture’.<sup>3</sup> Whilst it is true that Coleman’s project seeks to enhance the quality of the schoolgirl genre, there is always a faintly residual sense that, *really*, it is all quite *crap*; one thinks of ‘The False Friend’, which, it has to be said, is a poem about one girl’s irritation with another for buying their teacher a book token, when they had agreed only to buy a card. Running parallel to the attempted enhancement of the genre is a strong sense of revelling in the bad and the undervalued; not only does camp ‘dethrone the serious’, and show that ‘One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious’, it also says ‘it’s good because it’s awful’.<sup>4</sup> For Sontag, this is the ‘ultimate Camp statement’, but it is surely also Coleman’s attitude to schoolgirl fiction in a nutshell. In other words, camp reforms one’s relationship with ‘good’ and ‘bad’ art, unleashing the possibility of seriously appreciating the frivolous and the poor. This is important, particularly in relation to the Coleman *oeuvre*, which has been so easily dismissed as a joke; Sontag argues that ‘Camp taste identifies with what it is enjoying. People who share this sensibility are not laughing at the thing they label as “a camp”, they’re enjoying it. Camp is a tender feeling.’<sup>5</sup> There is much to laugh at within the Coleman *oeuvre*, but this does not necessarily make it a joke. Having created a camp heteronym writing a camp body of work, there is every chance that Larkin both loves and identifies with that creation. It is alright if readers do so too.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 286-87.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 288, 292.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 291-2.

For Sontag, ‘It goes without saying that the Camp sensibility is [...] apolitical’ – an uncharacteristic oversight in an otherwise majestic essay.<sup>6</sup> How can this be so, when she herself points to camp’s delight in ‘going against the grain of one’s sex’? In the same essay, Sontag also describes how ‘Camp sees everything in quotation marks’, so that ‘woman’ becomes “‘woman’”. Consequently, ‘To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. [...] Camp is the triumph of the epicene style. (The convertibility of “man” and “woman”, “person” and “thing”.)’<sup>7</sup> This is where Sontag’s essay becomes most relevant to the heteronym, since Coleman is a delightful manifestation of ‘Being-as-Playing-a-Role’. In this, camp has deeply political implications, showing as it does the constructed nature of gender. It is surprising, then, that ‘Notes on “Camp”’ is invisible in Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, a later study which develops this theory of performativity, and which can also shed light on Larkin’s project.

### **Butler’s *Gender Trouble***

In this important work, Butler’s aim is not to challenge man’s dominion of woman, but rather to challenge the very binary gender terms which allow power inequalities to occur in the first place, by showing the constructed-ness, and therefore spuriousness, of gender difference. Taking as a starting point ‘Beauvoir’s claim that one is not born, but rather *becomes* a woman’, Butler argues:

[It] follows that *woman* itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification. Even when gender seems

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 277.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 280.

to congeal into the most reified forms, the ‘congealing’ is itself an insistent and insidious practice, sustained and regulated by various social norms. It is, for Beauvoir, never possible finally to become a woman, as if there were a *telos* that governs the process of acculturation and construction. Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.<sup>8</sup>

Gender, therefore, is the *effect* of a series of repeated acts performed by a person, which in the course of time comes to be seen as a fundamental sign of difference. Butler strengthens her case by recourse to gender parody, i.e. ‘the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities’. ‘I would suggest’, she writes, ‘that drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity’. This is because

The performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed. But we are actually in the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance. If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance. As much as drag creates a unified picture of ‘woman’ (what its critics often oppose), it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of

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<sup>8</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990) 33.

gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. *In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency.*<sup>9</sup>

In other words, the very ability of a person to draw attention to the distinction between biological sex and behaviour, through the performance of another gender, reveals the falseness of the view that gender differences are natural and essential. If this is true, Butler argues, there can be no primary or original gender, only the performance, or ‘an imitation without an origin’.<sup>10</sup> This theory of gender identity is close to the theory of Larkin’s epistolary identities which I proposed in Part I: his performances there are not masks obscuring an essential and pre-existing identity, they *are* his identity. And such a ‘perpetual displacement’ between the imitation and the origin of an identity ‘suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualization’.<sup>11</sup>

Butler’s interest is largely the materiality of gender, the bodily contours of a person, and their behaviours and acts, but her theory applies just as well to a figure who exists without a material body, and only as a textual or verbal construct – such as Brunette Coleman. As a heteronym, Coleman must perform herself into being, and every one of her characteristics (from her gender and sexuality, to her sense of humour, and even her preference for buttered toast and coffee at breakfast) is a *performance* of identity, an imitation without an origin, *not* simply the expression of a pre-determined identity. To adopt a text-centred approach to these writings is to reject the notion that Larkin exists as the original, with Coleman as a slightly refracted expression of his identity. In this sense, Coleman is an exercise in – and proof of – the possibility of various and infinite

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 138.

identity configurations. She is not a woman because she was born one, but rather because she performs her womanhood; she is not a lesbian because of some inner psychic or biological difference, but rather because she performs her lesbianism. Butler points to the *cultural* practice of drag, but we should remember that Larkin is practising a *textual* version of it, by inventing and performing a heteronym with a gender and sexuality distinct from his own. The point can be made more explicitly by re-quoting the passage from *Gender Trouble* just cited, this time substituting ‘Larkin-as-Coleman’ for each appearance of the word ‘drag’:

As much as [Larkin-as-Coleman] creates a unified picture of ‘woman’ [...] [he] also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. *In imitating gender, [Larkin-as-Coleman] implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency.*

In other words, the cross-dressed and camp performance that is Brunette Coleman fundamentally deconstructs the binary of gender essentialism, showing ‘man’ and ‘woman’, ‘heterosexual’ and ‘homosexual’, to be arbitrary, socially-constructed and socially-policed terms, rather than fixed and stable identity categories. This explains both the title and epigraph Coleman chooses for the *Sugar and Spice* poems. The children’s rhyme from which it is taken – one of the social texts which can condition a child into a particular way of behaving, as described by Knowles and Malmkjaer – conveys an essentialist view of gender, in which little boys are made of ‘Snaps and snails, and puppy-dogs’ tails’ (all that is nasty and grim), and little girls are made of ‘Sugar and spice, and all that’s nice’ (all that is sweet and lovely) (*TWG*, 241). Rowe

takes this epigraph at face value, apparently oblivious to the content of the poems, with their diverse personalities, bickering girls, predatory lesbians, femmes damnées, and their strong elegiac undercurrent – poems which clearly deconstruct this crude and naïve binary, as does the wider *oeuvre*, with its smoking, gambling, sleuthing, seducing, cross-dressing, rebellious gang of girls.<sup>12</sup> As a title, *Sugar and Spice* is, rather, a snappy but deeply ironic synopsis of the entire project, and it is the performance by textual means of a camp and lesbian identity which is so integral to that project's strategy.

This impulse is entirely in keeping with the deconstructive Larkin described by Osborne, although he only glances at this chapter of Larkin's career. Osborne places the Brunette Coleman *oeuvre* in what he calls the 'first phase' (of three) of Larkin's experiments in gender deconstruction, showing Larkin to be 'thoroughly at odds with the mid-century libidinal economy', when the nation 'witnessed the deepest entrenchment of patriarchal values since the Victorian era'.<sup>13</sup> It is important to recall that these texts were produced squarely within a wartime context, written during the fourth year of a global conflict, with 4.5 million British men in combat, risking permanent physical and psychological damage, or death. In this context, it would be easy to view the work as pure escapism, but given my argument about the performance of a feminine and queer identity, I think that would be intellectually lazy. The novel approach to gender and identity – that is, their fluidity and potentially infinite configurations – surely means this literary project cannot be separated from its historical context, however oblique the context might be. The most explicit reference to the war is found in Coleman's brief introduction to the poems, where she writes: 'I make no apology for presenting a collection of what may seem "trivia" in these disturbed times. I

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<sup>12</sup> 'Girls [Larkin] associates with sugar and spice and all things nice; boys he associates with the vaguely sexual and off-putting slugs and snails and puppy dogs' tails.'; see 'Unreal Girls', 87.

<sup>13</sup> Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, 159.



feel that now more than ever a firm grasp on the essentials of life is needed' (*TWG*, 243). This statement has camp written all over it, especially when one turns the page and reads of how Elspeth has told Miss LeQuerne that the narrator's liking for French prose is nothing but a pose. But we know from Sontag that camp is a form of seriousness unto itself. In this sense, it is easy to concur with Osborne's characterisation of these words as 'a sturdy defense of the sanity of schoolgirl fiction when compared with the insanity of the actual world of men'.<sup>14</sup> The sweetness and loveliness of girls, however, is definitively *not* one of those 'essentials'. Once again, to read Coleman's work as a joke is to short-change its radical potential, and to a very large extent. There are reasons for Larkin's use of a heteronym, and reasons for her to be a woman and a lesbian – but a homophobic sneer is not one of them.

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

## Conclusion: Why Brunette Disappears

Rowe is very clear that if we want to understand ‘the Brunette problem’, ‘we need to begin with Larkin’s sexual history’. In these chapters, I have refused to build an analysis of the *oeuvre* on the dubious foundations of rumours and speculation about which way Larkin swung; instead, I have read these works on their own terms, allowing their themes and ideas on genre, gender, sexuality, and the camp to emerge. But there is one aspect of the *oeuvre* barely discussed in this chapter, and that is the second and unfinished novella, *Michaelmas Term at St Bride’s* – arguably the strangest and slipperiest of Coleman’s works. On one hand, *St Bride’s* is simply the logical sequel to *Trouble at Willow Gables*; the same girls have left school and gone up to Oxford to study – of course – at an all-women’s college. But in *St Bride’s*, the plots are stranger, and Coleman’s hitherto meticulous adherence to the Unity of Action falters, and ‘the story breaks off abruptly in a welter of half-hearted “metafictional” incidents’, as Castle puts it.<sup>1</sup>

Why is this? The few critics interested in the *oeuvre* have tried to account for its stumbling to a close, never to be revived. But, as with their explanations of why the *oeuvre* exists in the first place, their readings are largely unsatisfactory. For Motion, it is simple: ‘The main reason why *St Bride’s* fails to reach a conclusion is that it loses its erotic impetus’.<sup>2</sup> But these texts are mostly very un-erotic, and, as I have argued, tend to treat the theme of sex more intelligently and progressively than Motion recognises. It is

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<sup>1</sup> Castle, 92-3.

<sup>2</sup> Motion, *A Writer’s Life*, 96.

difficult to see where the ‘erotic impetus’ takes off in the first place, let alone where it runs out of steam. Choi stays with her psychoanalytical approach, arguing that ‘in *Michaelmas Term at St Bride’s* homosexuality becomes a more adult matter and by the end of the novella has faded into normality, which suggests that writing the stories played a therapeutic role’.<sup>3</sup> But this explanation suffers from the same problems as the overall psychological approach: namely its reliance on the clichéd and rather bizarre notion that one can work through homosexuality in order to arrive at the ‘normative’ state of heterosexuality. Even if a particular sexuality can be exorcised through writing (can it?), the evidence for Larkin’s own sexual preferences at this time is too thin on the ground and too shaky. Cooper offers a different account, finding in the novella’s closing pages an exploration of Jungian beliefs and practices: ‘What the pub scene [...] represents’, he argues, ‘is the (Jungian) means by which Philippa is to be cured of her belt fetish’ – a reference to this character’s troubling preoccupation with her collection of thirty-seven very constricting belts.<sup>4</sup> Cooper takes his cue on this from Motion’s biography, which traces Larkin’s burgeoning interest in Jungian analytical psychology. At Oxford, Larkin was stimulated by his contact with John Layard, a student of Jung, whose talks at the University encouraged Larkin to practise dream analysis.

However, in making this connection between the biography and the heteronym, Cooper seems to have overlooked another, perhaps more integral influence, also discussed by Motion: that of Bruce Montgomery, a fellow St John’s undergraduate who, at the same time Larkin was writing *heteronymously*, was *pseudonymously* writing (as Edmund Crispin) his detective novel *The Case of the Gilded Fly*, a book referenced in Coleman’s novella months before its actual publication. Larkin seems to have been mightily impressed by Montgomery’s literary output and success, and by his

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<sup>3</sup> Choi, 115.

<sup>4</sup> Cooper, 30.

personality. Motion cites an autobiographical essay Larkin wrote in 1943, the year of the Brunette Coleman works: ‘Under his immediate influence I suddenly revolted against all the things I’d previously worshipped – poetry, law, psychoanalysis, seriousness ... and so forth’.<sup>5</sup> This revolt would fit with the argument of the previous chapter, which points to a camp aesthetic and ethic within the *oeuvre*, chiefly camp’s very serious undermining of seriousness. Although Philippa’s problem is moving – Booth detects a concern for adolescent anorexia – the response of her sister, Marie, is utterly ludicrous, and sends up the whole world of psychoanalysis and its high-minded seriousness.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Layard even makes a thinly-disguised appearance in the novella as ‘Barnyard’ – and his expert guidance is about as reassuring as his name. Having attended Barnyard’s talks, Marie decides her sister’s belt fetish must be symbolic of something:

‘Think of them. *Belts.*’ She made a suggesting, writhing movement with her right arm, spilling her coffee.

‘Swimming?’ hazarded Myfanwy.

‘No, silly. *Snakes. Worms. Slugs. Symbols,*’ Marie enunciated portentously, ‘of immense psychological depth.’ (*TWG*, 186)

The answer – *obviously* – is to infiltrate Philippa’s room with worms. For which Marie is punished by being lashed with – guess what – a belt. This psychoanalytical storyline is absurd, and a mock-up of the ‘cheap psychology’ which Coleman identifies in her essay on the genre. In turn, it implicitly ridicules the psychoanalytical approaches of those critics who have subsequently sought to interpret the texts in this vein.

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Motion, *A Writer’s Life*, 88.

<sup>6</sup> Booth, *Life, Art and Love*, 80.

If not a loss of eroticism, if not a working-through of homosexuality, and if not a Jungian resolution: then what? Given Coleman's brilliance in laying down *and following* the solid rules of schoolgirl fiction, the biggest obstacle to this novella's success must surely be her breaking of them. Taking into consideration Larkin's writerly anxieties in this period (often discussed in letters to Sutton), an outpouring of highly original content must have been a joy, and the temptation to see it through to the girls' varsity years entirely understandable. But the chief problem with sending the girls to Oxford is that the rules are instantly violated: Oxford is a university and a city, *not* a school for girls, and although the characters are resident in an all-women's college, the original 'little Copernican universe' has been lost, when the point was to recover it. This violation takes various forms, not least the sudden presence of those horrid, paternalistic, self-important, sexually desperate, and predatory creatures: men. It is not long before men do intrude on the girls' lives, most notably Clive Russell Vick and 'the Creature', neither one a poster boy for masculinity, or even humanity. The subplot involving these men is humorous – they bond over their individual girl-troubles, not realising that they are chasing the same girl – but it is also clichéd (when much of Coleman's writing is not), and, in truth, simply much less fun than the other works. And this absence of fun is palpable. The final pub scene is not so much Jungian explication as an outright lapse of interest in the narrative: recognising the barmaids as servants from Willow Gables, Marie asks one of them why she is no longer at the school:

'That story's over now, Miss Marie,' she answered. 'Willow Gables doesn't exist any more.'

'Story?'

'Yes, Miss Marie. You tied me up, don't you remember?'

‘Yes, of course, Pat, of course I remember. I’m sorry about that.’

‘That’s all right, Miss Marie. It was in the plot, so of course we had to do it. It wasn’t your fault, Miss Marie.’

‘Then whose fault was it, Pat?’ enquired Marie, stumbling over the brass rail at her feet.

‘The woman who writes all these books. Haven’t you ever met her, Miss Marie? I saw her once.’ (*TWG*, 228-9)

This is the ‘half-hearted’ ‘welter’ of metafictional incidents which Castle describes. Confused, Marie continues to ask questions: “‘But if this is a story, Pat [...] where’s real life? If this is all untrue, where’s reality?’”; Pat responds that “‘There’s a good deal of it going on in the Smoke Room, at the moment.’” (*TWG*, 229). That room happens to be full of drunken, rowdy, immensely unlikeable men: along with the Creature, there is a ‘weedy, jumpered’ specimen, a ‘rather acquiline old Malvernian’ grinning ‘in a ferocious manner’, and so on. Marie shuts the door of the Smoke Room: ‘If this was reality, she decided, she would rather keep in the story’ (*TWG*, 30). But try as she might, Coleman cannot continue to feign interest in that story, which does not meet her own standards. Marie stumbles out of the pub, sees a green light, recognising it as Philippa’s torch, ‘which Marie remembered had been dimmed with green tissue-paper from round a cracker’, and with that banal detail, the Brunette Coleman *oeuvre* ends (*TWG*, 230-1). Having set out with such a strong vision, Coleman has been unable to block out ‘reality’ – the reality of men – and consequently gives up. The heteronym dies off, never to be revived, but Coleman’s significance has already been enormous, having taken Larkin away from the imitative and inward gaze of his early poetry (much of

which would, nonetheless, be published two years later in *The North Ship*), and pointed him in a new direction.

To be more specific, Coleman's lasting impact on Larkin seems to have been twofold: first, the ability to persuasively inhabit and explore the inner lives of others, particularly those who are other to the writer in some significant sense, such as gender or sexuality; second, the inclusion of a more demotic style and content, which in both the prose and poetry is mingled with traditional forms and exquisite craftsmanship. This impact would be more immediately felt by Larkin the novelist than by Larkin the poet (and novelist was still, at this point, his chief ambition in life). Although he abandoned *St Bride's* and the entire *oeuvre*, Larkin did follow up fairly rapidly with *Jill* (1946) and *A Girl in Winter* (1947). It seems a better and more experienced writer was now keen to move on and produce literary fiction with a vastly improved chance of being taken seriously.

*Jill* quite obviously bears the traces of the Brunette Coleman phase. The protagonist, John Kemp, invents a sister – who attends a school called Willow Gables – even producing letters and a diary ostensibly authored by her. Like *Michaelmas Term at St Bride's*, the end of the novel features a troubling clash between fantasy and reality, which reality wins, when Kemp's dalliance with Gillian (a character whom he believes to be the real-life manifestation of his invented sister Jill) is thwarted, and his fantasy extinguished in the most literal of ways when he is plunged into the college fountain by a pack of more masculine undergraduates (*J*, 240). Although in this work Larkin's protagonist is male, Kemp is a socially-awkward and pallid teenager, caught impossibly and miserably between not-fitting-in at home (the unpretentious northern town of Huddlesford) and not-fitting-in at ostentatious Oxford. In this sense, the novel is a deeply sympathetic exploration of a pitiful young man's emotional life, and this turn to

the Other was, I think, unlocked by Coleman. As Coleman is to Brazil, Larkin (in *Jill*) is to Evelyn Waugh, whose novels he subverts by rejecting the glittering pastoralisation of Oxford undergraduate life.

*A Girl in Winter* further developed Larkin's literary skills, returning to a female protagonist, this time an exile from an unspecified country, living in wartime England. Like Marie, and John Kemp, Katherine Lind must negotiate the traumatic disconnect between fantasy and reality: a dreamy teenage epistolary correspondence with Robin Fennel is offset by the fact he turns out to be dull as dishwater. The narrative ends years later, with the adult Robin intruding upon the adult (and wiser) Katherine's life; granted a brief period of army leave, he is looking for quick and simple sexual gratification, and the subtle verbal ambiguities of the novel's closing passages leave beautifully unstated the matter of whether or not she submits to his desires – a sensitive depiction of female sexuality and the pressures thereon, which has its origins in the two schoolgirl novellas and the *Sugar and Spice* poems (AGW, 248).

In short, not only did Coleman help to relieve Larkin of his writer's block, she also helped him to *write better*, to go deeper into the inner lives of others, and to be more alive to their desires and their complexities. Admittedly, Larkin the poet was (with the exception of *Sugar and Spice*) late to catch onto this, continuing to write with 'Maudlin sensuality', a derivative and mostly disappointing style with a 'lack of particularity', as Timms puts it (EPJ, 31).<sup>7</sup> The influence of Coleman on Larkin the poet, then, burned much slower, but at some point in the late 1940s and early 1950s, consciously or not, Larkin's significant progress in fiction began to be fruitfully transferred to his poetry. Coleman lurks as a positive ghostly presence in the corners of numerous poems which would later comprise *The Less Deceived*, published in 1955, and widely regarded as

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<sup>7</sup> Timms, 28.



Larkin's first mature work. The nostalgia for a woman's past in 'Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album', for instance, seems to be a continuation of Coleman's concerns. So too is the sex anxiety of 'Reasons for Attendance', the theme of sexual violence in 'Deceptions', the female-centred consciousness of 'Wedding-Wind', and the influence of French poetry in 'Absences'.

Coleman's influence is also borne out by two events in Larkin's publishing history. The addition of a poem written in 1947 at the end of the 1966 Faber re-issue of *The North Ship* is an important one. Larkin called this poem ('Poem XXXII') a 'coda' (*RW*, 30), and Timms concurs, since it abandons

those attitudes towards poetry and what is suitable for inclusion in it that had marred the earlier work. The poeticisms have gone: the rooms in the hotel where it is set are lit by electric light bulbs, not candles, and it has drainpipes and a fire escape. The setting is specific.<sup>8</sup>

Thwaite also reads the poem in these terms, arguing that it is 'an address to the Muse'.<sup>9</sup> These aspects which Timms and Thwaite endorse can be seen as a development of Coleman's re-working of Baudelaire in *Sugar and Spice*, with its contemporary, demotic setting (milk on the doorstep, *Guardian* in the mailbox), its plainer, more direct style, and its refusal of gorgeous comfort. This is an important speculation, because it de-values the currency of the standard Yeats-to-Hardy narrative of Larkin's literary development – forwarded by the poet himself and swallowed easily by most critics –

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>9</sup> Anthony Thwaite, 'The Poetry of Philip Larkin', in *The Survival of Poetry: A Contemporary Survey*, ed. Martin Dodsworth (London: Faber and Faber, 1970) 43.

and instead shines the spotlight on an influence more important than either the Irishman or the Englishman: Brunette Coleman.

The second event is Larkin's decision to publish Coleman's re-working of 'Femmes Damnées' under his own name as a single-poem broadsheet with John Fuller's Sycamore Press, thirty-five years after its composition. The poem is a good one, and worthy of publication, but was this act late(r) Larkin's quiet tribute to early Larkin's vital heteronym? The same question might be asked about the role of Gautier – one of the modern lodestars of *Willow Gables* and *St Bride's* – whose 'Symphonie en blanc majeur' is the subtext of the 1967 poem 'Sympathy in White Major'. Whatever the answer, Coleman seems to have made a highly significant impact on Larkin's prose and poetry in the years after 1943, even if her own output was abruptly abandoned. What *she* did in a literary sense would remain a part of *his* distinctive and popular poetics until the very last elegiac poems written before his death. Indeed, it may be that Coleman's genre-busting in *St Bride's*, however clumsily done, also became a standard strategy for Larkin. The fidelity-betrayal paradox discussed by Osborne also applies to the unfinished novella, with its unorthodox (for this particular genre) metafictional moments. The simultaneous inhabitation and obliteration of thematic genres would become a major aspect of Larkin's work: consider the debunking of childhood nostalgia in 'I Remember, I Remember', the wish for ordinariness in 'Born Yesterday', the absence of love or a lover in 'Aubade', the instant annihilation of religious pieties in 'This Be The Verse', and so on. *St Bride's* may be the least readable work by Coleman, but combined with the generic accomplishment of *Willow Gables*, it was just as crucial to the success of Larkin's later poems. Although Bate has called the Coleman works Larkin's 'dirty little secrets', it may be Larkin felt even more pride in them than is

indicated by the later publication of ‘Femmes Damnées’.<sup>10</sup> Booth’s introduction to his edition of the works reveals that:

the battered card wallet-file which contains the type-script shows two ink-stamps bearing the name of a literary agent, ‘Rochefort Productions (Literary Property) Ltd.’. Strange though it may seem, Larkin made a serious attempt to see the work into print, presumably shortly after its completion. Had he been successful, his subsequent literary development – and reputation – might have been rather different. (*TWG*, xxi)

This, of course, is counter-factual literary history, but these chapters have set out to provide an in-depth exploration of the major themes and politics of the *oeuvre*, and pointed to areas of Larkin’s literary development which contain the hallmarks of the Coleman heteronym. This builds on the argument of Part I by showing what can be done when the interpretation of Larkin’s more complicated writings is shifted from a biographical and psychological reading practice to a more explicitly literary and textual one, viewing textual identities as products of authorship rather than expressions of personality or sexuality. The task now is to show the effect of this shift on the mature poetry for which Larkin is so well-known, and which makes him worth studying in the first place.

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<sup>10</sup> Bate, n.p..

# Part III

## *The Poems*

## Introduction: History, Identity, and Interpretation in ‘An Arundel Tomb’

Whilst holidaying on the south coast of England in 1956, Larkin and Monica Jones visited Chichester Cathedral, where they saw the Arundel tomb which would trigger Larkin’s famous poem. This event can be styled in two ways:

*January 1956: an English poet and his lover visit Chichester Cathedral whilst holidaying on the south coast, and there they see the effigial tomb of a medieval earl and countess. The inclusion of a dog at the countess’s feet seems strange, even comical, but seeing the earl’s hand clasped in his wife’s, an intimate gesture that has endured centuries, moves the poet, and upon his return home, he writes a poem which muses on the lasting, triumphal power of love over death and extinction. The poet’s biographers have discussed the relation of this event, and this poem, to his life. One has described how the poem represents the poet’s anxiety regarding recent health scares, as well as his ailing mother.<sup>1</sup> A later biographer has called the work ‘a love poem to the less deceived’ lover who stood beside him at Chichester Cathedral.<sup>2</sup> Either way, the poem has become one of his most celebrated works, not least because of its eminently quotable final line, ‘What will survive of us is love’.*

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<sup>1</sup> Motion, *A Writer’s Life*, 274.

<sup>2</sup> Booth, *Life, Art and Love*, 218.

*January 1956: an English poet and his lover visit Chichester Cathedral whilst holidaying on the south coast, and there they see the effigial tomb of a medieval earl and countess.<sup>3</sup> The inclusion of a dog at the countess's feet seems strange, even comical, but seeing the earl's hand clasped in his wife's, a gesture that has endured centuries, troubles the poet, and upon his return, he writes a poem which muses on the nature of artistic creation, and the battle between Art and Time, producing a complex poem full of uncertainties which rejects the false comfort of the clasped hands. Although the poem has become one of his most celebrated works – not least because of its eminently quotable final line, 'What will survive of us is love' – it is, in fact, a cautious work which shows how the meaning apparently projected by the tomb is too complex and mediated to be accepted at face value.*

Who were these figures? What were they like? What were their beliefs and their values? Did they believe (as it *seems* they did) in the everlasting power of love? These are questions raised by the poem, although the poem refuses to answer them. The poem has a clear 'moment of origination' – a visit to Chichester which really happened, as described in the two versions above. But it also creates its own realities. Consequently, it will become clear in this chapter that my sympathies lie more with the second version. In this study of Larkin's textual identities, 'An Arundel Tomb' offers a useful way in to

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<sup>3</sup> The earl is believed to be Richard FitzAlan II, 13<sup>th</sup> Earl of Arundel (c. 1307-76), and his wife Eleanor of Lancaster (1318-72); see *TCP*, 437. But the historical confusion which I explore in this chapter begins here: *Cracroft's Peerage* lists Richard FitzAlan II as the 10<sup>th</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Arundel, born c.1306 and died 1375 or 1376. When Larkin visited the tomb, a sign named the nobleman as Richard FitzAlan III, 14<sup>th</sup> Earl of Arundel and Surrey (1346-1397); but *Cracroft's Peerage* lists this figure as the 11<sup>th</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Arundel, born c.1348 and died 1397. From the off, then, origins are unstable; see Patrick Cracroft-Brennan, 'Arundel, Earl of', in *Cracroft's Peerage: The Complete Guide to the British Peerage and Baronetage*, at [http://www.cracroftspeerage.co.uk/online/content/arundel1139.htm?zoom\\_highlight=Arundel](http://www.cracroftspeerage.co.uk/online/content/arundel1139.htm?zoom_highlight=Arundel).

the mature poems because it deals explicitly with the problems of locating a stable, knowable meaning and identity within a work of art (in this case, a sculptural one) (*TCP*, 71-2). In this sense, it provides a conceptual introduction to the other poems discussed here.

It should be said from the start that I am not the first to problematise that eminently quotable final line which the two opening passages refer to. Craig Raine is quite right when he points out that ‘this famous last line is famously qualified with reservations’.<sup>4</sup> The ease with which the final poetic line has become detached from the grammatical sentence which both contains *and* qualifies it has been recognised by numerous critics, and its detachment can only become more permanent in an online culture which fetishises inspirational quotes presented in uplifting fonts with images of sunny skies and soaring birds (‘Don’t cry because it’s over, smile because it happened’; ‘People build too many walls and not enough bridges’; ‘What will survive of us is love’, etc.). Nevertheless, recognition of this has not been followed through with a fuller investigation of the poem’s issues relating to the interpretation of history, identity, and meaning.<sup>5</sup> To the biographers’ accounts of health scares, ailing mothers, and less deceived lovers, we can add John Carey’s view that the poem achieves a balance between ‘the sceptical, negative male voice, which insists that our “almost-instinct” is only “almost true”’, and ‘the more positive and trusting female voice that believes “What will survive of us is love”’, and Rossen’s belief that the poem reveals Larkin’s

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<sup>4</sup> Craig Raine, ‘Counter-Intuitive Larkin’, in *The Movement Reconsidered*, ed. Leader, 69.

<sup>5</sup> Only Osborne has discussed the poem’s problems of interpretation, but in an essay on Larkin and *ekphrasis* which argues that ‘at the root of Larkin’s critique is a sense that the differences between the verbal and the pictorial have been exaggerated to the detriment of the word’. His emphasis is, therefore, different from mine; see Osborne, *Radical Larkin*, 55.

scheme for resolving ‘difficulty with personal relationships’, which is ‘to be not conscious’.<sup>6</sup>

The issue of uncertainty – that is, the impossibility of fully reconstructing the past and the people who lived it – manifests itself from the opening stanza, with a characteristic Larkin pun: ‘The earl and countess *lie* in stone’ (my emphasis) – ‘lie’ meaning both their supine position, and the way they deceive visitors to the tomb. But in what sense do they deceive? Larkin appears to be inheriting and then dismissing a common literary trope from early modern poetry, the association of lying, sex, and death or dying. The ‘little death’ was Renaissance argot for the orgasm achieved by a male who ‘lies’ with his lover; John Donne’s ‘The Canonization’ is a well-known example, and may be one subtext of ‘An Arundel Tomb’:

Wee can dye by it, if not live by love,  
And if unfit for tombes or hearse  
Our legend bee, it will be fit for verse;  
And if no peece of Chronicle wee prove,  
We’ll build in sonnets pretty roomes;  
As well a well wrought urne becomes  
The greatest ashes, as halfe-acre tombes,  
And by these hymnes, all shall approve  
Us *Canoniz’d* for Love.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> John Carey, ‘The Two Philip Larkins’, in *New Larkins for Old*, ed. Booth, 63; Rossen, 32. Although Carey is correct to identify the tonal shifts of Larkin’s writings, his division of them into masculine and feminine is simplistically and unhelpfully essentialist.

<sup>7</sup> John Donne, ‘The Canonization’, in *The Metaphysical Poets*, ed. Helen Gardner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985) 61-2.



Donne's narrator insists that the pair's love will be immortalised in verse, even if it is 'unfit' for 'tombes' – unfit, because the pun on 'dye' reveals that he is writing about sexual love. They may never lie in stone, but poetry will guarantee their immortality instead. Larkin's poem gives the 'lie' to such notions. The earl and countess lie, as in *deceive*, because the meaning of all that they project – the entire *mise-en-scène* of their tomb, essentially – does not, *cannot*, translate *without corruption* from the historical past into the historical present. The immortality of their love is thus exposed as an impossibility. It may not be a deliberate deception on their part, but the narrator acknowledges this in stanza three: 'They would not think to lie so long'. As Christopher Ricks puts it, 'The earl and countess would not have imagined the swift decay of the international language of commemoration'.<sup>8</sup> The pure reception of meaning faces challenges which are practical and theoretical. Most obviously, their faces are 'blurred', so that any visual analysis of the tomb is compromised by its poor physical condition; in a literal sense, they have not endured the passing of time without alteration. Further, their 'proper habits' are only '*vaguely* shown', and 'The little dogs under their feet' give off a '*faint hint* of the absurd' (my emphases). In a sense, the narrator is wrong to find this feature 'absurd'. In an essay on the Arundel tomb, Trevor Brighton points out that dogs, as well as lions and deer,

were common at the feet of effigial warriors in the middle ages. [...] The principal reason for their being placed at the feet of an effigy was the sculptor's need to resolve the disposition of the dead person's feet. The result is that the

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<sup>8</sup> Christopher Ricks, 'Like Something Almost Being Said', in *Larkin at Sixty*, ed. Thwaite, 123.

feet arch unnaturally but elegantly over the back of the animal as though *en point* for a ballet.<sup>9</sup>

In short, there are sensible, sculptural reasons for this. The issue is one of historical translatability, whereby the twentieth-century narrator does not have to hand the art-historical context of a fourteenth-century tomb (although this may be a feigned ignorance, similar to that of ‘Church Going’). And this issue is further flagged, on a linguistic level, by the word ‘habits’ – which specific sense does the narrator mean: their attire, or their behaviours and customs? The word itself is Middle English (and so in currency at the time the FitzAlans were alive), and its etymology confused; beginning as an Old French word (*habit, abit*) referring to clothing *and* conduct, the word was extended in Latin (*habitus*) to mean both inward and outward conditions, so that by the time it entered Middle English, ‘senses were taken, from time to time, < French or Latin, without reference to their original order of development’, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*.<sup>10</sup> Today, the clothing sense of habit has become specialist, usually designating clerical/religious attire, and in behavioural terms more commonly used in relation to drugs. Of course, we are entitled to skip the etymological hand-wringing – there is not always time in the day to fret over lexicography. But the etymological history of this one word is representative of the way in which meaning changes diachronically, and thus anyone seeking to understand an historical artefact (a word, a tomb) must attempt to trace the evolution of its meaning and reception through time; otherwise, artefacts appear ‘blurred’, ‘vague’, even ‘absurd’.

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<sup>9</sup> Trevor Brighton, ‘An Arundel Tomb: the Monument’, in *An Arundel Tomb*, Otter Memorial Papers 1, eds. Trevor Brighton, Paul Foster, and Patrick Garland (Chichester: Bishop Otter College Trustees, 1987) 14.

<sup>10</sup> ‘habit, n.’, *OED Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, June 2015), at <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/82978?rskey=5XRpUG&result=1&isAdvanced=false>>.

This idea is continued but complicated in the second stanza, when the narrator acknowledges that ‘Such plainness of the pre-baroque / Hardly involves the eye’; here, history becomes entwined with aesthetics. For style, like the definitions of words, changes through time, and instead of the scientific method of diachronic lexicography, one must work with the rather un-scientific issues of aesthetic ideology and taste, in order to grasp the tomb’s meaning. In this case, the unadorned nature of the medieval (and thus pre-baroque) tomb allows a twentieth-century eye addicted to visual complexity to glide over the surfaces, stopping only with a ‘sharp, tender shock’ because of something unexpected: the image of the clasped hands. Here, interpretation becomes more difficult: for ‘Such faithfulness in effigy / Was just a detail friends would see: / A sculptor’s sweet commissioned grace’. So far, the poem has involved a two-way relationship between the looking narrator and the looked-at couple (in effigial form), the former seeking to interpret the latter. Now, a third party must be acknowledged: the sculptor ‘commissioned’ to create the tomb (and by extension the couple’s legacy). This raises a general problem in the interpretation of art, which is the role mediators play in the production of meaning – something memorably explored by Shelley’s ‘Ozymandias’, in which it is the sculptor’s work, not the tyrant’s power, which ‘yet survive[s]’ time’s decay.<sup>11</sup> True, the sculpture itself is in ruins, and will eventually decay to nothing, but in the meantime, the art has outlived its original circumstances, and duly means something different (the signifier of might goes on to signify the loss of that might). In Larkin’s poem, the change in signification is directly affected by a change in audience; the detail only meant for friends in fourteenth-century England is now on display to an infinite number of twentieth-century tourists from anywhere in the world. Once again, the phrasing is ambiguous: does ‘faithfulness in

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<sup>11</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, ‘Ozymandias’, in *The Major Works*, eds. Zachary Leader and Michael O’Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 198.

effigy' mean the sculptor has faithfully translated into stone the actual faithfulness (to each other) of this man and wife? Or that the sculptor has faithfully followed his patrons' order to convey certain qualities of their choosing, such as 'faithfulness'? We do not know, but the narrator guesses the commission was made to 'prolong / The Latin names around the base', so that now, to interpret this tomb, we must consider the couple's agenda for posterity, *and* the sculptor's hand in negotiating and constructing that agenda.

The next stanza introduces the theme of historical change, speculating that 'They would not guess how early in / Their supine stationary voyage / The air would change to soundless damage'. The phrase 'stationary voyage' is an oxymoron, and Raine finds it 'gnomic', but from a hermeneutic point of view, these lines make sense.<sup>12</sup> The voyage is a migration of the tomb's meaning through time whilst the tomb itself remains physically supine and stationary; the 'damage' is the violence done to it by eyes which look at it outside of its original context – this is why it is 'soundless'. Historical upheaval means 'tenantry' has given way to tourism, and this does damage to meaning and interpretation: 'How soon succeeding eyes begin / To look, not read'. Larkin's use of the present tense shows this to be a broader tendency ('began' would render it specific to the tomb). Indeed, Larkin's lines here provide a pithy summary of my own argument about the posthumous reception of his work, given the usual propensity of critics to look but *not read*.

Nonetheless, this pair has 'persisted' through time, and the fifth stanza further evokes the historical change they have silently witnessed, the centuries 'unobtrusively telescoped into a medley of kaleidoscopic images', as Booth beautifully puts it –

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<sup>12</sup> Raine, 71.

although I cannot assent to the idea that it has been unobtrusive.<sup>13</sup> After all, ‘up the paths / The endless altered people came, / Washing at their identity’ – those people being ‘altered’ because of their status as an historically different species (by 1956, twentieth-, not fourteenth-century). ‘Washing’ is a particularly loaded word, evoking several world faiths, and especially (within a cathedral setting) Christianity, where the act of washing has spiritual significance. In John 13, for instance, Jesus washes the feet of his disciples, an unthinkable act undertaken to show them the virtues of humility and love. The act of washing, then, is a spiritual and elevating one; in Larkin’s poem, ‘Washing’ represents a benign corruption, the corruption of pure meaning by the impurity of the ‘altered people’ looking but not reading, just as we may wash over the historical sense development of the word ‘habits’, or our eyes may wash over the plainness of medieval stone sculpture. As such, the earl and countess are ‘helpless in the hollow of / An unarmorial age’, ‘hollow’ suggesting the emptiness of contemporary culture and the consequent hollowness of our passive gaze. Here, ‘unarmorial’ is one of two words in the poem which seek to concisely evoke the entire medieval world from which this tomb stems; in this way, the poem can be said to be reaching after ‘next-best-fit’ words, words that might evoke, but can never re-construct, that which has been lost (the other word is ‘blazon’). These lines lead Raine to express further doubts about the poem’s quality:

I really don’t know how to interpret ‘the hollow of an unarmorial age’. Nor can I make much of the ‘smoke in slow suspended skeins’. It is an evocation of the unarmorial age, but more evocative than precise. Is it Larkin’s idea of the industrial revolution? You almost wonder, desperately, if the couple haven’t

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<sup>13</sup> Booth, *Life, Art and Love*, 218.

been made into a gift ashtray. I admit defeat, but the responsibility, the blame, is Larkin's.<sup>14</sup>

Raine may be correct to point the finger at Larkin; but would it be pushing matters too far to argue that the 'smoke and mirrors' of the penultimate stanza might be a deliberate strategy to evoke the way the vivid here-and-now of the present slips into the smoky vagueness of the past? The tomb is now only a 'scrap of history'.

This image of the 'scrap' is similar to the 'fragment' metaphor used by Salman Rushdie, in his essay on the susceptibility of memory which affects the exiled Indian author writing about his homeland. That author is 'obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost'.<sup>15</sup> Rushdie's 'fragment' and Larkin's 'scrap' both raise the question of what we do with the debris which history washes onto our shores. This is history as a broken structure, many of its pieces missing, so that the structure can never be faithfully reconstructed. Because of this inescapable truth, 'Only an attitude remains: // Time has transfigured them into / Untruth'. Two words here require a gloss. The 'attitude', most obviously, is that of the poem's final line, 'What will survive of us is love', but the word has another distinct and relevant meaning, which is the pose struck by a figure in a painting or statue. Keats uses this word in the final stanza of 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', surely an ancestor of Larkin's *ekphrastic* poem.<sup>16</sup> To accept this sense of the word is once again to recall the role of the artist (the sculptor), because the 'attitude', or pose, struck by this couple is his creation, wrought by his hands. In short, the tomb is the product of conscious artistic

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<sup>14</sup> Raine, 72.

<sup>15</sup> Salman Rushdie, 'Imaginary Homelands', in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992) 11.

<sup>16</sup> John Keats, 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', in *The Major Works*, ed. Elizabeth Cook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 288-9.

presentation, not of a living attitude which has somehow passed from the flesh to the stone. As with the word ‘habit’, there is an etymological shift from interior to exterior. This sense of the word also affects the meaning of the poem’s conclusion: if ‘*Only* an attitude remains’ (my emphasis), this implies that all we have, after all this time, is a pose consciously carved by a medieval sculptor. It is ‘Time’ which is responsible for them being ‘transfigured [...] into / Untruth’, the passive tense re-affirming the pair’s innocent deception – the ‘Untruth’ has been done *to* them, not by them. ‘[T]ransfigured’ is the other loaded word: like ‘Washing’, it carries powerful Christian connotations. The Transfiguration of Jesus is one of the New Testament’s major miracles, the moment when God made Christ visibly radiant before the eyes of Peter, James, and John. It represents the meeting of humanity with the divine, heaven with earth, *proving* the holiness of Jesus as the Son of God. As with ‘Washing’, however, Larkin makes this deeply spiritual Christian symbol a sign of corruption, as the act of Transfiguration, designed to *prove*, only serves in this poem to prove an ‘Untruth’.

And that ‘Untruth’ – the image of the clasped hands – has become the couple’s ‘final blazon’. ‘[B]lazon’ is another ‘next-best-fit’ word, expected to carry the burden of evoking an entire medieval culture. But it also carries a sense of *conspicuous* display – usually a public presentation of power and lineage in the form of heraldic arms. The term also refers to a convention of Petrarchan love poetry, in which the poet pauses to lavish praise on each part of a woman’s body – her eyes, her lips, her breasts, and so on. By the time Shakespeare penned his *Sonnets*, this conceit was already being trashed as a rather noisy and precious poeticism (hence ‘My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun’).<sup>17</sup> Here, the poem hones in only on the couple’s clasped hands. But by neglecting historical context, and repressing the role of the artist who sculpted this ‘attitude’ into

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<sup>17</sup> William Shakespeare, ‘Sonnet 130’, in *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (London: Bloomsbury, 2010) 131.

existence, that 'blazon' is enabled to prove 'Our almost-instinct almost true: / What will survive of us is love'. This is an 'almost-instinct' because it is what we feel, or perhaps what we would like to feel, when we encounter an apparent image of everlasting love, and it is 'almost true' because it appears so, but only when based on one 'scrap of history' which has been altered by Time's decay, in both a material and epistemological sense. The characteristic (for Larkin) transition to the first-person plural implicates 'us' with the 'endless altered people' of the fifth stanza, so that whilst 'we' are the people who believe in the eternal power of love, 'we' are also the people who look but do not read, and who do not understand how to read the text/tomb. As a consequence, we construct consoling, sentimental greetings-card truisms which are not, in the final analysis, all that true.

It may even be that the poem subverts its own sugary ending on a formal level, too. In Raine's catalogue of this poem's faults, the rhythms and rhymes feature prominently; he calls 'An Arundel Tomb' 'basically iambic with slippage', and suggests that Larkin 'finds it difficult to thread his thought through the rhyme scheme. There can be two results. Murky exposition or enfeebled rhymes'.<sup>18</sup> The 'voyage'/'damage' rhyme causes Raine particular offence, and Larkin admitted in an interview it was 'awful' (*FR*, 57). But there may be method in the rhyming madness. The fact that the poem's rhymes do not aurally complement each other as nicely as we would like ('breadths'/'paths') enacts the poem's argument about the inevitable slippage, or Derridean *différance*, which occurs in any attempt to reconstruct and interpret the past. The most unsatisfying rhyme of all is the final one of 'prove'/'love', a nasty eye-rhyme which itself proves that our eyes can be deceived. With the rhyme, as with the tomb, there is more to it than meets (or 'involves') the eye. This is another verbal nod to early modern poetry: English

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<sup>18</sup> Raine, 70.



poets, and translators of Italian verse such as Petrarch's, had to deal with the specific challenge of finding rhymes for 'love'; a common strategy was to fall back on the eye-rhyme 'prove', as in the excerpt from Donne's 'The Canonization'. Ricks finds 'at least two different possibilities of intonation' present in this final line, which achieves an 'extraordinary complementarity' between classicism ('What will *survive* of us is love') and romanticism ('What will survive of *us* is love'): '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'.<sup>19</sup> The doubling or multiplication of meaning is common in Larkin's writings, as I have shown, and will show in the poems still to be discussed. Ricks's cautious 'at least' is pertinent, given how the basic pattern of iambic tetrameter also results in a final intonation of 'love', an effect which arguably adds a starker emphasis to the absent rhyme, making the aphorism sound even more 'hollow'. As Osborne has pointed out, 'love' can also mean nil, or zero.<sup>20</sup>

What I have discussed here is a poem which wears its uncertainty on its sleeve, exploring the instability of meaning and identity in relation to one medieval tomb. Either by coincidence, or as inevitability, circumstances surrounding the poem's subject have strengthened or weakened its message, depending on one's perspective. To Haffenden, Larkin confessed he had got the central detail wrong: 'the hands were a nineteenth-century addition, not pre-Baroque at all' (*FR*, 58). It is true that the tomb in Chichester Cathedral was restored in the nineteenth century by Edward Richardson – adding another layer of artistic mediation to the production of meaning. Before his Chichester commission, Richardson had restored the crusader effigies in London's

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<sup>19</sup> Ricks, 121-2.

<sup>20</sup> Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, 256.

Temple Church, though not to everyone's taste: Augustus Hare labelled him a charlatan, and the Society of Antiquaries denied him admission. However, Brighton makes the point that Richardson 'obviously did some historical research on other monuments of the period, and there are a number of couples who lie hand in hand which he could have readily studied'.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps, then, this detail was not a later, sentimental addition, but the outcome of astute historical reconstruction.

For some, these circumstances will either strengthen or weaken the attitude of the final line: the hands as a restorer's addition disprove it, whilst the hands as an accurate restoration prove it. But to decide between them is a distraction – not just because the detail *is* an historical fact within the 'world' of Larkin's poem, but also because the poem already contains within itself the means by which its final line can be unpicked. Whether or not the hands were Richardson's invention, the point is surely that the tomb was already a 'scrap of history', its reception 'endlessly altered' by various forms of mediation: the earl and countess's agenda, the original sculptor, the physical decay over time, and the eyes of all those, including Larkin and his narrator, who have come 'up the paths' – all these have contributed to the onset of *différance*. Extensive debates about the (un)knowability of the past have taken place within the discipline of historical studies, spawning an entire sub-discipline of critical history (sometimes called the philosophy of history). One of its leading proponents, Hayden White, has argued in *Metahistory* that 'the historian performs an essentially *poetic* act, in which he prefigures the historical field and constitutes it as a domain upon which to bring to bear the specific theories he will use to explain "what was *really* happening" in it'.<sup>22</sup> If true, the historian and the poet are much more closely aligned than we might think; both create

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<sup>21</sup> Brighton, 16, 19.

<sup>22</sup> Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975) x.

truth rather than somehow recover it from a lost world. But this renders ‘truth’ a contingent, rather than an absolute, concept. White concludes that

there are no apodictically certain theoretical grounds on which one can legitimately claim an authority for any one of the modes [of history] over the others as being more ‘realistic’; [...] as a consequence of this, we are indentured to a *choice* among contending interpretative strategies in any effort to reflect on history-in-general; [...] as a corollary of this, the best grounds for choosing one perspective on history rather than another are ultimately aesthetic or moral rather than epistemological.<sup>23</sup>

The same can – *must* – be said of literary studies, and quoting White’s words here invites a self-reflexive consideration of the present study’s methodology. If there is no apodictically certain theoretical basis for the study of literature, then I opt for a text-centred one because of my own intellectual dislike of speculation – since textual scholarship, it seems to me, requires the least amount of speculation when compared to, say, biographical or psychoanalytical models of interpretation. It also respects literary texts for what they are: constructs wrought from the basic material of words-as-signs. To bring this theorising back to ‘An Arundel Tomb’, the poem provides a useful introduction to Larkin’s mature verse precisely because it contains within itself a critique of identitarian and interpretive certainties. Regardless of, but also illuminated by, the historical drama of the actual tomb in Chichester, the poem provides a complex expression of (post)modern doubt about the possibility of stable and universal meanings

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., xii.

and selfhoods. It pre-empts whatever historical accuracies and inaccuracies it may contain.

Of course, such an analysis could be considered far too literal-minded, particularly as we find ourselves in the arena of poetry, at heart an imaginative and emotional art with no obligations to historical accuracy. After all, an ‘Untruth’ is not exactly the opposite of a ‘Truth’. The poem only goes as far as to say that the clasped hands ‘prove / Our almost-instinct almost true’, and this surely implies that the truth of our sense that ‘What survives of us is love’ is not strictly reliant on the effigy’s original meaning. Larkin himself has practically endorsed this liberated position, recalling to Haffenden how a friend had asked whether he knew of a poem ending ‘What will survive of us is love’: ‘It suggested the poem was making its way without me. I like them to do that’ (*FR*, 58). It seems Larkin felt untroubled, even glad, that a line of his could float free of its pre-qualifying chains and enter the language as an uplifting Truth in its own right.<sup>24</sup> Only a puritan critic would wish to condemn such a phenomenon, and besides, the entry of fragments of poetry into the common language and culture is probably as inevitable as the movements of the tide. The purpose of my discussion is not to gleefully crush the hopes of those who believe in the eternal power of love, like Cromwell banning Christmas, but rather to show the instability of readings (of history, identity, text) by those who ‘look, not read’, and to show an apparent awareness of this, present within Larkin’s *oeuvre*. Like Keats’s notoriously ambiguous ending to ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’, Larkin has exited the poem with astonishing poise, neither asserting nor denying the truth or worth of its final sentiment. As readers, that truth or worth depends upon our

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<sup>24</sup> This is despite the fact Larkin wrote, in his workbook, ‘Love isn’t stronger than death just because two statues hold hands for six hundred years’. Waterman has corrected Motion’s erroneous description of this comment being written *after* a full draft of the poem; the comment was actually scribbled *before* Larkin completed the final stanza, thereby giving its conclusion a much more pessimistic slant; see Waterman, 174.

approach to the text, which is, generally speaking, the concern of this study. Do we read *out of* (exegetically) or *into* (eisegetically) the text? In the case of the tomb (which is a text), do we take into consideration not just what it says, but *how* it says it, respecting its form, history, and context? Or, do we opt for a hermeneutically naïve but arguably more satisfying approach, by taking the detail of the clasped hands at face value, retrospectively making it relate back to the lives of the FitzAlans, and then to our own lives? The methodology decides the meaning, and the meaning shapes our understanding of this misunderstood poet.

So far in this study, I have traced the textual construction of various identities within a selection of Larkin's correspondences, and within the heteronymous Brunette Coleman *oeuvre*. But Larkin's fame and reputation rest on his verse. 'An Arundel Tomb' shows that explorations of meaning and identity, how they are produced, and the problems of interpreting them, also take place within Larkin's major works. At the very least, whatever our stance on the poem's final line, there are lessons we can learn from the hermeneutic relationship between the poem's narrator and the tomb which s/he visits. More forcefully, the way we arrive at a stance on that final line is *wholly* dependent on our chosen methodology for reading the poem. In these final chapters, then, I intend to continue the project of reading, not looking. The close textual analysis applied to Larkin's letters and heteronym must now be turned on his major achievements in verse, in order to show how textual scholarship also liberates Larkin's poetry from the consensus which I have been at pains to critique.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Larkin's early efforts in verse are largely absent from these chapters. This is because the most original poetry Larkin wrote during the 1940s was the *Sugar and Spice* sheaf, discussed in Part II. Otherwise, his early poems (which culminated in 1945's *The North Ship*) are widely regarded as being heavily imitative – of Hardy, Yeats, Dylan Thomas, Auden, and more. Though seemingly also crucial to his development as a poet, it would be unhelpful to devote attention to these poems within a study of Larkin's textual identities, since the balance between individuality and imitation tips too much towards

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the latter. And whilst *intertextuality* features prominently in this study, Larkin's relatively straightforward imitation of other poets' words, moods, and subjects, is of much less interest here than the construction and treatment of textual identities in the mature verse.

# 12

## *Down Cemetery Road: The Public Larkin*

### Persona

Whether or not they like it, and whether or not they endorse or repudiate it, every major writer has a public perception and persona. Virginia Woolf and T. S. Eliot are two authors who have analysed this situation, and between them, they can shed some light on the matter in relation to Larkin. According to Woolf:

[M]ost people will exclaim that if ever there was a lovable human being, one whom one would wish to live with, walk with, go on foreign travels with, it was Keats. He was rather below middle height; his shoulders were perhaps a little broad for his size; his eyes glowed with inspiration, but at the same time expressed the greatest consideration for the feelings of others. He was vigorous but gentle in all his movements, wearing neat black shoes, trousers strapped under his insteps, and a coat that was a little shabby at the seams. His eyes were of a warm yet searching brown, his hands were broad, and the fingers, unlike those of most artists, square at the tip.<sup>1</sup>

This is a charming portrait of the Romantic poet, but does it have anything to do with his work? To an extent, Woolf is toying with us:

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<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'Personalities', in *Collected Essays by Virginia Woolf*, ed. Leonard Woolf (London: Hogarth Press, 1966) 273.

So we could go on making it up, page after page, whether accurately or not does not for our present purpose very much matter. For the point we wish to make is that we are ready supplied with a picture of Keats, and have the same liking or disliking for him personally that we have for a friend last seen half an hour ago in the corner of the omnibus that plies between Holborn and Ludgate Hill.<sup>2</sup>

Lacking the more puritanical temperament of Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', Woolf has indulged herself to daydream about walking holidays with Keats. 'Personalities', first published in 1947, shows no desire to abide by Eliot's clear-cut distinction between the personality and the work. Famously, he declared: '[T]he difference between art and the event is always absolute', and that 'Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. [...] The emotion of art is impersonal'.<sup>3</sup> But deep in thought about Keats's insteps, Woolf cannot suppress the nagging protestations of the man in the four-piece suit (as she once called Eliot), although she does not give into them:

Yet the critics tell us that we should be impersonal when we write, and therefore impersonal when we read. Perhaps that is true, and it may be that the greatest passages in literature have about them something of the impersonality which belongs to our own emotions at their strongest. [...] My purpose in dwelling upon this old-fashioned view of Keats is to confess similar prejudices, partly as

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 273.

<sup>3</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in *Selected Prose*, ed. John Hayward (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955) 28, 30.



an act of atonement for critical malpractices, and partly in order to see whether, when they are set out, any sense can be made of them.<sup>4</sup>

Is this not the logic of the alcoholic who drinks a Tequila Sunrise for breakfast in order to get his dietary five-a-day: *I know it's wrong, but I'm doing it anyway?* The objective is an interesting one, though: to see whether our impressions – however vague or crystalline – of an author's personality might actually improve, rather than distract from, our reading of his or her work. The Ancient Greek dramatists provide a test case for the absence of personality. Woolf tries to imagine Aeschylus: an eagle drops a rock on his head, 'it splits his skull open, and that is all', she laments. She then tries something similar with Tennyson, 'run over by a taxi-cab; or George Eliot gathering her skirts about her and leaping from a cliff'. The mental scene is now more vivid, more immediate, and Woolf feels certain that we would know all the details, pore over them in newspapers and scholarly studies, and, in the end, read *In Memoriam* or *Middlemarch* 'through that veil'.<sup>5</sup> With regards to those distant Ancient Greeks, then, Woolf argues:

The ordinary reader resents the bareness of their literature. There is nothing in the way of anecdote to browse upon, nothing handy and personal to help oneself up by; nothing is left but the literature itself, cut off from us by time and language, unvulgarized by association, pure from contamination, but steep and isolated. That is a happy fate for a literature, if it did not follow that very few people read it and that those who do become a little priest-like – inevitably

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<sup>4</sup> Woolf, 273-4.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 274.

solitary and pure, reading with more ingenuity but with less humanity than the ordinary person, and thus leaving out something.<sup>6</sup>

For Woolf, Aeschylus's work, and his readers, are less human than Tennyson's, and it is the absence of personality which makes this so. Meanwhile in *East Coker*, a man is turning in his grave – and Woolf's argument does not stand when she then considers a novelist whose work she much admires:

There is Jane Austen, thumbed, scored, annotated, magnified, living almost within the memory of man, and yet as inscrutable in her small way as Shakespeare in his vast one. She flatters and cajoles you with the promise of intimacy and then, at the last moment, there is the same blankness. Are those Jane Austen's eyes or is it a glass, a mirror, a silver spoon held up in the sun? The people whom we admire most as writers, then, have something elusive, enigmatic, impersonal about them.<sup>7</sup>

The frosted glass of Austen's perceived personality does not make her work cold and dull, like that of the Ancient Greeks. A lover of Austen's prose, Woolf nonetheless 'would rather not find myself alone in the room with her'. Accordingly, with 'Keats as an example of the kind of writer whose personality affects us', Woolf is forced to conclude that 'We must [...] go humbly and confess that our likings and dislikings for authors in their books are as varied and as little accountable as our likings for people in the flesh'.<sup>8</sup> Again, her logic is that of the person who gives in to their vice whilst being

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 274-5.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 275.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 276.

self-defensively self-conscious about it, and the essay ends in this impasse – or does it? In the very final passage, Woolf appears to veer back towards Eliot’s line, but then suddenly undermines it with a question:

The legacy of a negligible novel is often an oddly visible sense of the writer’s character, a fancy sketch of his circumstances, a disposition to like or dislike which works its way into the text and possibly falsifies its meaning. Or do we only read with all our faculties when we seize this impression too?<sup>9</sup>

Is Woolf suggesting that we should embrace our weakness for personality? That we should appropriate it as a methodology for reading, even? Maria DiBattista thinks so: ‘She is recommending a practice of reading that accommodates our half-formed, possibly false impressions of the writer’s personality, however subversive such a practice might prove to the orthodoxies [...]’.<sup>10</sup> DiBattista has written an innovative life of Woolf, not a conventional cradle-to-grave story, but what she calls a ‘critical biography’. Taking her subject’s lead on this question of writers and their personalities, DiBattista insists

that the person who writes never appears to us except as a figment of our imagination. This is what I mean by my title, ‘imagining’ Virginia Woolf. [...] What I fabricate is an image of her that has slowly formed in my mind – a figment I call it – from the impressions, some more concrete than others, that I

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 277.

<sup>10</sup> Maria DiBattista, *Imagining Virginia Woolf: An Experiment in Critical Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009) 20.

collect as I am reading her. This figment of the author may coexist with, but should never be mistaken for, the ‘figure of the author’.<sup>11</sup>

This is an interesting approach to the author/text debate, teasing out the writerly personality which emerges from the work *in the process of reading*, rather than documenting the one which is pre-formed in the mind thanks to biographical knowledge. ‘The subject of this biography’, writes DiBattista, ‘is not the historical person who was born in 1882 and died in 1941. The subject is Virginia Woolf, the figment who exists as much in the minds of her readers as in the pages of her books’. In other words, her ‘critical biography’ is ‘something at once less and more personally satisfying – an attempt to portray the person captured in the writing itself’.<sup>12</sup> In the case of Woolf, DiBattista’s approach allows her to identify five ‘epithets’, not meant to ‘label Woolf’s various selves, but to correspond to something essential, declarable, in her writerly personality’.<sup>13</sup>

DiBattista’s book is a welcome challenge to the enduring power of conventional biography, but her (and Woolf’s) logic is not without problems. Even if we ignore the banality of at least three of the five epithets (‘Author’, ‘Critic’, and ‘World Writer’ seem to me standard descriptors of any major literary figure), can we ever be *truly* certain that we have wrestled the genie of biography back into his lantern? To put this another way: is the figment of the author which emerges *only* coming from the work? If it is, then the methodology is a diluted version of the text-centred one. Or, is it possible the figment is still being influenced by external sources for the imagination – biographies, interviews,

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 5-6.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 35. The five epithets are: ‘The Sibyl of the Drawing Room’, ‘Author’, ‘Critic’, ‘World Writer’, and ‘Adventurer’, the last of which coheres them all.

anecdotes? In this case, the methodology would be compromised. After all, Woolf was writing in an age of intense modernisation, with new possibilities (such as broadcast media) for writers to present their work and their personalities; in theory, such opportunities have only increased. How can we be really sure that other representations of the writerly personality have not haemorrhaged into our reading? Furthermore, DiBattista's aim is to *assemble* a figment of the author from her various works – the collectivised implied author, perhaps. But, even putting aside the necessary separation of authors and narrators, where in the rule book does it say that authors must show some consistency in voice and values across their different works? Perhaps this explains the catch-all flatness of DiBattista's five epithets.

One of the issues I have with the Woolf/DiBattista reading practice is just how ineffectual it becomes in relation to Larkin. Here is an author with a highly vivid persona which is firmly embedded within the public imagination, and this persona *seems* to emerge from the poems without much mental effort on the part of the reader – consider 'Mr Bleaney', 'Church Going', 'Toads' and 'Toads Revisited', 'The Whitsun Weddings', 'High Windows', 'Annus Mirabilis', and so on. With broad brush strokes, we might describe this persona as the ageing, grumpy bachelor, balding and bespectacled, suffering from an 'indigestible sterility', obsessed with death, and alienated from society by his age and his old-fashioned attitudes (*TCP*, 40). A cartoon by Stephen Collins called 'Let's Not Play FRISBEE With That Poet Anymore' sums up the perception.<sup>14</sup> The strip shows Larkin standing at a distance, watching two figures play Frisbee in a park. As the Frisbee flies past the nearest figure and towards Larkin, he begins to compose a poem (a brilliantly Larkinesque pastiche):

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<sup>14</sup> The cartoon can be viewed at:

<<http://www.stephencollinsillustration.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/frisbee1.jpg>>.

Unloosed, unheralded,  
You soar toward me  
Across the dying afternoon.  
Bright disc of childhood,  
Long since thrown wide  
Of Youth's green imaginings,  
Your slow declining arc  
Figures a sky-written truth:  
We will all succumb, and soon  
To earth's hard oblivion.

At this point, the Frisbee hits him squarely in the face, and knocks the lumbering, mackintoshed poet to the ground. Philip Larkin: too weird and death-obsessed to play Frisbee.

This cartoon is just one of thousands of posthumous media representations of Larkin. But in his lifetime, a relatively small number of media appearances influenced the public and scholarly perception of his persona to a very great degree. And Larkin was not a passive victim of this, but very often complicit in the process. Arguably the most vivid contribution to the construction of the public Larkin persona was a 1964 BBC documentary, *Down Cemetery Road*.<sup>15</sup> Part of the Corporation's flagship arts series, *Monitor*, the film was presented by John Betjeman, and commissioned in response to the popularity of *The Whitsun Weddings*, which had been published in February, selling 7,000 copies within a year. A decade earlier, the success of *The Less Deceived* had marked out Larkin as one to watch in the world of contemporary poetry; now, the

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<sup>15</sup> *Down Cemetery Road*, dir. Patrick Garland, pres. John Betjeman, *Monitor*, BBC, 1964. The documentary can be watched at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Coe11pgoj8E>>.

follow-up volume meant people were literally watching him on primetime television. Osborne has pointed out that ‘With only two television networks available at the time, the programme had extraordinary penetration, carrying into the homes of a sizeable proportion of British citizens’.<sup>16</sup> This makes *Down Cemetery Road* a significant document in the history of Larkin’s reception. Because of the ease with which this personality can be made to match with the personalities of the poems, readers and scholars have not, for the most part, bothered to distinguish between them. In *Imagining Virginia Woolf*, DiBattista locates, describes, and finally coheres, the various writerly personalities of her subject. But in the present study of Larkin’s textual identities, as constructed by the poems themselves, I want to *test* the standard catalogue of imagined Larkins *against* the poems, under the strain of a rigorous textual scholarship, in order to show how they crumble.

At this point, it is worth pausing to consider in more detail the public persona under scrutiny, which appeared on the BBC in December 1964. Filmed in and around Hull, in many ways *Down Cemetery Road* is a masterpiece of literal-minded visuals. The effect of this is to create a one-way dynamic, from place to poet, so that Larkin is celebrated as being *expressive* of place, with his part in constructing it denied. From the start, the link between Hull’s solitude and Larkin’s solitude is affirmed: Betjeman’s first piece-to-camera finds him standing on the opposite side of the Humber from Hull, pointing to it, like an anthropologist tentatively approaching a remote tribe. Just before this, Larkin is shown awkwardly loitering around Hull’s fish docks amidst the usual early morning bustle. His voiceover explains:

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<sup>16</sup> Osborne, *Radical Larkin*, 102.

I never thought about Hull until I was here. Having got here, it suits me in many ways. It is a little on the edge of things, I think even its natives would say that. I rather like being on the edge of things. One doesn't really go anywhere by design, you know [laughs], you put in for jobs, and move about, you know, lived in other places, born in Coventry.

Already, Larkin is being portrayed simultaneously as an ordinary guy ('born in Coventry', 'you put in for jobs'), and a social misfit. A lover of solitude, he has drifted towards Hull, and his justification for describing that city as 'on the edge of things' – 'I think even its natives would say that' – both co-opts local authority *and* shows him to be separate from that locality, not being a 'native'. In other words, Larkin is not even at home when he is at home. At this early stage in the film, a number of his poems are being implicitly referenced: 'I Remember, I Remember', with its description of an 'unspent' life; 'Places, Loved Ones', with its melancholy rootlessness; 'Here', with its panoramic sweep to the edge of things; and so on (*TCP*, 41-2, 29, 49). In fact, Betjeman then launches into a reading of 'Here', accompanied by shots of Hull and the wider region of Holderness. The literal-visual aesthetic is shameless in matching specific lines from the poem with specific images, filming the city centre's 'domes and statues', the birthplace of abolitionist William Wilberforce for 'the slave museum', and even an unsuspecting 'grim head-scarfed' wife.

Following this, Betjeman's construction of the Larkin identity begins. By 1964, Betjeman's reputation as a force in architectural heritage and as a connoisseur of eccentric Englishness was well established. He was a founding member of the Victorian Society, co-author with John Piper of guides to Buckinghamshire and Berkshire, and author of numerous other books on English heritage, including *English Cities and Small*



*Towns, First and Last Loves, and The English Town in the Last Hundred Years.*

‘Slough’, his poem about the ruination of England, had been published in 1937. This Betjemanian agenda permeates the Larkin film: ‘The history that leads up to Philip Larkin’s Hull is really fascinating, and then, for our own civilisation, you get chain stores, and new estates, and new flimsy-packaged architecture for the housewife, nothing like the old Hull. And it’s the combination of them both that Philip Larkin gets into his poems’. His contempt for the new society and its architecture is palpable, but what makes Larkin so interesting is his ability to ‘get’ Hull, with its architectural past and present, into poems. This is the first of four uses of the verb ‘get’ in this context, evidence of Betjeman’s life-into-art philosophy. And the documentary continues in much the same fashion, alternating between Betjeman’s voiceovers and pieces-to-camera, cosy chats between the two poets, and readings of Larkin’s poems with further literal images for explication. Shots of Larkin stalking the Brynmor Jones Library, suited and overcoated, show him as the (now promoted) ‘man next door’ of Al Alvarez’s *The New Poetry*.<sup>17</sup> When Larkin reads ‘A Study of Reading Habits’, the panning camera settles on a shelf of Russian books, *just* as he hits the final line, ‘Books are a load of crap’ – faintly hinting at his Englishness, or even mild xenophobia (*TCP*, 62). His reading of ‘Toads Revisited’ is accompanied by shots of Pearson Park, with its hapless cast of ‘Palsied old step-takers, / Hare-eyed clerks with the jitters’ (*TCP*, 55-6). It ends with Larkin back in the library, attended to by his ‘loaf-haired secretary’, Betty Mackereth. Mackereth has said on several occasions that the BBC paid for her hair to be

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<sup>17</sup> A. Alvarez, ed. and introd., *The New Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982) 25.

done in this style, for the benefit of the cameras. Such trivia highlights the mind-set of the director: if the life does not fit neatly into the art, change the life.<sup>18</sup>

With the two poets sitting in the nineteenth-century Spring Bank Cemetery, a spot favoured by Larkin, another of the film's quirks further demonstrates this kind of phenomenon. Twice, Betjeman misquotes Larkin's poetry. After Larkin makes some comments about his all-pervading consciousness of death, the elder poet says:

You get it beautifully in your poem about ambulances, that line 'In time all streets are visited', and I remember the four lines in it, 'And sense the solving emptiness / That lies just under all we do, / And for a second get it whole, / So permanent and black and true'.

Clearly, Betjeman did not remember the lines so well; the poem should read 'All streets *in time* are visited', and 'So permanent and *blank* and true' (my emphases) (*TCP*, 63-4). On one level, this is nothing but the loveable, bumbling Betjeman persona in action. But do such mistakes matter? Without wishing to throw Betjeman in the stocks for a minor offence of misquotation, on another level his errors do suggest that impressions of a poem may take a stronger hold on the mind than the actual words on the page. It also shines a light on the same tendency to convert poems back into 'real life' stories or events, as demonstrated by Mackereth's 'loaf-haired' cameo. With sartorial mock-ups and fallible memories, one might ask what other kind of mis-representations of the work could be occurring. Although arguably unimportant in themselves, such details illustrate

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<sup>18</sup> James Booth, e-mail to the author, 21 May 2015. Admittedly, Mackereth's hair had been in the 'loaf' style when Larkin wrote 'Toads Revisited'. But the wider point here is that the filmmakers consciously modified 'reality' in order to visually demonstrate the unity of Larkin's life and art.

the need for closer, more focused readings in discussions of Larkin's art and identities, and their relation to the life.

It should be said, however, that Larkin seems happy to oblige with all this. When Betjeman goes misty-eyed in the living room of Larkin's Pearson Park flat – 'when I look outside there, and I see [...] that dusty sycamore, and those burned-out chestnut candles, sheltering the public park below us, I think of your poem "Toads Revisited"' – Larkin responds with a resounding endorsement: 'And well you may'. Later, when Betjeman mentions 'Church Going', Larkin explains the poem by explaining the circumstances behind it:

At that time I'd rather formed a habit of going out cycling on Sundays, partly for exercise, partly because I hadn't got anything to do, and whenever I saw a church I used to stop and look inside; it was a nice excuse for stopping, but I like going into them, I know very little about them but I always welcomed the feeling I had going into a church, and in the end I began to try to write about it.

In other words, one of the twentieth century's great poems about faith and society came about because of Larkin's weekend boredom, and a 'nice excuse' to pause from exercise. That explains that, then.

Indeed, so politely cooperative is Larkin, he does not even object to criticism of his poetry:

I read that, you know, I'm a miserable sort of fellow, writing a kind of Welfare State sub-poetry, doing it well perhaps, but it isn't really what poetry is, and it isn't really the sort of poetry we want, but I wonder whether it ever occurs to the

writer of criticism like that that really one agrees with them, that what one writes is based so much on the kind of person one is, and the kind of environment one's had and has now, that one doesn't really *choose* the poetry one writes, one writes the kind of poetry one *has* to write, or *can* write.

Far from rebuffing claims that he writes 'sub-poetry' (essentially Alvarez's claim), Larkin merely remarks that he cannot help it. Poets are shaped by upbringing, environment, and personality, and they cannot quibble with the poems which come to them. If his poetry is miserable, well, that is just because he is too. Here, Larkin is aligning himself with Betjeman's life-into-art aesthetic, articulating a poetry of experience: you have the experience and then you put it in a poem. And Betjeman is quick to praise this: 'But that's what I think so marvellous *about* your poetry – it *exactly* describes the surroundings in which you live, and the feelings of a detached observer, and it's easily understood by everyone [...]'. Indeed, Betjeman's test of the poetry's worth appears to be how closely it can express the real locations and the real emotions of real people. On a ferry crossing the Humber, he tells Larkin (after Larkin has described local effects of light and clouds):

And your poem 'Here', you know, gets that, where you get that sense of there being limitlessness beyond Hull, and then eternity. I read it to some Hull people last night, and tears came to their eyes, they thought it was so good, one said 'we must know this man, can't he come and see us?'

At this, Larkin laughs and says 'That's another evening gone!' The film then cuts to Larkin standing on the bank of a polluted River Hull, his voiceover reading 'Wants',

one of the bleaker poems from *The Less Deceived*, with its ‘wish to be alone’ and ‘desire of oblivion’ (*TCP*, 32). This is the film’s finale; the careful scene transition and concluding tone are designed to present Larkin the misanthrope. He just wants to be left alone.

That said, Larkin’s quip – ‘That’s another evening gone!’ – seems to have been a self-referential joke, and lost on the earnest Betjeman. Tracing the word ‘evening’ through Larkin’s verse, one finds it repeatedly deployed within the context of lost or wasted time. ‘Self’s the Man’, published in *The Whitsun Weddings*, finds Arnold ‘Planning to have a read at the evening paper’ – but alas, his wife has jobs around the house for him to do (*TCP*, 58-9). In the uncollected ‘At thirty-one, when some are rich’, the solipsist narrator muses on life, before abruptly declaring ‘Another evening wasted!’ (*TCP*, 280-1). In another uncollected poem, ‘After-Dinner Remarks’, the narrator thinks of the evening passing no less than five times as s/he considers the lives of others with melancholy (*TCP*, 179-83). By the time ‘Vers de Soci  t  ’ was published seven years later, in 1971, readers were already more than familiar with Larkin’s misanthropy:

I could spend half 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*. (*TCP*, 91)

The quip is one of the rare moments in the film when Larkin distinguishes himself from the presenter. His comment is one of distancing, an expression of horror at Betjeman’s organicist belief in the connection between the poet and the people. Larkin is too much of a recluse to mix with the people he is supposed to ‘get’. But if this was a self-

referential joke, perhaps even self-parody, it seems to have been lost on Betjeman (his expression is blank), and the cut to Larkin reading ‘Wants’ completes the strategy of presenting viewers with the Hermit of Hull.

Within twenty-five minutes, then, a significant audience was presented with the following versions of Larkin: the drifter who washes up at the edge of things; the purveyor of grim and weird Hull-ness; the chap next door with a regular nine-to-five job; the resigned and miserable Welfare State sub-poet; the lone wanderer of public parks; the death fetishist with a penchant for cemeteries; the weekend cyclist (complete with cycle-clips) with a love of provincial English churches; the anti-metropolitan misanthrope with a wish for solitude and oblivion. As with letter-writing, the construction of Larkin’s identity in this film was a dialogic one, and although obliging, Larkin knew this. In May 1964, with the film in the planning stage, Larkin wrote to Monica Jones: ‘Betjeman is still due to be included, wch I rather deplore – I shall be typed as just another Betjeman’ (*LM*, 335). Given Betjeman’s emphasis on Hull’s civic and religious architectures, and his repeated praise of Larkin’s success in ‘getting’ these into the poetry, this was an accurate prediction. In June, with filming underway, Larkin updated her: ‘This is turning into a film about Betjeman!’ (*LM*, 337). To his mother, he wrote: ‘I suggested they should call it “To Hull with John Betjeman”’.<sup>19</sup> In his feelings of claustrophobia, Larkin recognised the performative and constructed nature of the film-making process:

I’m writing at 9.15 a.m. – they are ‘coming for’ me at 10. Today we ‘work the graveyard’ – i.e. shoot about 2 mins of B. & I talking among the graves. It will take about 3 hours, I expect. [...] My rabbit, my burial ground – I suppose it is

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<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Motion, *A Writer’s Life*, 347.

nice to have them filmed, but I know you'll understand that they seem less mine now. In fact, I feel less mine now, if you follow me. I shall be glad when I see the whole caravan of sound, lights & cameras disappearing up the road towards London. (*LM*, 337)

The inverted commas (“work the graveyard”), the passive voice (“they are “coming for” me”) – these features point to the documentary’s artificiality, and Larkin’s sense of having things done to him. Far from being filmed doing what he does in his natural habitat, he is being directed and choreographed. His sense of being ‘less mine now’ echoes other comments of his regarding the conscious performativity of selfhood – such as having ‘Quite a Larkin afternoon’ in a Victorian cemetery (*LM*, 437), or his remark in an *Observer* interview: ‘I don’t want to go around pretending to be me’ (*RW*, 51). However, verisimilitude and authenticity seem to have been the qualities sought by viewers: when the programme aired in December, Larkin told Jones that ‘Hull D. Mail [the local newspaper] rang up to ensure it actually showed Hull people in Hull!’ (*LM*, 344).

Palmer has argued that ‘Larkin’s multiple masks and governing deceptiveness have been all too successful – by which I mean that, while those properties are responsible for so much that is fertile and stimulating, they have also sponsored palpable misunderstandings of his work and of him as a human being’. He calls the excoriating, anti-modernist introduction to *All What Jazz* ‘Larkin’s Most Expensive Mistake’, and ‘a mistake from which Larkin’s reputation is still recovering’.<sup>20</sup> Momentarily overlooking my objection to the mask trope, I am reluctant to call Larkin’s obliging self-presentation in the *Monitor* film a ‘mistake’, as this would require psychological speculation about

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<sup>20</sup> Palmer, 13, 32.

what exactly he hoped to achieve. Nonetheless, it is the case that the Larkin identities constructed by the film's visuals and words have been incredibly seductive and influential for readers and scholars, making the conflation of the man filmed cycling around East Yorkshire churchyards, and the narrators of his poems, very easy indeed.<sup>21</sup>

As Motion writes:

To readers who had never seen Larkin before, the bald, slim, bespectacled man in the three-quarter length pale fawn macintosh [*sic*], nervously swallowing his stammer as he allowed the camera to follow him around town and then up to his flat for tea, was fascinating but also familiar-seeming.<sup>22</sup>

Regardless of how comfortable or uncomfortable this made Larkin, the result has been a wholesale distortion of the work, which this study seeks to correct. When Patrick Garland, the director, wrote to Larkin to propose the idea of a film, Larkin's initial stance was this: 'I've always believed that it is best to leave oneself to the reader's imagination'.<sup>23</sup> Having been persuaded to abandon that position, Larkin effectively gave readers permission to conflate his personage with his poems. Bradford argues that 'The film became for Larkin, albeit in its robustly understated way, the equivalent of the Lake District for Wordsworth'.<sup>24</sup> Although 'understated' seems nonsensical, given the

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<sup>21</sup> Like the story behind Mackereth's hair, the film's church scenes constitute a further case of the production team's desire to fake it. Larkin is shown exploring two different churches – one abandoned, one not. To shoot the latter, Larkin and the crew silently slipped out of Hull and across the river to Barton-upon-Humber – i.e. away from the terrain which the film so explicitly situates Larkin within. In any case, Larkin wrote 'Church Going' whilst living in Belfast, *before* he had any connection with Hull and East Yorkshire.

<sup>22</sup> Motion, *A Writer's Life*, 347.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Motion, *A Writer's Life*, 347.

<sup>24</sup> Bradford, 203.



film's relentlessly literal exhibition of place and personality (Larkin called Garland's direction '1958 Tony Richardson-&-water'), Bradford is correct to recognise how it pinned Larkin to a particular place, as well as a particular selfhood (*LM*, 344). Like Motion, he has commented on Larkin's strange familiarity to readers:

[F]or those who watched the film the most strikingly unambiguous feature of Philip Larkin, and the one which corresponded with *The Whitsun Weddings*, was of calculated singularity; bachelorhood not just as a transitional stage or a circumstantial condition but as an impregnable state of mind. [...] The man on the television screen raises similar questions to the man in the railway carriage in 'The Whitsun Weddings': What does *he* do when not in his library or talking with Betjeman in the cemetery? Who does *he* meet after leaving the train in London?<sup>25</sup>

Librarian; Betjeman's chum; man on the train to London – for readers and viewers, each of these identities, whether real or fictional, coagulated easily within the frame of Philip Larkin. His persistent epithet, 'the Hermit of Hull', and the wording of the *Guardian's* front-page headline the day after his death ('Larkin, the romantic recluse, dies at 63'), are evidence of the lasting influence which this film has had on Larkin's popular perception.<sup>26</sup>

Having read a selection of Larkin's correspondences, and the Brunette Coleman writings, from a rigorously textual and literary perspective, this same process must now be applied to the poems – the need to read, not just look, which 'An Arundel Tomb' establishes. The identity of Larkin constructed by *Down Cemetery Road* is the one

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 205-6.

<sup>26</sup> John Ezard, 'Larkin, the romantic recluse, dies at 63', *Guardian*, 3 December 1985, 1.

which fascinates and endures when readers open a copy of the poems. But textual scholarship tests that identity, and the next two chapters show its disintegration under stress.

## Larkin's Persona Poems

Distinguishing between 'work' and 'text', Barthes argues that 'The work is caught up in a process of filiation. [...] As for the Text, it reads without the inscription of the Father'.<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, I want to show how poems which are so strongly filiated to Larkin may read 'without the inscription of the Father', in ways that are equally as legitimate and interesting, if not more so. The texts which I am calling Larkin's 'persona poems' are the ones most closely and easily associated with Larkin's public persona, triggering critical discussions which often blur 'poet' and 'narrator' without much concern for the distinctions between them; these contrast with the 'impersonal poems', discussed in the next chapter, whose narrators are necessarily distinguished from the Larkin persona. Booth has noted that 'Many of Larkin's most familiar phrases include the pronouns "I" or "me": "Such attics cleared of me! Such absences!", "Hatless, I take off / My cycle-clips in awkward reverence", "Give me your arm, old toad", "When I see a couple of kids / And guess he's fucking her..."'. He resists the idea that Larkin's speakers are 'dramatic personae', arguing that there is 'no such didactic distance between the poet and the speaker'. 'In only four of his mature poems does Larkin create speakers who are clearly distinguished by sex and social context from himself', he writes.<sup>2</sup> At this point it is worth recalling Motion's assertion that 'the

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, 'From Work to Text', in *Image Music Text*, ed. and transl. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977) 160-1.

<sup>2</sup> Booth, *Philip Larkin: Writer*, 92-3. The four poems which Booth cites are 'Wedding-Wind', 'Livings', 'A Study of Reading Habits', and 'Naturally the Foundation will Bear Your Expenses'.

poems *are* autobiographical [...] even allowing for the personae they adopt’, and Tolley’s discussion of ‘the poet, un-self-consciously and unostentatiously himself, the man who “says” the poem’.<sup>3</sup> Harvey Hallsmith points out that ‘All but half a dozen of the poems in *The Less Deceived* are related by an “I” figure, a persona, and more than half the poems in *The Whitsun Weddings* and *High Windows* fall into the same category’. ‘Why should such a private man have chosen to speak with such a public flourish of the first person?’ he asks, admitting that ‘it is tempting to dismiss the whole idea of personae and to accept that in the “I” poems he is speaking to us directly in his own voice’.<sup>4</sup> Swarbrick argues that the Larkin of *The Less Deceived* ‘had learned to deal with deeply personal issues in ways that externalised them’ using ‘slightly differentiated personae’, but when his next two volumes brought fame and a bigger audience, ‘the strategies by which he protected the essential core of his privacy had to become more devious’.<sup>5</sup> And Waterman proclaims that ‘Larkin rarely adopts obviously separate personae for his speakers, and almost never falters from presenting a truth-confronting male authorial voice’.<sup>6</sup>

Such analyses are broadly representative of Larkin scholarship. The linking of particular persona poems to footage of Larkin and his environment in *Down Cemetery Road* only served to give this practice the appearance of normality, as the natural and common-sense way to think about Larkin’s poetry. By rejecting such a practice in favour of textual scholarship, I have been able to read a selection of Larkin’s writings in different forms, and from across his career, in drastically different ways. This chapter applies that approach to three of Larkin’s major ‘persona poems’: ‘Church Going’,

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<sup>3</sup> Motion, ‘On the Plain of Holderness’, 68; Tolley, *My Proper Ground*, 77.

<sup>4</sup> Harvey Hallsmith, ‘The “I” in Larkin’, in *Critical Essays on Philip Larkin: The Poems*, Longman Literature Guides, eds. Linda Cookson and Brian Loughrey (Harlow: Longman, 1989) 72-3.

<sup>5</sup> Swarbrick, 92.

<sup>6</sup> Waterman, 97.

‘Annus Mirabilis’, and ‘Vers de Société’. These are poems on which a firm critical consensus has settled, so that they dramatise well the argument of this study.

**‘If only that so many dead lie round’: ‘Church Going’**

One of Larkin’s most famous poems, the accounts of ‘Church Going’ are, by now, well-rehearsed. A man out cycling (usually assumed to be Larkin) stops at a church and, once he has checked ‘there’s nothing going on’, he goes in; with an ignorance which soon appears feigned, he looks around, taking off his cycle-clips ‘in awkward reverence’, and donates ‘an Irish sixpence’ (*TCP*, 35-6). He decides ‘the place was not worth stopping for’, but confesses that he often does stop, always ending ‘much at a loss like this’. In turn, this leads him to wonder what will happen when churches ‘fall completely out of use’, imagining them in a ruinous state, with ‘dubious women’ coming to pick ‘simples for a cancer’ or to make their children ‘touch a particular stone’, and so on. He then imagines his ‘representative, / Bored, uninformed’, yet drawn nonetheless to this ground for no other reason than because it once ‘held unspilt / So long and equably what since is found / Only in separation – marriage, and birth, / And death’. He realises that it ‘pleases’ him to stand in this space in silence, and the final stanza stages a poeticised meditation on the value of the church setting, whether active or defunct. What can never be ‘obsolete’ is the strange gravity of this space: here, ‘someone will forever be surprising / A hunger in himself to be more serious’, the ground being ‘proper to grow wise in, / If only that so many dead lie round’.

Booth has commented that the ‘lyric “I” is not clearly distinguished from the author himself’, and that consequently this is a ‘dangerous strategy to employ when writing on a subject to which readers bring such strong prejudices’.<sup>7</sup> Although there is very little –

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<sup>7</sup> Booth, *The Poet’s Plight*, 128.

if any – evidence within the poem which determines the narrator to be Larkin, Booth is correct to identify prejudices which have informed readings, and to call it a ‘complex lesson in the distortions of topical reading’.<sup>8</sup> The terms of the debate were set by Alvarez in *The New Poetry*. Characterising the Movement as English poetry’s third and final ‘negative feed-back’ designed to rebuff the invasion of English verse by American modernism, Alvarez was highly critical of the ‘academic-administrative verse’ of the 1950s:

The pieties of the Movement were as predictable as the politics of the thirties’ poets. They are summed up at the beginning of Philip Larkin’s ‘Church-going’ [*sic*]:

Hatless, I take off

My cycle-clips in awkward reverence.

This, in concentrated form, is the image of the post-war Welfare State Englishman: shabby and not concerned with his appearance; poor – he has a bike, not a car; gauche but full of agnostic piety; underfed, underpaid, overtaxed, hopeless, bored, wry. This is the third negative feed-back: an attempt to show that the poet is not a strange creature inspired; on the contrary, he is just like the man next door – in fact, he probably *is* the man next door.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>9</sup> Alvarez, 23, 24-5.

(Simon Armitage has quipped that ‘He didn’t sound like the man who lived next door to me’.<sup>10</sup>) For Alvarez, ‘Church Going’ was a symptom of ‘the disease so often found in English culture: gentility’.<sup>11</sup> His account has been influential in the critical formation of a narrative describing the murder of British modernism by a gang fronted by Larkin – a gang which managed to delay the progress of postmodernism. Further debate has occurred regarding the poem’s theological disposition, with J. R. Watson seeing the poem as evidence of Larkin’s ‘*homo religiosus*’, his ‘intuitive awareness of the tenuous sacred in the midst of the profane’.<sup>12</sup> For Booth, however, the poem is ‘a less deceived retort to T. S. Eliot’s “Little Gidding”, published thirteen years earlier’, whilst Osborne has argued that Larkin ‘presents God as an historical concept. [...] [The] death of God removes an obstruction to proper appreciation of the church’s civic virtue’.<sup>13</sup> Osborne has more recently pointed to Larkin’s conscious ‘deterritorialization’ of the poem: the ‘deletion of geographical markers leaves stranded and exposed, like an amoeba upon a slide, the phrase “an Irish sixpence” – the three most hotly contested words in Larkin’s *oeuvre*’.<sup>14</sup> This is a reference to arguments about the narrator’s donation of Irish currency, which critics who assume the poem is set in England view as an act of disrespect towards the Church. (In fact, Larkin wrote the poem whilst living in Belfast, and has talked about churches in Northern Ireland and the Republic having prompted the poem; see *TCP*, 370.) For Osborne, because the poem declines to state its national setting,

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<sup>10</sup> *Great Poets in Their Own Words: Access All Areas, 1955-1982*, dir. Kemi Majekodunmi, BBC, 2014. This documentary can be watched at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dVv2dEUsYKI>>.

<sup>11</sup> Alvarez, 32.

<sup>12</sup> J. R. Watson, ‘The other Larkin’, *Critical Quarterly*, 17:4 (December 1975), 360.

<sup>13</sup> Booth, *Life, Art and Love*, 194; Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, 98.

<sup>14</sup> Osborne, *Radical Larkin*, 106.

*The territorializing of the sixpence highlights by contrast the deterritorializing of everything else.* To what end? So as to bring the poem's address to nationality to the same crisis points as its address to theology: the site demarcated by neither God nor flag, the site of unverifiability, of questions rather than answers.<sup>15</sup>

To this excellent analysis of the poem's nationality and theology, I have little to add. I concur with the position of Booth and Osborne, neither of whom finds any evidence to suggest that the narrator is Christian, and agree with Osborne's view that the narrator instead ponders the personal and social value of the Church without subscribing to its doctrines. The focus of my own reading will be a more explicitly *literary* one, particularly addressing questions of intertextuality, influence, and tradition. Whilst the church described is surrounded by the buried dead, the poem itself has buried beneath its surface a network of literary allusions and citations. Many of them have already been excavated by critics, and sometimes appear as a secondary theme in discussions of the poem, but – if the reader will forgive the mixed metaphors – there has been a lot of trainspotting, and not enough boarding of the trains in order to see where they go. Morrison's reflective essay in *The Movement Reconsidered*, for instance, restates his earlier position that 'hostility to certain aspects of Modernism was genuinely felt', but he now admits that 'anyone reading Larkin's "Church Going", say, will notice how indebted it is to other poets (Hardy, Graves, Betjeman, Auden, Norman Cameron, Roy Fuller, and Robert Frost among them) and how profoundly it engages with Tradition, whether slipshodly sampled or not'.<sup>16</sup> This is an interesting qualification by the author

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>16</sup> Blake Morrison, "'Still Going On, All of It': The Movement in the 1950s and the Movement Today", in *The Movement Reconsidered*, ed. Leader, 21.



of what is still the best account of the Movement. But a fuller investigation of the concept of poetic debt is required, in order to show how diversely mediated is the textual identity of this important and career-defining poem.

Since 2012, readers have been able to consult Burnett's commentary on 'Church Going' in his authoritative edition of the *Complete Poems* (TCP, 368-73). There, one finds listed a significant number of allusions and citations, including from the Church of England prayer book ("Here endeth"); Orwell's *Coming Up for Air* and MacNeice's 'In the Cathedral' (the donation of a 'sixpence'); Hardy's 'The Lost Pyx' ('pyx'); Keats's *The Eve of St Agnes* (the syntactical inversion of 'A serious house on serious earth it is'); Frost's 'Directive' ('house', 'destinies'); George Eliot, Keats, Hardy, Yeats, and MacNeice ('blent'). Burnett's list is not exhaustive. He and other critics have also found a number of echoes of T. S. Eliot, ranging from more general influences (John Wain, for instance, likened Larkin's narrator to Prufrock) to the specifically syntactical: Ingelbien has compared 'Wondering what to look for' with 'not knowing what you came for' ('Little Gidding'), and notes that 'serious earth' 'could easily turn into Eliot's "significant soil"' ('The Dry Salvages').<sup>17</sup> Burnett himself compares 'A purpose more obscure' to lines from 'Little Gidding' ('Either you had no purpose / Or the purpose is beyond the end you figured') (TCP, 372). And the narrator's imaginative description of a ruined church – 'Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky' – is surely redolent of *The Waste Land*.

Four years before Burnett's edition appeared, Osborne had already broken new ground in drawing attention to Larkin's vast citational practice – 'the palimpsestic range and density of Larkin's referencing'. 'As for Eliot', Osborne wrote, 'his influence is so pervasive that it is possible to detect in nearly forty Larkin poems. The influence is

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<sup>17</sup> John Wain, letter, *London Magazine*, March 1957, 56; Ingelbien, 21, 23.

apparent at the levels of diction, of phrasing and tone, and of metrics'.<sup>18</sup> Osborne's enlightening reading of 'The Whitsun Weddings' demonstrates this 'pervasive' influence, but I would nominate 'Church Going' as *the* poem from the Larkin canon which betrays his debt to Eliot, and his quiet negotiations with Eliotic modernism.<sup>19</sup> More recently, I have added to the swelling list of excavated citations by highlighting the poem's links with Eliot's 1935 verse drama *Murder in the Cathedral*, which Larkin openly admitted to reading for pleasure, and from which he excerpted two passages in his *Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse* (RW, 66, *OBTCEV*, 247-9). (Larkin also made at least two attempts at the verse drama form in his lifetime; see *EPJ*, 317-46). It is therefore surprising that no critic has noted *Murder in the Cathedral* as a source for 'Church Going', which is indebted to Eliot's play at the levels of language and theme.<sup>20</sup>

Both texts are 'about' the Church in crisis, though the contexts differ. Eliot's crises are historical *and* immediate: they are the assassination of Thomas Becket, former Archbishop of Canterbury (the subject of his play), and the role of the Church in the early-twentieth century (arguably the real subject of his play). For Larkin, it is the decline of the Church in both a spiritual and material sense: his poem is as much about the *church going* as it is about the decline in *church-going*. It is interesting to note that Larkin was partly prompted to write it after reading a later Archbishop of Canterbury's appeal to save church buildings from decay (see *TCP*, 369-70). Setting their works within the physical space of a church, whether Canterbury Cathedral or the imagined one of Larkin's poem, both writers pose the question: why come *here*? Indeed, 'here'

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<sup>18</sup> Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology, and Critical Violence*, 55-6.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 60-6.

<sup>20</sup> This account has been published as: 'Larkin's "Church Going": A Source', *Notes & Queries*, 61:1 (March 2014), 146-8.

becomes a significant verbal and theatrical device of *Murder in the Cathedral*, recurring throughout the play (the first line spoken is ‘Here let us stand, close by the cathedral’). Similarly, Larkin’s narrator pronounces “‘Here endeth” much more loudly than I’d meant’, which is both a mock reading from the prayer book, and a portent of the place’s demise. ‘Are we drawn by danger? Is it the knowledge of safety, that draws / our feet / Towards the Cathedral?’ asks the Chorus at the opening of Eliot’s play, whilst the narrator of ‘Church Going’ concludes their visit ‘much at a loss’, ‘Wondering what to look for’ – ‘Yet stop I did: in fact I often do’.<sup>21</sup> Further links between these texts are to be found in the ways in which their authors seek to answer those questions. In one passage from *Murder in the Cathedral* (the first of the two selected by Larkin for his *Oxford* anthology), the church-setting is celebrated as a space in which the landmark moments of human existence are unified: ‘We have seen births, deaths and marriages’, pronounces the Chorus. But with their beloved Archbishop in grave danger, ‘a great fear is upon us’, and this fear is described as ‘A fear like birth and death, when we see birth and death alone / In a void apart’.<sup>22</sup> Anxiety about the disintegration of faith and stability is therefore related to the divorce of social rites normally practised in this one space. In ‘Church Going’, Larkin merely rearranges Eliot’s list of rituals: the Church is acknowledged as a place which ‘held unspoilt / So long and equably what since is found / Only in separation – marriage, and birth, / And death’. For both Eliot and Larkin, then, the declining status of the Church in the twentieth century has the serious consequence of separating social rites, splintering human existence. At the end of Eliot’s play, the Chorus once again praises the sacred space which the Cathedral building represents:

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<sup>21</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*, in *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004) 239.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 244.

For wherever a saint has dwelt, wherever a martyr has given his  
blood for the blood of Christ,  
There is holy ground, and the sanctity shall not depart from it  
Though armies trample over it, though sightseers come with  
guide-books looking over it [...].<sup>23</sup>

In Larkin's poem, one can detect a strong myrrhic whiff of those lines by Eliot, particularly 'Or, after dark, will dubious women come'. Eliot's sightseers clutching guide-books are akin to Larkin's 'crew / That tap and jot and know what rood-lofts were', his 'ruin-bibber, randy for antique', and his 'Christmas addict'. More generally, Larkin's poem shares with Eliot's play a similar accumulation of clauses, and the same blend of anachronistic syntax and vocabulary with more contemporary, demotic speech, written within the historical present.

Of course, Larkin's treatment of the church, whether as celebration or elegy, is a much more secular one than Eliot's, who had converted to Anglicanism in 1927. But where these two writers do meet is on the 'serious earth' (Larkin's phrase) which the Church represents. Whatever the status of the Christian faith in the twentieth century, each writer finds a *social and cultural* significance haunting this holy ground. To draw attention to this connection is to inflect the meaning of 'Church Going', and provide another important instance of Larkin's borrowing from Eliot. But this is not all. After all, Larkin's extensive citational practice in 'Church Going' puts the poem on a collision course with his 'Statement', published in D. J. Enright's *Poets of the 1950s* one year after the poem first appeared in the *Spectator*:

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 281-2.

As a guiding principle I believe that every poem must be its own sole freshly created universe, and therefore have no belief in ‘tradition’ or a common myth-kitty or casual allusions in poems to other poems or poets, which last I find unpleasantly like the talk of literary understrappers letting you see they know the right people. A poet’s only guide is his own judgement; if that is defective his poetry will be defective, but he had still better judge for himself than listen to anyone else. (*RW*, 79)

Nowhere in the ‘Statement’ is Eliot named, but any reader with a rudimentary knowledge of ‘Lit Crit. and Theory’ will recognise ‘tradition’ – with its sardonic quotation marks – as a dig at the author of ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’.<sup>24</sup> Lerner even claims that ‘Church Going’ specifically ‘springs from the Larkin who declared his dislike of “‘tradition’ or a common myth-kitty” as material for poetry’.<sup>25</sup> But how many readers have spotted the potential verbal echo carrying from the Eliot essay into ‘Church Going’ – an echo which would realign, rather than collide, the two poets’ aesthetics? Eliot writes:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to *the dead* poets and artists.

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<sup>24</sup> Larkin’s footnote in *Required Writing*, where the ‘Statement’ is reproduced, explains that Enright had asked contributors for ‘a brief statement of their views on poetry. I assumed he would use their replies as raw material for an introduction; I was rather dashed to find them printed *verbatim*’ (*RW*, 79). It may not be, then, his most considered piece of writing. But critics have taken it seriously, and Larkin made plenty more denunciations on this theme; it therefore warrants further discussion.

<sup>25</sup> Lerner, 18.

You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison,  
among *the dead*.<sup>26</sup> (my emphases)

For Larkin's narrator, the space of the church is 'proper to grow wise in, / If only that so many *dead* lie round' (my emphasis). Whether or not this echo is coincidental, it is the specifically literary dimension of 'Church Going' to which I want to draw attention; for we have a poem which not only echoes a number of Eliot's works ('The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', *The Waste Land*, *Four Quartets*, *Murder in the Cathedral*), as well as works by other writers, but *also* echoes and explores Eliot's essay on the poet's relation to tradition. This is another example of Larkin's hidden depth: 'Church Going' is simultaneously a poem about the consequences of the Church in decline, *and* an exercise in intertextuality and literary tradition. If the narrator begins in a state of ignorance about church symbolism – feigned or not – and then finds him/herself growing in metaphysical stature, the same transition can be detected in a poem which begins as concrete nouns and demotic speech before finding its feet – electrified, not stifled, by Tradition. This shows the high level of intertextual mediation in one of Larkin's most allegedly straightforward, direct, and personal poems. In Barthesian terms, 'The plural of the Text depends [...] not on the ambiguity of its contents but on what might be called the *stereographic plurality* of its weave of signifiers (etymologically, the text is a tissue, a woven fabric)'.<sup>27</sup> To take into consideration the poem's allusions and citations is to make it signify in ways it cannot when read exclusively through a biographical or Movement filter.

This has not been to every reader's taste. Kingsley Amis, asked by Larkin to look over the poem, criticised the archaic poeticisms of its closing stages:

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<sup>26</sup> Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', 23.

<sup>27</sup> Barthes, 'From Work to Text', 159.

I think the last stanza isn't right yet; not because of the punctuation – couldn't see anything wrong with that – but because of one or two highly poetical words and constructions: the inversion in the first line, for instance, which makes me think of 'A casement high and triple arched there was' and such bits of flannel. I'd say you've got to be extra careful, at the point when you ease your foot gently down on the accelerator, to avoid reminding the reader that 'this is poetry'. See what I mean? 'Blent', too, seems a bit 18<sup>th</sup>-c. to me.<sup>28</sup>

Larkin chose not to act on Amis's advice; this is, I think, one occasion when Amis believed Movement hype, whilst Larkin rejected it. As Michael O'Neill has commented, 'One may feel that it is by no means undesirable that, as Larkin eases his foot gently down on the accelerator, what comes to mind is a Romantic poem'.<sup>29</sup> This is, after all, a poem which bravely but sensitively steps into the realm of the unknown, asking questions about the nature of belief, superstition, the strange gravity of particular spaces, and the human hunger for seriousness – all Romantic concerns. O'Neill's view that 'the poetic diction flirts with archaism but earns its keep' is appropriate, given how gradually and subtly this poem grows in its own seriousness. Precisely because the modulation is so effective, O'Neill is also correct to argue that Larkin has found 'an idiom that is at once of its time and in contact with a poetic tradition that includes the Romantics'.<sup>30</sup> On a formal level, too, Larkin's use of large stanzas, and pentameters, which create the space necessary for meditation, is a Keatsian strategy.

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<sup>28</sup> Kingsley Amis, *The Letters of Kingsley Amis*, ed. Zachary Leader (London: HarperCollins, 2000) 399.

<sup>29</sup> Michael O'Neill, "'Fond of What He's Crapping On": Movement Poetry and Romanticism', in *The Movement Reconsidered*, ed. Leader, 290.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 291.

This ‘contact with a poetic tradition that includes the Romantics’ is one of the ways in which ‘Church Going’ negotiates the Eliotic theory of tradition. The ‘dead’ who ‘lie round’ are at once the bodies of parishioners buried in the graveyard through the centuries, *and* ‘the dead poets and artists’ considered by Eliot, and woven into the fabric of the poem by Larkin. Of course, ‘lie’ may also be a characteristic Larkin pun. Like the earl and countess of ‘An Arundel Tomb’ who ‘lie in stone’, it may be that these bodies expose Christianity’s lie regarding the existence of an afterlife. But given the polyvalence of Larkin’s verse, the presence of a pun such as this does not by any means preclude any of the alternative readings offered here.

The point about poetic tradition and inheritance can be made more compellingly if one compares ‘Church Going’ with Derek Walcott’s ‘Ruins of a Great House’. For some, Larkin and Walcott may be bizarre bedfellows, particularly if you believe the cries of racism and colonial supremacy by critics like Jardine, Greer, and Paulin. But in fact, the connections between these two poems, written at similar times but in very different contexts, are remarkable. This is a different kind of intertextuality; not so much a direct or covert allusion as an unintended shared cultural frame of reference. I do not wish to suggest that either writer was in any way conscious of what the other was doing, only that the connections exist because the winds of literary history were blowing in a similar direction – not that the current configuration of British literary history says so. Larkin’s poem, first published in 1955, was written in 1954; Walcott composed his during 1953-4, first publishing it in a 1956 issue of *New World Writing*, before including it (in revised form) in his 1962 collection, *In a Green Night: Poems 1948-1960*, the book which brought him international attention. In ‘Ruins of a Great House’, Walcott negotiates the Caribbean’s colonial past and its emancipated present, working through issues of memory and legacy. Like Larkin in ‘Church Going’, he does



this within the setting of a decaying historical structure – this time, the Great House – which is also a site of literary citations and allusions mostly lifted from the Western canon (something Walcott has always insisted is his rightful inheritance as much as any writer born in England). As Rei Terada puts it, the poem ‘plunges into a potentially infinite regression of mimicries, each of which possesses political resonance’.<sup>31</sup> The motif of the Great House, as well as being an important one in Caribbean culture, alludes to English novels such as Austen’s *Mansfield Park*, to the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century country house poem (Marvell’s ‘Appleton House’, for example), and the ‘Big House’ setting of much Anglo-Irish fiction. The poem opens with an epigraph taken from Thomas Browne’s *Urn Burial* (1658), itself a highly intertextual exploration of burial, artefacts, history, inheritance, and colonialism. We then encounter a tissue of direct and indirect citations: from Blake (“Farewell, green fields” / “Farewell, ye happy groves!”); Keats (‘Marble as Greece’); Faulkner (‘Faulkner’s South’); Milton (‘Fallen from evil days, from evil times’); Marvell (‘not from the worm’s rent’); Hawkins, Raleigh and Drake (described as ‘Ancestral murderers and poets’); Shakespeare (‘nook-shotten’); Coleridge (‘rook o’er blown’); Donne (‘the ashen prose of Donne’, “a piece of the continent, a part of the main”); Jacobean song and revenge drama (‘Three crows’, ‘Ablaze with rage’); and so on.<sup>32</sup> Like ‘Church Going’, the poem formally echoes the expansive and meditative Romantic ode, as well as the *ubi sunt* lyric of Medieval and Renaissance poetry. And like the narrator of ‘Church Going’, Walcott’s narrator undergoes a gradual but significant modulation in his/her thought and emotion. This begins as pure anger at the murderous regime of slavery imposed upon the region –

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<sup>31</sup> Rei Terada, *Derek Walcott’s Poetry: American Mimicry* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992) 60.

<sup>32</sup> Derek Walcott, ‘Ruins of a Great House’, in *The Poetry of Derek Walcott 1948-2013*, ed. Glyn Maxwell (London: Faber and Faber, 2014) 29-30.

‘Ablaze with rage, I thought / Some slave is rotting in this manorial lake’ – but works through this in order to reach a final state of insight: ‘And still the coal of my compassion fought: / That Albion too, was once / A colony like ours’. It is the compassion proposed by Donne, in his famous ‘Meditation XVII’ from *Devotions*, which the narrator has in mind:

All in compassion ends

So differently from what the heart arranged:

‘as well as if a manor of thy friend’s...’

‘Manor’ is a pun, as much a reference to writing in the ‘manner’ of ancestral poets in order to achieve understanding, as it is a reference to the literal ‘manor’ described by the poem. Scholars of postcolonial literature have discussed this poem in relation to Eliot’s theory of tradition, arguing that this is a model to which Walcott subscribes. Charles W. Pollard, for instance, rejects the idea that Eliot’s influence simply expired somewhere in the middle of the twentieth century, but also resists the notion that his influence on New World writers has been one of passive inheritance; instead, he argues, poets like Walcott ‘have recast modernism in general and Eliot in particular because aspects of his modernist aesthetic enable them to understand and to represent better their postcolonial experience of modernity, what Eduoard Glissant calls the New World’s “irruption into modernity”’.<sup>33</sup> Walcott in particular, Pollard argues, values Eliot’s ‘poetic method’, and his ‘habit of thought’ which

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<sup>33</sup> Charles W. Pollard, *New World Modernisms: T. S. Eliot, Derek Walcott, and Kamau Brathwaite*, New World Studies (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004) 3.

brings together seemingly contradictory ideas as congruent parts of contingent wholes. [...] [Eliot's] goal is to widen the circles of tradition, not as a struggle between the past and the present, between the community and the individual, between continuity and originality, but as a collocation of the past and present, of the community and the individual, and of continuity and originality in a new contingent whole.<sup>34</sup>

This is precisely the project undertaken by 'Ruins of a Great House', with its heap of broken images, and its archaeological excavation of literary legacies alongside the dredging of human victims of slavery. If Walcott's poem achieves *historical* insight – that greater compassion for, and understanding of, the colonial Other may help to heal the traumas of the past – then it is aided by the exploration of a *literary* past. Like Larkin's, his poem shows the benefit of transactions within and between cultures.

Larkin and Walcott were writing in very different geographical and socio-political terrains; in brief, one wrote from the previously colonising Old World whilst the other wrote from the previously colonised New World. But, writing in the early- to mid-1950s, both writers opted to explore issues of historical change, memory, legacy, and literary tradition, within the architectural space of a decayed or decaying institution. In doing so, both achieved the Eliotic ambition of 'continuity and originality in a new contingent whole' (Pollard), creating identities for themselves as individual poets within a wider tradition which they became responsible for updating.<sup>35</sup> Intriguingly, Ian

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>35</sup> Although the similarities outlined here are coincidental, Larkin and Walcott went on to appreciate each other's work. In 1989, Walcott wrote:

One of the most flattering experiences I have had was when Larkin included me in his *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* of 1973. I mention this not only from the pride of being recognized by a

Almond has commented of 'Church Going' that 'The earthly, material feel of the church finally culminates in its description as a place where silence is "brewed" – as if the means by which a church produces an atmosphere or a certain feeling in its congregation is, in the end, nothing more than a chemical process'.<sup>36</sup> He may have unwittingly been onto something, given that Eliot's essay uses a chemical analogy for the functioning of tradition: 'I therefore invite you to consider [...] the action which takes place when a bit of finely filiated platinum is introduced into a chamber containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide'.<sup>37</sup> This may be yet another example of Larkin's ability to pull off two or more meanings at once.

In the case of Walcott scholarship, any controversy surrounding poems like 'Ruins of a Great House' has only focused on the question of *why* he should want to adopt an Eliotic (and thus Western) mode, not *whether* he has done so. The controversial nature of my argument in the case of 'Church Going' is that it pushes Larkin towards a modernist aesthetic which he frequently denounced. Given his 'Statement', or his

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poet for whose work I had great affection and whose severity of judgement I feared, but also because it contradicts, self-contradicts, the image of a beleaguered provinciality that Larkin offered his readers. This image, continually repeated, was of a weary, sneering recluse who 'never read foreign poetry', for whom China was a good place to travel to, if one could get back on the same day, who despised 'the myth-kitty' into which poets rummage to pluck classical fragments from the sawdust of the Greco-Roman bran tub, and for whom books were 'a load of crap'.

Walcott here shows himself to be a perceptive and open-minded reader of Larkin's work and persona; see 'The Master of the Ordinary: Philip Larkin', in *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998) 165. Further evidence of my argument about Larkin, Walcott, and their subscription to the Eliotic theory of tradition, can be found in Walcott's epic poem, *Omeros*, in which he uses the word 'blent', thereby continuing its life within the echo chamber of literary tradition; see *Omeros* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1990) 277.

<sup>36</sup> Ian Almond, 'Larkin and the Mundane: Mystic without a Mystery', in *New Larkins for Old*, ed. Booth, 184.

<sup>37</sup> Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', 26.

condemnation of the evil triumvirate of modernist experimentation (Parker, Pound, Picasso), critics might object that far from having been written out of the narrative of modernism and its legacies, Larkin happily and proudly wrote *himself* out of it (*AWJ*, 27). Tolley sets out this stall most confidently: Larkin ‘never admired Eliot and Pound and was never drawn to their programme for poetry’.<sup>38</sup> Having accepted this position, authors of post-war British literature surveys and textbooks often use Larkin as the preeminent example of how the 1950s generation rejected modernism in favour of a plain and direct form of writing with no interest in a common myth-kitty. Alvarez’s envy of literary developments in America – far more experimental, far less genteel – is palpable in the pages of his introduction to *The New Poetry*. But this narrative is becoming less sustainable, and a textual examination of ‘Church Going’, with its network of echoes and citations from literary tradition, shows why – and *all this* from a poem of the 1950s so widely cited by critics explaining Movement philosophies and aesthetics. In recent years, modernist scholarship has undergone a comprehensive respatialisation and reperiodisation. Susan Stanford Friedman published an influential essay in 2006 calling for this, arguing that ‘The 1940s end date for modernism in effect refuses to hear what the later modernisms have to say about the modernities that have shaped and been shaped by colonialism and its aftermath throughout the twentieth century’.<sup>39</sup> In order to reframe modernism, Friedman had to redefine it as an expression of modernity *wherever* and *whenever* it occurs:

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<sup>38</sup> Tolley, *My Proper Ground*, 91.

<sup>39</sup> Susan Stanford Friedman, ‘Periodizing Modernism: Postcolonial Modernities and the Space/Time Borders of Modernist Studies’, *Modernism and Transnationalisms*, special issue of *Modernism/modernity*, 13:3 (September 2006), 439.

To spatialize the literary history of modernism requires the abandonment of diffusionist ideologies of innovative centers and imitative peripheries. It requires as well the recognition that the ‘periods’ of modernisms are multiple and that modernism is alive and thriving wherever the historical convergence of radical rupture takes place. Always spatialize! But remember: spatialization means reperiodization.<sup>40</sup>

Accounts of New World modernisms such as Pollard’s have played a huge role in this transnational expansion of modernist studies. But the danger of such a reframing is that it continues to accept the story of how modernism’s flame expired in the Old World just as it burst into relevance across New World nations. Although Friedman was careful to include ‘the modernities that have shaped [...] colonialism’ in her essay, attention has understandably been focused on postcolonial modernities. To read Larkin’s Eliotic practice in ‘Church Going’ in line with Walcott’s in ‘Ruins of a Great House’ is to challenge this narrative, and argue for a reconsideration of modernist legacies in post-war Britain as much as anywhere else – with Larkin as a protagonist. There is of course a danger here, which Osborne identifies:

[T]his type of argument [...] risks swapping one absurdity (that Larkin owed nothing to Modernism) for another (that he owed everything to Modernism). The slowness and the completeness with which he emerged as a great poet are due to the tenacity with which he wrestled with one after another of the

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 439.

contemporary masters of the art – Hardy, Edward Thomas, Yeats, Eliot, Auden, MacNeice, Frost and (to a lesser extent) Dylan Thomas.<sup>41</sup>

As well as, I would add, a line of masters going further back in poetic history. As far as this study goes, however, the purpose of drawing attention to all this is to demonstrate that Larkin's textual identities are indeed *textual*, and far more diversely mediated than has been acknowledged by the bulk of scholarship on his work. With regards to 'Church Going' specifically, the result is to expose its narrator as an artistic construct woven from the many threads of literary tradition, and produced in order to explore complex ideas about history, society, faith, and community, rather than the genteel and mildly philistine voice of the 'man next door' Philip Larkin, describing and expressing himself in simple verse. As Claudette Sartillot has argued in her study of citation and modernity,

from the moment one can no longer recognize a quotation as an insertion separated typographically from the 'main' discourse, the relationship between one text and another becomes a form of complicity. As a consequence, the concept of text as an autonomous entity, the property of its author, an author situated outside the text, is likewise modified or abrogated.<sup>42</sup>

As with the presence of intertextuality in Larkin's letters, this theory of citation dispatches the notion of the author's 'voice' which 'speaks' to us through the poem. 'Church Going' is not an obscure or unknown poem plucked from the *Juvenilia* or from deep inside the *Complete Poems* in order to prove this or that influence on the early

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<sup>41</sup> Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, 60.

<sup>42</sup> Claudette Sartillot, *Citation and Modernity: Derrida, Joyce, and Brecht*, Oklahoma Project for Discourse and Theory (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993) 20.

Larkin; rather, it is one of the highlights of Larkin's 1955 masterpiece, *The Less Deceived*, which critics universally agree represents his first stride into poetic maturity and greatness. Part of the recipe for such success was not the abandonment of influence and tradition in favour of the direct and the personal, but rather a complex negotiation between an undoubtedly original poet and a wider tradition which contains but does not engulf him.

### **Textual intercourse: 'Annus Mirabilis'**

'Annus Mirabilis' is a journalist's favourite. It has become obligatory to quote the poem's assertion that 'Sexual intercourse began / In nineteen sixty-three' in any piece on the 1960s and the permissive society (*TCP*, 90). In a *Telegraph* article looking at the 1960 trial of Penguin Books fifty years on, Dominic Sandbrook used it for revisionist purposes: 'Although Philip Larkin famously wrote that sexual intercourse began "between the end of the Chatterley ban / and [*sic*] the Beatles' first LP", the truth is that Britain in the next few years remained a strikingly chaste and conservative society'.<sup>43</sup> Sandbrook's myth-busting is all very well, but what he fails to notice is that the poem does not believe its own hype about the Sixties. 'Annus Mirabilis' is a poem which presents a naïve sociological argument in order to produce a more sophisticated and radical one.

As usual, however, the problems surrounding its interpretation begin at home – that is, with the scholarship on Larkin's work. And those problems generally stem from the usual smashing together of poet and narrator, a critical move which produces skewed

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<sup>43</sup> Dominic Sandbrook, 'Lady Chatterley trial - 50 years on. The filthy book that set us free and fettered us forever', *Daily Telegraph*, 16 October 2010, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/8066784/Lady-Chatterley-trial-50-years-on.-The-filthy-book-that-set-us-free-and-fettered-us-forever.html>.



meanings too weak to stand up to textual examination. Booth summarises the poem thus: ‘the moment in 1963 when “life was never better” came, unfortunately, “just too late for me”. The “Everyone” who in that year [...] suddenly began to feel that life was “A quite unlosable game” cannot, in the very order of things, include the poet himself’.<sup>44</sup> Here, it is ‘the poet’ who announces his exclusion from the brave new world of promiscuity and loose morals. In his recent biography of Larkin, Booth has complicated this reading, drawing attention to ‘the poet’s self-mocking presence, [...] [which] merely adds piquancy, “me” being a stereotype of old-fashioned inhibition. Indeed, the poem is delightfully politically incorrect’.<sup>45</sup> This is a more sophisticated position, although I am not convinced the poem contains politically *incorrect* attitudes.

Some have interpreted ‘Annus Mirabilis’ in even more personal terms. In *The Philip Larkin I Knew*, Brennan calls it ‘a thinly disguised account of our relationship’, and explains the Beatles reference: ‘their tunes held a special place in his affections, for they stood for a happy and successful period of his life’.<sup>46</sup> Bradford runs with Brennan’s account, arguing that ‘Larkin’s cold glance upon contemporaneity should not be written off as that of the standard reactionary, because in this poem, as Maeve disclosed, generalities are interwoven with a very private resonance’. Because of Brennan’s ‘disclosure’ – that of their relationship – ‘One can almost see Larkin’s smile forming behind “Which was rather late for me”; by “Though just too late for me” he is laughing aloud’.<sup>47</sup> In other words, ‘Annus Mirabilis’ is a joke at the reader’s expense, a poem about missing the sexual revolution written by a poet having sex with various women.

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<sup>44</sup> Booth, *Philip Larkin: Writer*, 153.

<sup>45</sup> Booth, *Life, Art and Love*, 309-10.

<sup>46</sup> Brennan, 63, 54.

<sup>47</sup> Bradford, 212.

Motion, too, conflates poet and narrator: ‘we gather that it is not Larkin’s fault that he missed out but society’s: he was simply born too early to benefit from the sexual revolution of the early 1960s, and therefore had no option other than to become a victim of shyness, fear and ignorance’. Although Motion is alert to the modulation of tone – ‘In the fifth and final verse, which nearly but not quite mirrors the first, it’s clear that he wants us to think again’ – he resorts to a default biographical position in order to explain this: it is Larkin’s love of ‘solitude’ which undermines the poem’s envy; ‘He hankers after commitment, but also enjoys self-containment’.<sup>48</sup> Rossen and Hassan make similar arguments. According to the former, the poem may discuss social change, but ‘the difficulties here are internal as well as external to the poet’. These difficulties are related to Larkin’s misogyny, although Rossen seems reluctant to use the word:

In a sense, what Larkin does is to adopt the freedom of the sexual revolution in talking about sex openly – even brashly – all the while proclaiming that he can’t enjoy its fruits in actual fact. As the poems ‘Annus Mirabilis’ and ‘High Windows’ suggest, he feels caught between two generations. This grievance is compounded by the fact that he feels personally affronted by women; and in consequence his poetry approaches the problem entirely from the man’s viewpoint as a victim of the system, and from the related perspective where women are seen as entirely responsible for his deprivation. He reworks this unresolved conflict repeatedly, insisting that the relationship between men and women is antagonistic and that sex consists of ‘obstacles’ to be overcome.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Motion, *A Writer’s Life*, 372.

<sup>49</sup> Rossen, 137, 140.

Nowhere in the two poems mentioned are women represented as an ‘affront’ or as ‘obstacles’ – Rossen’s reading seems to be based on certain of Larkin’s letters, however much she claims to be discussing the poems. Furthermore, Larkin is not simply a misogynist, but a half-hearted one too: the poem ‘acknowledges envy and loss; but the modest self-deprecation [...] is offered too readily, and suggests that the poet is dissociating himself from something he does not care much about. He may regret not having enjoyed more sexual freedom, yet he regrets it too politely to seem entirely convincing’.<sup>50</sup> It seems Larkin does not even have the courage of his woman-hating convictions; he dislikes women, but only unenthusiastically, as he is not really interested in sex anyway. Hassan also detects a lack of ‘drive’ in the poem: ‘the poet’s attitude towards the sexual freedom the young enjoy is not, in any case, the outcome of his jealousy, but rather, of his full awareness that happiness can never be achieved in life’.<sup>51</sup> Whereas for Motion the poem should be understood in the light of Larkin’s need for solitude, Hassan ties it to another personality trait: Larkin’s misery. Again, it is difficult to find a basis for this in the poem itself; one can only assume Hassan is thinking of the persona. Moreover, was Larkin bothered about sex or not? Bradford thinks he was, but Motion, Rossen, and Hassan all find him apathetic. The absurdity of this disagreement highlights one of the main issues with biographical readings, namely the instability of critics’ knowledge about the life before they even get to the work.

It should be said that not all critics have read ‘Annus Mirabilis’ in this way. Osborne sees it as part of Larkin’s ‘9/11 view of history’, which rejects ‘the conservative consolation of historical fixity’.<sup>52</sup> And Palmer expresses disbelief at the poem’s reception: ‘I find it incredible that anyone can or ever did take literally the first three

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>51</sup> Hassan, 119.

<sup>52</sup> Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, 191.

lines of Larkin's "Annus Mirabilis".<sup>53</sup> But if we are to decide what exactly this seemingly straightforward poem has to say, what is required is a full analysis of the text, not of the poet. As is often the case, the best way to debunk biography is with biography. When the narrator announces that 'Sexual intercourse began / In nineteen sixty-three', but that this 'was rather late for me', we may instantly dismiss the notion that Larkin is 'speaking': 'In fact, sexual intercourse had begun with Ruth in October 1945', Motion writes – and, we might add, it continued with various other women throughout the 1950s, '60s, and '70s.<sup>54</sup> As Alan Bennett put it in a discussion of 'Larkin and his women': 'All of them (mother excepted) he clubbed with sex, though Maeve was for a long time reluctant to join the clubbed and Betty escaped his notice until, after seventeen years as his secretary, there was presumably one of those "When-you-take-off-your-glasses-you're-actually-quite-pretty" moments'.<sup>55</sup> In other words, if sex really did kick off in 1963, Larkin seems to have been given a decent head-start, which renders the rather literal-minded biographical interpretations invalid. The narrator of 'Annus Mirabilis' is a *character*, or a constructed identity, and as such, we need to pay close attention to the words on the page in order to know what kind of a character s/he is.

On first inspection, the narrator appears to be a cultural type: more specifically, a member of the older generation against which the youth of the 1960s kicked. S/he knows enough about contemporary society to realise what is going on, and even seems to endorse it, but makes it clear that it is a phenomenon from which s/he is excluded: 'life was never better than / In nineteen sixty-three', although 'just too late for me'. The cultural markers of societal change are 'the end of the *Chatterley* ban' – Penguin Books

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<sup>53</sup> Palmer, 86.

<sup>54</sup> Motion, *A Writer's Life*, 338.

<sup>55</sup> Bennett, 6.

was prosecuted on obscenity charges in 1960 after publishing an unexpurgated edition of Lawrence's novel, but the jury returned a 'not guilty' verdict – and 'the Beatles' first LP', *Please Please Me*, which was hurriedly released by Parlophone in 1963 in response to the growth of 'Beatlemania' across the UK and Europe. These events are used as shorthand for the bigger concept of the permissive society, or 'civilised society', as Roy Jenkins called it.<sup>56</sup> The narrator describes the kind of society there had been 'Up till then':

A sort of bargaining,  
A wrangle for a ring,  
A shame that started at sixteen  
And spread to everything.

This arrangement may have been successful in preventing the 'spread' of, say, sexual disease, but in its place something arguably worse took hold: 'shame'. The third stanza sets out the new arrangement, wherein 'every life became / A brilliant breaking of the bank, / A quite unlosable game'. The fourth and final stanza almost perfectly echoes the

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<sup>56</sup> Jenkins earned his reputation as Britain's most liberal Home Secretary by effectively ending capital punishment, relaxing the divorce laws, legalising abortion, decriminalising homosexuality, abolishing theatre censorship, and more – all within the space of just two years. In the late 1950s, he had successfully sponsored a parliamentary bill which became the Obscene Publications Act 1959. Crucially, this Bill made allowances for the publication of 'obscene' material if literary merit could be demonstrated. It was this Act which, a year later, allowed Penguin Books to win its trial at the Old Bailey. One of the expert witnesses at this trial was Richard Hoggart, erstwhile colleague of Larkin's at the University of Hull, and in 1960 Monica Jones's colleague at Leicester. During the 1950s, the government was put under pressure to introduce such a bill, and this intensified when A. P. Herbert stood for Parliament on a reform platform. Interestingly, Herbert was the author of a comical poem on the theme of artists and morality – 'Lines for a Worthy Person' – which Kingsley Amis included in his *New Oxford Book of Light Verse* (1978), and which Christopher Ricks has suggested could be an influence on Larkin's 'Annus Mirabilis'; see *TCP*, 468.

opening one, this time arguing that ‘life was never better than / In nineteen sixty-three’ – although, once again, this was ‘just too late for me’.

The first thing to say is that the narrator, despite feeling excluded from the *zeitgeist*, does not by any means defend or promote the values of the past: ‘shame’ is not construed as desirable; ‘bargaining’ and ‘wrangle’ imply a mean-spiritedness; and the financial trope is transparently inappropriate and cynical when applied to matters of love and sex. What, then, is the narrator’s attitude to the new values – to that ‘brilliant breaking of the bank’? This image extends the trope of finance, replacing tight-fisted negotiations with an era of fiscal (i.e. sexual) irresponsibility. As Cooper points out, this line and the stanza’s last one also connote gambling. But the game is not really a gamble: it is ‘quite unlosable’. For Cooper, this modification of the metaphor means:

the poem achieves a positive note by identifying the chief characteristics of a revised model for sexual politics. [...] [In] 1963 what is celebrated is the ‘breaking of the bank’ signalling how questions of sexual and personal attachment have been liberated from the world of financial obligation. [...] [The] establishment (or ‘bank’) has been toppled by the new code of ethics that ‘Everyone’ wants.<sup>57</sup>

Certainly, the shift from negativity (stanza two) to positivity (stanza three) puts paid to the idea that the narrator identifies with the illiberal and now extinct way of life – s/he is no ‘stereotype of old-fashioned inhibition’ (Booth) casting a ‘cold glance upon contemporaneity’ (Bradford). But does s/he *really* endorse the new order so readily and without reservation? This is where the textual approach comes into play. Under

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<sup>57</sup> Cooper, 179.

scrutiny, the second stanza can be read as containing a studied vagueness: previously, there had been ‘A *sort of* bargaining’, ‘A *wrangle*’, and shame that ‘spread to *everything*’ (my emphases). This is actually very evocative, given how sexual ethics and expectations tend to be unwritten and therefore inexact; there was no handbook to consult, only what your parents and the neighbours thought. But the next stanza is almost ludicrous in its escalation of vagueness, a product of the stanza’s all-encompassing, one-size-fits-all generalities. The old way of doing things ended ‘all at once’; ‘*Everyone* felt the same, / And *every* life became / A brilliant breaking of the bank’ (my emphases). Such sweeping statements are both unconvincing and untenable.

Because of this, the stanza’s vocabulary also begins to appear unpersuasive: ‘brilliant’ and ‘unlosable’ now look flat, quietly and subtly sarcastic. By extension, the entire subsequent and final stanza reads in a different light, despite being an almost word-perfect replication of the opening one. The sociological generalisations have become so all-encompassing that they fail to persuade; in consequence of this, ‘So life was never better’ reads as pathetically feeble, like a bankrupt man describing himself as a little short of cash. These comical and flimsy effects are reinforced by the poem’s rhyme scheme, which is not only as basic as the poem’s ostensible argument, with its childish *abbab* pattern, but also an aural nod to ‘the Beatles’ first LP’. Although practically sacrilegious to criticise the Beatles, I think it is appropriate to comment on the simplicity of the sounds and lyrics on *Please Please Me*, which are basic almost to the point of being facile – for example the *aaaba* rhyme scheme of ‘Love Me Do’:

Love, love me do

You know I love you.

I’ll always be true

So please

Love me do, woh love me do.<sup>58</sup>

Members of the band have been open about this aspect of the LP. In one of his last interviews, John Lennon looked back to the days spent writing the *Please Please Me* tracks with Paul McCartney, recalling: ‘Yeah, we were just writing songs a la Everly Brothers, a la Buddy Holly, pop songs with no more thought to them than that – to create a sound. And the words were almost irrelevant’.<sup>59</sup> This is no crime: simple can be beautiful, and simple can be fun, and there is pleasure to be had in the songs of the Beatles, the Everly Brothers, or Buddy Holly. Larkin himself sometimes made positive remarks about the Beatles, whom Brennan believed had provided the soundtrack to a happy period of his life. But the writings collected in *All What Jazz* demonstrate, at best, an ambivalence towards the group, and in one piece, written in 1967, he describes them as having ‘made their name in the narrow emotional and harmonic world of teenage pop’ – narrow emotions and harmonics also being a decent characterisation of ‘Annus Mirabilis’ (*AWJ*, 186). In Larkin’s hands – the hands of a master craftsman – a rhyme scheme such as this one can only sound flat and silly. This is either bad writing or a deliberate textual effect. If the latter option seems the most likely, then we might perhaps conclude that Larkin is co-opting the arguably facile ‘Sound of the Sixties’ (as he called it in another *Daily Telegraph* piece, and which so many compilation albums

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<sup>58</sup> John Lennon and Paul McCartney, ‘Love Me Do’, in *The Beatles Lyrics: The Songs of Lennon, McCartney, Harrison and Starr* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 1993) 21.

<sup>59</sup> Quoted in David Sheff, *The Playboy Interviews with John Lennon and Yoko Ono*, ed. G. Barry Golson (New York: Playboy Press, 1981) 129.



today call it), wherein words are ‘almost irrelevant’, in order to demonstrate the superficiality of the myth surrounding that decade (*AWJ*, 146).<sup>60</sup>

If the poem uses subtle textual effects such as these in order to undermine the seemingly straight-faced narrator’s seemingly straightforward narrative (wherein stanza two/pre-1963 = negative, and stanza three/post-1963 = positive), then what kind of attitude towards the social changes of the Sixties does it actually display? Surely this debunking of the progress narrative renders the poem reactionary, conservative, and nostalgic – the poem critics expect Larkin to write. Not necessarily, I would argue; for if we want to grasp the potential issue with Sixties sexual liberation, we can flick back a few pages and consult the title poem of *High Windows*, an obvious companion piece to ‘Annus Mirabilis’. Doing so is not about assembling different Larkin poems in order to achieve a coherent sense of the author’s identity – the process which I critiqued in relation to DiBattista’s biography of Woolf. Instead, this kind of act acknowledges the ways in which Larkin’s poems enter into generative or destructive dialogues with each other, particularly *within* individual collections: ‘Coming’ and ‘Going’ in *The Less Deceived*; ‘Here’ and ‘The Importance of Elsewhere’ in *The Whitsun Weddings*; ‘Sad Steps’ and ‘Solar’ in *High Windows*; and so on. Different reading strategies can find different relations between the poems, irrespective of authorial intention or character. ‘High Windows’ and ‘Annus Mirabilis’ are both poems on the theme of the permissive society, which contrast the older generation with the new one, and deploy a tone which is sceptical of the progress narrative. Again, this could be because of Larkin’s ‘crusty Toryism’ (Mowat), because he is a ‘bigot’ (Ackroyd), and a ‘quasi-Fascist’ (Paulin). Or

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<sup>60</sup> Interestingly, in a piece written in 1963, Larkin describes the Beatles as being ‘like certain sweets, they seem wonderful until you are suddenly sick. Up till then, it’s nice, though’ (*AWJ*, 102). Perhaps the year and the verbal echo (‘Up till then’) are coincidental; or perhaps Larkin’s article was an early rehearsal of the musical and sociological argument of ‘Annus Mirabilis’.

– as I have shown in several of his writings – these poems might be exploring more progressive notions. ‘High Windows’ famously opens with these lines:

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

Everyone old has dreamed of all their lives [...] (*TCP*, 80)

But ‘paradise’ for whom exactly? Presumably for the guys rather than the gals; as Cooper points out:

Significantly, ‘he’s *fucking* her’ while ‘she’s / *Taking* pills or wearing a diaphragm’ [...] implying that men enjoy sex while women suffer the anxieties of contraception. [...] The chauvinistic yearning for a world where sexual activity is entirely enjoyed and directed by men is just another of the dubious ‘utopias’ that the poem’s objective challenges.<sup>61</sup>

To read ‘High Windows’ in this vein is to unfold a critique of the Sixties as a sanctimonious myth of sexual liberation *for all*. The myth is twofold: did the world of flower power and free love ever truly materialise outside of Carnaby Street, or did life on Douglas Dunn’s Terry Street in Hull, for example, remain much as it had for a

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<sup>61</sup> Cooper, 171-2.

century, albeit with brighter dresses and a few Beatles LPs thrown in?<sup>62</sup> Further, was the sexual emancipation of women really achieved, if the contraceptive pill had the effect of making women *permanently* available for sex – no reason to say *no* now – and therefore sex objects? Of course, for many women this *was* a time of sexual revolution, and it is important to acknowledge that, but how many women felt the opposite? I am not the first to raise these questions in relation to the 1960s; neither was Larkin in 1974, although few critics seem willing to recognise the presence of liberal and feminist sociological critiques such as these in *High Windows*. But such empathy for the feminine should not come as a surprise in a 1974 collection, when since his earliest writings, Larkin had concerned himself with issues of femininity and womanhood. This is evidenced by Part II of this study, which looks at the Brunette Coleman writings; the letters to Monica Jones, discussed in Part I; the complex and subtle ending to *A Girl in Winter*; or lines such as these, from a 1940 poem, ‘Out in the lane I pause’: ‘Girls and their soldiers from the town / Who in the shape of future years / Have equal shares’ – a hopeful image of sexual politics which again turns on the money trope (*TCP*, 185-6).

Indeed, like all myths, the myth of the Sixties is one of perspective: for many women, the availability of ‘the pill’ will have caused *new* anxieties about sex and relationships with men. Throughout my analysis of ‘Annus Mirabilis’, I have declined to sex the narrator of the poem, partly because the poem offers no fixity on this question, partly because it might be interpreted differently if read from the point of view of an older woman observing a new wave of sexual harassment. After all, the title track of the Beatles LP referred to by the poem contains chauvinistically haranguing lyrics such as these:

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<sup>62</sup> See Douglas Dunn, *Terry Street* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969).

Last night I said these words to my girl

I know you never even try, girl.

Come on, come on, come on, come on,

Please please me, woh yeah, like I please you.<sup>63</sup>

The Latin phrase which provides Larkin's poem with its title can only signify positively if you share the perspective of the person who utters it. Hugh Dalton, Attlee's Chancellor of the Exchequer, called 1946 the Labour Party's *annus mirabilis* – but not if you were a Conservative horrified by the concept of a welfare state. 1922 has been called an *annus mirabilis* of High Modernism – but not if you think *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* are works of unintelligible trash. 1644-5 was an *annus mirabilis* in the English Civil War, thanks to a string of victories by James Graham, 1<sup>st</sup> Marquess of Montrose – but not if you were a Roundhead. Keats experienced his own *annus mirabilis* in 1819, Wordsworth and Coleridge in 1797 – but not if you hate the poetry of Keats, Wordsworth and Coleridge (such people do exist). The point is that *annus mirabilis* means different things to different people in different times, and Larkin's poem recognises this. That becomes clearer when the poem is read in relation to its most obvious citation, Dryden's 1667 poem of the same name, which charts the events of 1665-6, a year of maritime battles with the Dutch, plague, and the Great Fire of London. (Samuel Johnson thought Dryden had called this a year of miracles because it was a miracle London had survived.) In fact, Dryden's title was itself a citation, for propaganda purposes. In the years leading up to 1665-6, a series of pamphlets with *Annus Mirabilis* as their sub-title was published illicitly. These pamphlets – produced

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<sup>63</sup> Lennon and McCartney, 'Please Please Me', in *The Beatles Lyrics*, 23.

by dissenters and republicans smarting at the Restoration – fabricated a catalogue of fantastical accounts of omens (comets, the birth of monsters, etc.), which they explained as the judgement of a God horrified by the behaviour of the English people, which had allowed a Commonwealth to collapse and reinstated a morally-barren monarchy. The events which then took place – war, plague, and fire – could only strengthen this case. Various measures were taken to counter this narrative, one of the most effective being Dryden’s poem, which appropriates the pamphlets’ sub-title, and reframes the events as *trials*, not judgements, which the King and City of London officials had miraculously seen off with courage and ingenuity.<sup>64</sup> When Larkin cites Dryden’s title which is also a citation, he is (whether intentionally or not) drawing attention to the malleability of history, its vulnerability to competing treatments, constructions, and manipulations – a similar lesson to that of ‘An Arundel Tomb’. Interestingly, when Larkin first published this poem in a 1968 issue of *Cover*, it bore the title ‘History’. This title invites the expectation that the poem will philosophise on the nature of history; the change of title for inclusion in *High Windows* makes that philosophising more historically specific, at least when read with an awareness of Dryden’s propagandising under the same name.

And there is a further way in which the poem shows history to be as pliable as playdough, which is its rhyme scheme. Not only is it facile, as I have suggested, but also comically accidental, in the sense that ‘me’ and ‘LP’ only function as rhymes if paired with the year ‘sixty-three’. 1963 was not the year sexual intercourse began for Philip Larkin, but neither did it truly begin for Britain in a socio-cultural sense – this is another of the poem’s myths which is being mocked. As Sandbrook argues in his *Telegraph* article, ‘chaste’ and ‘conservative’ continued to be the rule in many Britons’ sex lives. Alternatively, for others, sex was already well and truly happening. The

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<sup>64</sup> My account of the historical context draws on the following essay by Edward N. Hooker: ‘The Purpose of Dryden’s “Annus Mirabilis”’, *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 10:1 (1946), 49-67.

Profumo affair, for instance, began with a sexual relationship between the Secretary of State for War and Christine Keeler two years earlier (although the scandal broke in our fateful year of 1963). But an equally ‘bad’ rhyme scheme could be shaped around 1961 in order to show that year’s significance, should one choose:

Sexual intercourse began  
In nineteen sixty-one  
(Though I was dead and gone) –  
A false statement to the House of Commons  
Nearly killed PM Macmillan.

And once one gets started on trying to date the moment when sex began, there is no obligation to stick to the 1960s, or even the twentieth century. What about Byron’s many conquests, for instance, which were well publicised in his day?

Sexual intercourse began  
In eighteen hundred and twelve  
(Though too late for me to delve) –  
When the voracious George, Lord Byron  
In Lady Caroline Lamb’s bed excelled.

Larkin himself played this game: in a letter to Thwaite, he wrote: ‘Still slaving away at Wells. “Sexual intercourse began In 1895, Before I was alive – ”’ (*SL*, 718). One could go on and on, writing more and more alternatives for different years (my versions might even improve), but here it must suffice to say that the 1963 start-date for sex in British

culture and society is no more or less true than 1961, or 1812, or any other year with some kind of copulative importance. Larkin's poem demonstrates the absurdity of cultural and historical myth-making and reductive narratives such as the one of 1963, and he does this across his wider *oeuvre* with an awareness of competing or alternative perspectives and experiences, including that of gender. Unlike the Sandbrook article, for example, Larkin's poem refuses to privilege one system or set of values over another. A textual examination of 'Annus Mirabilis' testifies once again to Larkin's depth and complexity, allowing a more radical and progressive poem to step out of the shadow of one which appears to be so straightforward and naïve.

### **Parodying misanthropy: 'Vers de Société'**

If 'Annus Mirabilis' is, in the eyes of many critics, Larkin's self-presentation as the grumpy old man born too early to enjoy sexual freedom, then 'Vers de Société' is his self-presentation as the grumpy old man who wants to be left alone. For Almond, it is a poem of 'shallow misanthropy'; for Booth, one of the poems of the early 1970s in which 'raw defensive anxiety drives the poet into increasingly histrionic projections of antisocial solitude' – the 'ageing Larkin comes closest to accepting defeat at the hands of society'.<sup>65</sup> Once again, the personal dominates: Motion argues that the poem 'encapsulates the beliefs which dominated the last third of [Larkin's] life as powerfully as "Dockery and Son" did those of his earlier career' – those 'beliefs' essentially being the usual solitude fetish which *Down Cemetery Road* and other media representations have trained critics to read into the poetry. In 'Vers de Société', Motion continues, Larkin 'implies but never openly admits, the terms of his own private life. It is an aged mother and the thought of marriage, just as much as it is the prospect of drinking

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<sup>65</sup> Almond, 189; Booth, *The Poet's Plight*, 167.

“washing sherry” and talking drivell, that threaten the time he would prefer to spend “under a lamp””.<sup>66</sup> Mothers and lovers are nowhere to be found in this poem; Motion’s reading is a product of the standard conflation of life and work which occurs again and again. Paulin thinks ‘Larkin rejects the time he’s spent in society’, whilst Hassan argues that ‘the fluctuation of the poet’s attitude towards life has resulted from the ceaseless hope and frustration brought about by time’.<sup>67</sup> Rossen’s analysis extends her characterisation of the Larkin of ‘Annus Mirabilis’ as a misogynist-without-conviction: he ‘often writes about the predicament of the man who cannot express himself [...] and uses it not only as a metaphor for pent-up rage but as a safety valve to relieve some of the pressure he feels’; as such, Larkin suffers from a ‘seething inner turmoil’, but he is ‘too constrained by politeness to tell Warlock-Williams his instinctive response’, since he is ‘primarily motivated by fear of retaliation’.<sup>68</sup> Again, it is Rossen’s understanding of the Larkin *persona* which leads her to read the *poems* as misanthropic and cowardly. Timms also aligns the poem with what he perceives to be the poet’s mindset: ‘The poem shows how constant Larkin’s themes have remained since 1946: disappointment in life, the pressures of society on the individual, the desire to escape those pressures together with the fear of the isolation such escape brings, the encroachment of time’.<sup>69</sup> And Petch agrees, explaining that ‘the fear is genuine, no matter how the sarcasm tries to cover it’.<sup>70</sup> In the accounts of persona poems such as this one, it is remarkable to note the ease with which critics decide which emotions and attitudes are ‘genuine’.

This obsession with life and art was evidenced earlier this year, when the archivist at St. Hugh’s College, Oxford came across a 1968 letter by Larkin to Rachel Trickett,

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<sup>66</sup> Motion, *A Writer’s Life*, 411.

<sup>67</sup> Paulin, ‘She Did Not Change’, 246; Hassan, 118.

<sup>68</sup> Rossen, 124-5.

<sup>69</sup> Timms, 124.

<sup>70</sup> Petch, 99.



formerly the college principal. Trickett had written to Larkin to suggest that he stand in the forthcoming Oxford Professor of Poetry election. Larkin replied that he was ‘deeply honoured’, but declined on the basis that ‘My idea of hell on earth (physical pain excepted, and I am not sure that it is excepted even in this case) is a literary party, and I have an uneasy feeling that the post carries with it a lot of sherry-drill with important people’.<sup>71</sup> Not surprisingly, the discovery of this letter prompted people to draw comparison with ‘Vers de Société’, including one Oxford don interviewed by the *Guardian*. This is a clear and very recent example of the blurring of art and life which is so typical of anything to do with Larkin. As Palmer has said,

‘Vers de Société’ is, on the surface, *exactly* the kind of poem to cite when looking to identify disillusionment or harshness in Larkin’s work. Moreover, those looking to dislike him point to what they see as the gratuitous self-congratulatory offensiveness of ‘crowd of craps’, ‘in a pig’s arse’ and ‘the drivell of some bitch / Who’s read nothing but *Which*’ in very much the same way as they deplore the infamous lines in ‘This Be the Verse’ [*sic*] and ‘High Windows’.<sup>72</sup>

Not for the first time, Palmer looks beyond the surface, not satisfied to simply read the poem as yet more ranting and raving by an ageing and increasingly bitter Larkin. In the end, however, his reading is not much different from those by Hassan, Petch, and others, even though he is careful to separate poet and narrator: ‘Vers de Société’ is ‘a

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<sup>71</sup> Quoted in Alison Flood, ‘Dread of literary parties led Philip Larkin to shun Oxford poetry professorship’, *Guardian*, 1 June 2015, at <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jun/01/philip-larkins-refusal-of-oxford-poetry-professor-nomination-discovered>>.

<sup>72</sup> Palmer, 118.

poem about a man who is no longer young and who finds solitude increasingly uncomfortable, even unmanageable. That isn't disillusion: that is *fear*', with 'a final dimension of *horror*'.<sup>73</sup> In effect, Palmer takes a different route to the same destination.

It is not that I particularly disagree with Palmer's analysis; as with many of the writings discussed in this study, the reading I wish to propose offers an alternative approach which does not necessarily supercede the dominant one – possible only because of Larkin's multi-layered depth and complexity. Osborne has discussed Larkin's poetry of deconstruction: his 'sceptical, undeluded poems are hungry for duality, doubt, paradox and contradiction; in short, for a type of dialectic between the *either* and the *or* that renders them both/and'.<sup>74</sup> In the case of 'Vers de Société', Osborne suggests that the curtailed sentence which ends the poem 'renders "Why, of course"' at once emphatic and ambiguous: of course, *what?*'<sup>75</sup> Consequently, the incomplete concluding sentence could be completed as "Dear Warlock-Williams: Why, of course I shan't be attending your wretched function!", or in more polite terms as "Dear Warlock-Williams: Why, of course I would love to attend your splendid function but, alas, I have a prior arrangement. And so Dear Warlock-Williams: I'm afraid –". Osborne admits that 'This may always be a secondary undercutting interpretation', but that 'such complications testify to the tenacity and invention with which Larkin's poems resist closure'.<sup>76</sup> In other words, it is a sign of Larkin's virtuosity that he is able to write a short poem which has, inscribed within itself, the possibility of two contrasting interpretations.

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>74</sup> Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, 105.

<sup>75</sup> Osborne, *Radical Larkin*, 198.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 200.

But Larkin's textual identities are even more versatile than that, and there is a third possible way to read 'Vers de Société', which I would like to put forward without in any way dismissing the perfectly valid and fruitful analyses by Palmer and Osborne. This involves the speculative repatriation of the poem within the literary context which its title evokes: *vers de société*, a sub-category of the light verse genre. As *vers de société* – at heart a satirical genre – there may be different levels of satire going on: and there is no good reason why Warlock-Williams and his crowd of craps should be *exclusively* targeted, when the poem *also* reads as a send-up of the misanthropic narrator. Most critics neglect the poem's title, the absence of discussion perhaps showing that they take for granted its irony. After all, if you believe that the narrator is Larkin, and that Larkin by this point is 'ageing', 'seething', and 'increasingly histrionic', then you are unlikely to think of him genially writing light verse on the topic of sherry parties. But the title deserves some interrogation. Timms is uncommon insofar as he explicitly rejects the poem's categorisation as *vers de société*: 'Despite its title, it is not light verse in the sense of being non-serious, though in parts it is bitchily funny'.<sup>77</sup> This statement equates seriousness with incompatibility as light verse, *despite* the acknowledged presence of humour. Osborne also dismisses the idea, confident that 'the opening is designed to disqualify the poem from that category and, therefore, to ironize the title and mock the mode'.<sup>78</sup>

Of course, there is reason behind the general reluctance to read this poem within the context of *vers de société*, not least because its lexicon ('craps', 'arse', 'bitch'), and its dark apprehensions of mortality ('The time is shorter now for company'), are not, primarily, associated with a genre which M. H. Abrams characterises as 'good-natured

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<sup>77</sup> Timms, 123.

<sup>78</sup> Osborne, *Radical Larkin*, 186.

satire' and 'badinage' (*TCP*, 91).<sup>79</sup> But the idea that *vers de société*, or the wider light verse genre, has not historically extended to obscene or dark work is a false one. If we refuse Larkin's poem admission to the *vers de société* club, then we shall have to boot out Byron's *Don Juan*, for instance, and various poems by Swift. The *vers de société* produced by these two poets make Larkin's effort comparable, not anomalous. W. H. Auden and Kingsley Amis, both editors of an *Oxford Book of Light Verse* each, can confirm this. In their introductions, Auden and Amis commit themselves to showing that 'Light verse can be serious', as the former puts it before going on to historicise the reasons for its frivolous reputation: 'It has only come to mean *vers de société*, triolets, smoke-room limericks, because, under the social conditions which produced the Romantic Revival, [...] it has been only in trivial matters that poets have felt in sufficient intimacy with their audience to be able to forget themselves and their singing-ropes'.<sup>80</sup> Amis, too, is at pains to demonstrate light verse's capacity for seriousness. His anthology includes seven poems by Larkin, all of which contain, to varying extents, serious and/or sombre themes.<sup>81</sup> As he compiled the book, Amis explained: 'I know, by the way, that not many of [them] would fit into *Punch*, say, but in my book ha-ha entertaining verse, whatever else it might be doing besides entertain, even if that includes giving the reader a nasty jab here and there is light'.<sup>82</sup> He re-states this position in his introduction: 'all light art is likely to deliver, now and then, a jolt to the gentler

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<sup>79</sup> M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 7<sup>th</sup> edition (Boston: Heinle and Heinle, 1999) 140.

<sup>80</sup> W. H. Auden, ed. and introd., *The Oxford Book of Light Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952) ix-x.

<sup>81</sup> The seven poems are: 'Fiction and the Reading Public', 'Toads', 'Toads Revisited', 'I Remember, I Remember', 'Self's the Man', 'A Study of Reading Habits', and 'Annus Mirabilis'.

<sup>82</sup> Amis, *Letters*, 798.

emotions, the more telling for its unexpectedness'.<sup>83</sup> He also quotes, with approval, A. A. Milne's view:

Light verse [...] is not the relaxation of a major poet in the intervals of writing an epic; it is not the kindly contribution of a minor poet to a little girl's album; it is not Cowper amusing (and how easily) Lady Austin, not Southey splashing about, to his own great content, in the waters of Lodore. It is a precise art which has only been taken seriously, and thus qualified as art, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>84</sup>

Precisely because light verse deals with topics lightly, it has a serious purpose – whether that is to mock the solemnity of other poets and poems, or to expose the foibles and hypocrisies of society. So whilst it is true that Larkin's poem contains obscene language and broods on morbid themes, these aspects should not immediately cause us to dismiss its categorisation as light verse. If Larkin's 'Vers de Société' is not what it says on the tin, then nor is Swift's black comedy of economics, 'A new Song of Wood's Halfpence' ('The soldier is ruin'd, poor man, by his pay'); nor the grotesque eroticism of *Don Juan* ('He was a bachelor, which is a matter / Of import both to virgin and to bride, / The former's hymeneal hopes to flatter'); nor the misogyny of Anthony Hecht's 'The Dover Bitch' ('We have a drink / And I give her a good time') – all poems and excerpts which can be found in the Auden and Amis anthologies.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Kingsley Amis, ed. and introd., *The New Oxford Book of Light Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) ix.

<sup>84</sup> Quoted in Amis (ed.), *Light Verse*, vi.

<sup>85</sup> Jonathan Swift, 'A new Song of Wood's Halfpence', and Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, in Auden (ed.), 216-9, 342-57; Anthony Hecht, 'The Dover Bitch', in Amis (ed.), *Light Verse*, 314-5.

This is not to say that Larkin's poem unproblematically inherits and inhabits the genre, either. In fact, the poem's obscenity functions as a subversion of the social elitism of traditional *vers de société*. A potential forerunner of Larkin's poem could be Oliver Goldsmith's 'Verses in Reply to an Invitation to Dinner' – the reply being a definitive *no*: 'Your mandate I got, / You may all go to pot'.<sup>86</sup> (Larkin was familiar with Goldsmith's work, not least because Monica Jones was a fan.) Goldsmith's poem is representative of a genre in which poems were usually written for and about the poet's own social circle, and distributed amongst friends or performed in salons, coffee-houses, private functions, and so on. Within this context of familiarity, the poet aims to amuse and entertain, not to offend; his misanthropy is feigned – a form of the 'badinage' which Abrams mentions. Writing for an audience which was both limited and familiar, the poet can be sure his intentions will be understood by those listening or reading.

From another perspective, however, this can look very much like the Establishment is pleasuring itself – that is to say, Establishment poets *pretending* to take on the Establishment, but in the process actually continuing to be flawlessly Establishment. The genre is, as Rhian Williams explains, 'associated with the graces and mores of so-called polite society in particular, making it both a description of and entertainment for the educated classes'; it also sees its 'technical brilliance' as reflective 'of its society's elegance'.<sup>87</sup> In political terms this does not just result in an art which is elitist, but also self-serving and self-congratulatory. There is nothing subversive about high society writing and laughing about itself. The Goldsmith poem is a good example: after the

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<sup>86</sup> Oliver Goldsmith, 'Verses in Reply to an Invitation to Dinner', in *The Poems of Oliver Goldsmith*, ed. Austin Dobson (London: J. M. Dent, 1898) 149-51.

<sup>87</sup> Rhian Williams, *The Poetry Toolkit: The Essential Guide to Studying Poetry*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) 63-4.

initial jolt of ‘You may all go to pot’, the poem is nothing more than an in-joke in verse designed to tickle a small and exclusive crowd of friends which included Sir Joshua Reynolds, first president of the Royal Academy of Arts. Larkin’s poem, on the other hand, does not worry about offending his social equivalent, the chattering and sherry-swilling middle-class of the 1970s. With its coarse language and its pot-shots at pretension, ‘Vers de Société’ undermines its generic origins by wounding, instead of fawningly pretending to wound. In this sense, its title *is* ironic: this is society verse which suffers no society fools, which is undeceived about some of society’s pretensions and their self-serving functions. Larkin’s poem, for instance, poses the question of whether being social is really just being selfish, a way to ‘have people [be] nice to you’, so that ‘these routines’ are like ‘Playing at goodness, like going to church’. In this way, the poem sabotages traditional *vers de société*, not only in its intention to hurt, but also in its use of a coarse lexicon decidedly excluded from the genre for reasons of propriety and class – a democratisation at the levels of language, subject, and audience.

But when critics give short shrift to the poem’s title, focusing on issues of age, death, and misanthropy, they neglect the formal and linguistic devices which do mimic traditional *vers de société* – and in doing so, neglect the possibility of a different object of satire. Opening with the narrator’s sardonic re-phrasing of a party invitation, packaged in iambic pentameter, the narrator abruptly responds – though only provisionally – with ‘In a pig’s arse, friend’. This retort splits the line’s third iambic foot down the middle (‘*us?*’ is unstressed, ‘In’ stressed), so that the division of the metrical foot replicates the sudden linguistic difference between the polite invitation and the impolite (to put it mildly) rejoinder. The resulting cretic (‘*pig’s arse, friend*’ – my emphases) is therefore vicious in its register and its intonation. It also reads like a twentieth-century version of Goldsmith’s eighteenth-century retort, ‘You may all go to

pot'. The host is 'Warlock-Williams', a name which situates the poem within the territory of caricature. Definitions of 'warlock' in the *OED* include 'a wicked person', 'scoundrel', 'a general term of reproach or abuse', 'The Devil; Satan', 'a savage or monstrous creature', and 'the male counterpart of witch'.<sup>88</sup> Either Warlock-Williams is the scourge of humanity, or our narrator is being deliberately extreme in order to entertain us. The addition of 'Williams' makes the name double-barrelled, and thus a signifier of social pretence; he is a figure from the social world which Jim Dixon despises but temporarily tries to please (usually by accepting unwelcome invitations) in Amis's *Lucky Jim*. Already, these features should tell us the poem is comedic, almost cartoon-like, and consequently pretty difficult to take too seriously.

The extreme and grotesque humour continues in the second stanza, when the narrator imagines him/herself at such a party, 'Holding a glass of washing-sherry, canted / Over to catch the drivel of some bitch / Who's read nothing but *Which*'. Although I am reluctant to explain a joke, it should be noted that this *is* very funny indeed. 'Washing-sherry', a phrase borrowed from Dylan Thomas, reinforces the idea of the host's misguided pretensions: either he keeps back the good stuff from his crowd of craps, thinking it (and himself) too good, or, *worse*, he cannot tell a good sherry from a bad one. How vulgar. The verb 'canted' puns on the noun 'cant', which Byron uses in Canto I of his *vers de société*, *Don Juan* (where the gazettes are said to be cloyed with 'cant').<sup>89</sup> Pairing the obscenity 'bitch' with a rhyming partner as banal as '*Which*' (i.e. a consumer magazine) is hilarious, and truly one of the poem's *pièces de résistance*. As Milne implies in his phrase 'a precise art', this is a genre which places great importance

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<sup>88</sup> 'warlock, n.1', *OED Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, June 2015), at <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/225756?rskey=MIU0Zv&result=1&isAdvanced=false>>.

<sup>89</sup> Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, in *The Major Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 373.



on formal and technical excellence. A rhyme *seemingly* forced into existence by the demands of a simple scheme, for instance, can have a devastating effect – consider the following effort by Byron: ‘And Coleridge, too, has lately taken wing, / But, like a hawk encumbr’d with his hood, / Explaining metaphysics to the nation – / I wish he would explain his Explanation’.<sup>90</sup> If anything, formal and technical skills become even more valued than in serious poetry: ‘The expectations of the audience are different in the two cases’, writes Amis; ‘A concert pianist is allowed a wrong note here and there; a juggler is not allowed to drop a plate’.<sup>91</sup> If Larkin’s poem does cause offence to some, as Palmer suggests, then so be it: the image of the narrator catching ‘drivel’ with a sherry glass is just too grotesque, too cartoonish, to be taken seriously, and as Amis says, the ‘chief weapon’ of light verse is ‘impropriety’.<sup>92</sup>

The other *pièce de résistance* comes right at the end as the poem swoops round in a circle, taking the end of stanza one, ‘Dear Warlock-Williams: I’m afraid –’, and re-writing it as ‘Dear Warlock-Williams: Why, of course –’. It seems our narrator, for all his/her viciousness and philosophising on the social and solitary selves, will respond with a cowardly *yes* (if we privilege this interpretive option over the alternatives suggested by Osborne). In the context of the narrator’s loss of nerve, ‘Remorse’ and ‘of course’ is a superb rhyme, lacking the obscenity of ‘bitch’/‘Which’, but no less amusing. The darkening of the poem’s themes and language between the first and last stanzas is precisely what leads many critics to dismiss the appropriateness of its title, but this can also have the effect of intensifying the comedy: when the poem suddenly restores a light tone in the final line, the effect is *even more comical* than it would have been, precisely because the intervening stanzas have depressed so much (‘the more

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 378.

<sup>91</sup> Amis (ed.), *Light Verse*, viii.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., viii.

telling for its unexpectedness' – Amis).<sup>93</sup> Although Timms does not interpret it in this way, his description of the narrator's 'impotent bravado' is a good one.<sup>94</sup> But 'impotent bravado' is *funny*. After four stanzas of ruthless protest against the social engagement, our narrator starts to write the note that will confirm his/her attendance. S/he looks ridiculous. This is enacted on a minute level, with the shift from pentameters to a possible alexandrine in the final line, so that, metrically, the poem achieves closure (à la Dryden), but the closure is at the expense of its narrator, whose loss of nerve is embarrassingly conspicuous.

In this, the poem parodies the narrator as much as it shows the narrator parodying the crowd of craps. As Osborne has pointed out, 'to be included on the same invitation list as "a crowd of craps" can only signify that in the eyes of Warlock-Williams one is another such'.<sup>95</sup> In considering himself so superior, but not having the guts to make this clear, the narrator is as guilty of social pretension as Warlock-Williams and all the other craps; this feature of the poem qualifies it for *vers de société* status. In adding this new and self-reflexive layer of satire, Larkin's poem moves much closer to the 'playful' mode of 'badinage' described by Abrams.<sup>96</sup> In fact, it might even be said that this witty parody *of* the narrator unpicks the severe parody *by* the narrator.

Citing Charles Dibdin's view that light verse aims to 'raise a good-natured smile', Amis goes on to argue that 'The smile need not come as a response to the comic; it may acknowledge one of several sorts of outrageousness, a parodist's exact catching of his original's tone of voice, a stroke of metrical ingenuity, etc.' – and to this we might add 'a parodist's exact catching' of their narrator's preposterousness.<sup>97</sup> This, too, can raise

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., ix.

<sup>94</sup> Timms, 124.

<sup>95</sup> Osborne, *Radical Larkin*, 190.

<sup>96</sup> Abrams, 140.

<sup>97</sup> Amis (ed.), *Light Verse*, xiii.

‘a good-natured smile’, and if it does, what we are responding to is light verse. This is another example of how a reader may reject biographical knowledge, or simply not possess it in the first place, and produce a distinct and unorthodox reading of a poem which still functions in a valid, meaningful, and entertaining way. This does not require readers to quarrel about whether or not Larkin was a misanthrope. It is simply a shifting of emphasis *within the text*, from seriousness to humour, and from irony to satire, aided only by the poem’s literary context and devices, which unveil a further layer of parody.

Indeed, ‘Vers de Société’ would not be the first Larkin poem to parody or challenge its own narrator or narrative: in ‘Naturally the Foundation will Bear Your Expenses’, for instance, the narrator sneers at ‘Crowds, colourless and careworn’, but there is much in the text that invites readers to sneer at him/her (*TCP*, 52). This chapter has already discussed the insincerity of ‘Annus Mirabilis’, and the following chapter similarly challenges the surface misanthropy in ‘Livings’. These poems are testament to the complexity of Larkin’s work, and the diversity and alterity of his many textual identities, which can be this, or that, or both. The reading offered here does not necessarily cancel the dominant reading, or the alternatives suggested by Osborne – indeed, like Osborne’s, it may have to content itself with ‘always [being] a secondary undercutting interpretation’.<sup>98</sup> But it is present as *one* potential interpretation nonetheless, and shows the multi-layered depth of Larkin’s poems – even when they *seem* to be expressions of his personality. ‘Vers de Société’ can be read as a misanthropic vandalism of its genre, or it can be read as a parody of misanthropy in a manner that is largely consistent with the genre; by containing both options within itself, it shows Larkin’s textual identities to be sundry and slippery.

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<sup>98</sup> Osborne, *Radical Larkin*, 200.

## Larkin's Impersonal Poems

Larkin's 'impersonal poems' tend to provoke the most critical confusion, or simply the least interest. These are poems without a first-person narrator, or with an invisible first-person narrator, or with a first-person narrator who is definitively *not* Larkin or the Larkin persona. Without the vivid Larkin persona to hook onto, it becomes harder for critics to relate the work to the life. In this final chapter, I want to subject three such impersonal poems – 'Here', 'Livings' (actually a triptych of poems), and 'The Explosion' – to a focused and in-depth textual examination in order to drive home the diversity of the poetic identities Larkin constructs and explores in his mature verse. Cutting through the common perception of an intensely personal poetics, Clive James has gestured to precisely this aspect of Larkin's artistry:

Pushkin said that everything was on his agenda, even the disasters. Larkin knew about himself. In private hours of anguish, he commiserated with himself. But he was an artist, and that meant he was everyone; and what made him a genius was the effort and resource he brought to bear in order to meet his superior responsibility.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter seeks to explicate that 'effort and resource', in order to substantiate James's claim that Larkin's writings attend to a 'responsibility' far wider than critics

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<sup>1</sup> James, 34.

tend to acknowledge. Freed from the biographical impulse (although not completely, as we shall see), textual scholarship allows us to read these impersonal poems as exercises in the construction and inhabiting of identities even more various than those of Larkin's correspondences or the persona poems.

### **Surreal Pastoral: 'Here'**

'Livings' and 'The Explosion' are poems explicitly about other people, whether miners, or lighthouse-keepers, or university dons. 'Here' is the odd one out, insofar as the identity produced by the poem is one of *place*, rather than person. Nonetheless, it provides a useful way in to this chapter's discussion of Larkin's textual identities, given that it constructs a local identity by *textual* means – the opposite of the model implied by *Down Cemetery Road*, which sees Larkin as *expressive* of place. Often said to be a poem about Hull and Holderness, critics have done their best to make the impersonal personal, finding ways to make the poem somehow speak to the life. In fact, 'Here' provides a classic example of Larkin scholars trying to have their cake and eat it. On the one hand, the poem is described as a celebration and manifestation of Larkin's Englishness, his connection to the English soil and community. Seamus Heaney finds the final stanza redolent of the conclusion to Joyce's 'The Dead' – 'and indeed', he writes, '*Dubliners* is a book very close to the spirit of Larkin whose collected work would fit happily under the title *Englanders*'.<sup>2</sup> For Heaney, 'Here' is one of a number of poems which

spring from the deepest strata of Larkin's poetic self, and they are concerned with another kind of mood that pervades his work and which could be called

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<sup>2</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'The Main of Light', in *Philip Larkin*, New Casebooks, ed. Stephen Regan (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997) 27.

Elysian [...]. To borrow Geoffrey Hill's borrowing from Coleridge, these are visions of the 'spiritual, Platonic old England', the light in them honeyed by attachment to a dream world that will not be denied because it is at the foundation of the poet's sensibility.<sup>3</sup>

Heaney's 'spring' trope is significant: the poems flow from the self, they do not construct the self – and it is a self which is fundamentally English. (The trope is consistent with Heaney's own practice as a lyric poet – 'poetry as revelation of the self to the self' – but his mistake is to assume that Larkin's practice is the same.)<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Rossen cites 'Here' as one of several poems which confirms the 'view of Larkin as spokesman for England'.<sup>5</sup> In this vein, critics have zoned in on the poem's specific locus, finding, in Motion's phrase, 'Such rapt identification with a place, such sensuous identification of its values'.<sup>6</sup>

However, in *Down Cemetery Road*, 'Here' was one of seven poems chosen to portray (*inter alia*) Larkin the solitude-loving misanthrope (the film opens with 'Here' and closes with 'Wants'). In this sense, the poem was used as evidence of Larkin's anti-social personality. Despite co-opting the poem for Larkin's England spokespersonship, Rossen remarks that 'Hull possesses the virtues of protective and beneficial isolation, and it becomes a refuge within the larger island of England. [...] [In] line with the great value Larkin put upon solitude, he put the highest value upon absolute, unattainable emptiness'.<sup>7</sup> Her argument, typical of the consensus on this poem, simultaneously sees

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>4</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'Feeling into Words', in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980) 41.

<sup>5</sup> Rossen, 49-50.

<sup>6</sup> Motion, *A Writer's Life*, 250.

<sup>7</sup> Rossen, 55.

Larkin as a representative of England and Englishness who seeks refuge from all the pesky Englanders he so dislikes. In other words, however contradictorily, this poem without a personality is made to relate to these two supposed facts of Larkin's personality. Rowe goes further, arguing that 'the illusion' of 'pure consciousness' created by the poem's ending reflects Larkin's desire to escape his 'overwhelming dread' of death.<sup>8</sup> Such readings are understandable when placed alongside Larkin's many comments linking Hull with solitude, as well as more general comments about his poetry, such as this one in the *Observer* interview: 'The poet is really engaged in recreating the familiar, he's not committed to introducing the unfamiliar' (*RW*, 55).<sup>9</sup> It is immensely easy to read 'Here' as a straightforward reconstruction of a place with which Larkin was very familiar, having lived there – another example of the life-into-art approach.

However, Sam Perry has persuasively argued that 'one of the most illuminating ways of approaching the poetry of Philip Larkin is through the philosophy and art of the Surrealists', finding in poems like 'Essential Beauty' 'Surrealist tones and techniques' which 'defamiliarize even the most seemingly insignificant occurrences of everyday life, inviting his readers to see the world in a radical new light'.<sup>10</sup> This is the opposite of life-into-art: a consciously artistic defamiliarisation of all that appears normal and

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<sup>8</sup> Rowe, *Art and Self*, 43.

<sup>9</sup> On the connection between Hull and solitude, see, for instance, Larkin's comments in *Down Cemetery Road*: 'it suits me in many ways, it is a little on the edge of things'; his Foreword to *A Rumoured City*: 'Hull [has] the air of having its face half-turned towards distance and silence, and what lies beyond them' – *A Rumoured City: New Poets from Hull*, ed. Douglas Dunn (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1982) 9; and his remark in the *Observer* interview: 'I love all the Americans getting on to the train at King's Cross and thinking they're going to come and bother me, and then looking at the connections [to Hull] and deciding they'll go to Newcastle and bother Basil Bunting instead. Makes it harder for people to get at you' (*RW*, 54).

<sup>10</sup> Sam Perry, "'Only in dreams": Philip Larkin and Surrealism', *English*, 59:224 (January 2010), 95.

ordinary. Perhaps this is what Larkin meant by ‘recreating the familiar’ (my emphasis). Perry’s argument informs my own reading of ‘Here’, which may be read as a kind of Surrealist pastoral poem, one which reminds us that a place’s identity exists *only* on the page, having been constructed, not expressed, by the poem itself. The clue is in Larkin’s use of a deictic for the title: our understanding of the word ‘Here’ depends entirely upon the context of time and place. More details are required before we can know where exactly ‘Here’ is. Whether or not critics are willing to acknowledge that the poem never names its setting as Hull and Holderness, most agree that its accumulation of detail forms a recognisable image of that region; David Lodge, for example, finds Larkin using a novelist’s ‘synecdochic detail’ to ‘evoke’ Hull.<sup>11</sup> But in its syntax and imagery, the poem resists orientation. If the deictic title requires further context before it can properly signify, we do not get it; the poem opens ‘Swerving east’, but ‘east’ here is merely a direction, not a point of arrival (*TCP*, 49). Moreover, this verb (if Larkin is using it in verb form) is not attached to a subject – who, or what, is ‘Swerving east’? Further disorientation is caused by the fact that it takes nine lines to reach a main verb (‘Gathers’), and twenty-five lines to reach the end of the grammatical sentence (‘where removed lives / Loneliness clarifies.’). If the sheer length of this sentence leaves the reader breathless, this is only compounded by the high level of assonance and consonance, with breathy rhymes (‘shadows’ and ‘meadows’), nasal consonants (‘all night north’), dental consonants (‘Too thin and thistled’), aspirants (‘harsh-named halt’), sibilance (‘swerving to solitude / Of skies and scarecrows’), and so on – ‘frightful to read aloud’, as Larkin himself put it (*FR*, 59).

These few examples are taken only from the first stanza, but the strategy is continued extensively throughout, making it just as difficult to read the poem as it is to situate it

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<sup>11</sup> David Lodge, ‘Philip Larkin: The Metonymic Muse’, in *Philip Larkin*, ed. Regan, 75-6.



geographically. Where exactly are we, by the time that first full stop arrives? Critics find plenty of evidence to support the claim that this is Hull and Holderness, and it should be said that this region *is* indeed discernible. However, two points should be made about the second stanza. Firstly, the watery-urban description works just as well for Grimsby (across the Humber), or even Birmingham, with its canals.<sup>12</sup> More significantly, the poem appears to take a Surrealist turn at this point. In the stanza's first line, the ninth of the poem, all that previously accumulated detail 'Gathers to the surprise of a large town'. Surprise? This is a key element in Surrealist theory and practice, and although there is nothing obviously extraordinary about an urban panorama of 'domes and statues, spires and cranes', the description of them clustering personifies them, giving them a life-like presence, as though they are watching over the townscape. Other descriptions appear as slightly unreal, or *surreal*: 'grain-scattered streets' in a town? This looks like the town and the country have been yoked together – incongruous juxtaposition being a favourite Surrealist technique.<sup>13</sup> And there is something cartoon-like, even grotesque, about 'residents from raw estates, brought down / The dead straight miles by stealing flat-faced trolleys', the latter image itself a defamiliarisation of a very ordinary urban sight, trams (which 'steal' because they are so

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<sup>12</sup> On a related note, the American scholar Lolette Kuby believed the train in 'The Whitsun Weddings' set off from Lincolnshire; see *An Uncommon Poet for the Common Man: A Study of Philip Larkin's Poetry* (The Hague: Mouton, 1974) 122. Although the poem does not name its place of departure (despite most critics' conviction that it is Hull), this demonstrates well how non-native readers of Larkin do not instantly acquire the same ideas about place as so many native readers do. In terms of 'Here', the only detail which might confirm that the city described is Hull is the 'slave museum' – since at the time of composition, Hull was the only place in the UK to have one. But this requires an awful lot of local knowledge – do we really think the poem can only signify to its full potential if readers know this?

<sup>13</sup> André Breton, for instance, in his 1924 *Manifesto of Surrealism*, quotes with great interest these words by Pierre Reverdy: 'The more the relationship between the two juxtaposed realities is distant and true, the stronger the image will be – the greater its emotional power and poetic reality...'; quoted in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, transl. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972) 20.

quiet). Stan Smith catches the strangeness of the supposed realism when he calls Larkin's descriptions 'pseudo-specificities'.<sup>14</sup> Read closely, the language here gestures at the darker side of urban life: 'raw' is most often used in the context of uncooked food, particularly meat; the miles of road are not straight but '*dead* straight' (my emphasis); and 'stealing' can mean thieving as well as moving surreptitiously. Indeed, the description of people being 'brought down' in 'flat-faced trolleys' might even bring to mind the funeral cortege. And there is a moment of surreal comedy at the textual level: the image of crowds 'stealing flat-faced trolleys' and 'Push[ing] through plate-glass swing doors' faintly evokes an image of them smashing their trolleys through the glass to get at 'their desires'. This may only be a latent interpretation of the lines, but it is one which the text itself produces. Perhaps moments like this explain why Craig Raine and Christopher Reid – the two most accomplished Martian poets of the 1970s and '80s – have been so influenced by Larkin.

Indeed, part of the poem's strangeness is that the imagery can be both celebratory and grimly ominous; the presence of conflicting emotions is not out of keeping with Surrealist art. In this sense, the poem is very much like some of Dalí's paintings, which simultaneously celebrate the recognisable landscapes of his native Catalonia *and* create dark and weird landscapes of the (unconscious) mind – such as *The Persistence of Memory* (1931). There is further Surrealist significance in that image of residents pushing 'through plate-glass swing doors to their desires': as Perry points out, the 'illusory power of desire' is an abiding theme in work by Larkin and the Surrealists.<sup>15</sup> The fixation with 'Electric mixers, toasters, washers, driers' elevates these everyday objects to the ethereal realm of poetry, giving them a strange aura which again mimics a

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<sup>14</sup> Stan Smith, 'Margins of Tolerance: Responses to Post-war Decline', in *Philip Larkin*, ed. Regan, 182.

<sup>15</sup> Perry, 96.

number of Surrealist artworks involving objects, machines, and mechanisation.<sup>16</sup> The third stanza contains more surreal images: ‘Tattoo shops, consulates, grim head-scarfed wives’. This line is not just caricature-like, but also continues the Surrealist project of yoking together unlike things: ‘Tattoo shops’ do not go hand in hand with ‘consulates’. In his own (less continental) way, this is what Larkin does with the imagery of ‘Here’. A few lines back, the poem describes:

A cut-price crowd, urban yet simple, dwelling  
Where only salesmen and relations come  
Within a terminate and fishy-smelling  
Pastoral of ships up streets [...].

At this point, the poem begins to make more sense if read through the lens of ‘Pastoral’, a longstanding poetic genre which constructs for its readers an Arcadia into which they can escape. Retrospectively, we can see Larkin doing just this: with the traffic heading north, the poem instead swerves east. Like the Arcadia of Virgil’s *Eclogues*, the space towards which the poem swerves is cut off, distancing being a necessary feature of the pastoral genre. The landscape, with its ‘haystacks, hares and pheasants’, and the ‘piled *gold* clouds, the *shining* gull-marked mud’ (my emphases), is the golden one which writers of the pastoral seek to create. Although Leo Marx has written ‘no shepherd, no pastoral’, this landscape does have its own labourers, in the contemporary form of

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<sup>16</sup> For instance, the following simile in an 1869 novel by Comte de Lautréamont became doctrinal for Surrealist artists: ‘He is fair ... as the chance meeting on a dissecting-table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella!’; see *Les Chants de Maldoror*, transl. Alexis Lykiard (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1972) 177.

‘Workmen at dawn’.<sup>17</sup> Reading ‘Here’ as pastoral also helps to explain that almost excessive use of assonance and consonance, at odds with Larkin’s usually effortless-seeming verbal craftsmanship. Since its origins, in Theocritus’s *Idylls*, the pastoral has been the product of a self-conscious artistry. As Terry Gifford argues,

When we joke about Cretan shepherds today believing that they live in Arcadia, we are referring to the myth of the literary construct. When we say that, actually, it is like Arcadia, we are speaking metaphorically. It is essential to pastoral that the reader is conscious of this construct so that she or he can see what the writer is doing within the device. [...] The reader recognises that the country in a pastoral text is an Arcadia because the language is idealised. In other words, pastoral is a discourse, a way of using language that constructs a different kind of world from that of realism.<sup>18</sup>

Such a phenomenon can be seen at work in Marlowe’s ‘The Passionate Shepheard to his Love’:

And I will make thee beds of Roses  
And a thousand fragrant poesies,  
A cap of flowers, and a kirtle  
Imbroydred all with leaves of Mirtle.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Leo Marx, ‘Pastoralism in America’, in *Ideology and Classic American Literature*, eds. Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 45.

<sup>18</sup> Terry Gifford, *Pastoral*, *The New Critical Idiom* (London: Routledge, 1999) 22, 45.

<sup>19</sup> Christopher Marlowe, ‘The Passionate Shepheard to his Love’, in *The Penguin Book of English Verse*, ed. Paul Keegan (London: Penguin, 2004) 174.

The emphasis on making and on beauty refers to the poet's craft; in writing *Arcadia*, he is self-consciously creating 'fragrant poesies' which have no basis in reality. This makes the overt poeticisms of Larkin's language in 'Here' ('swerving to solitude / Of skies and scarecrows' etc.) consistent with the pastoral's emphasis on its own poetic, synthetic nature.

The movement between the town and the country which 'Here' enacts is also consistent with the pastoral genre. Gifford reminds us that the retreat-return structure is one of pastoral's defining features. The 'return' may be to the city, to reality, or it may be that the text yields a 'return' of insight (on contemporary socio-political issues, for example).<sup>20</sup> In 'Here', there is no return to the town. The only possible insight which the poem might return is the idea that the place is an unreality, insofar as it exists *only* on the page, and not out there in the 'real world'. It is surely significant that Larkin describes the locus as a 'fishy-smelling / Pastoral'. This could easily be explained by the fact of Hull's fishing industry, which thrived throughout the 1950s and 1960s – but, metaphorically speaking, something 'fishy-smelling' is something not quite right. Accordingly, although the poem mimics a number of pastoral conventions, it is not completely faithful to them either: Ingelbien has perceptively commented that 'The landscape of "Here" stands in revealing contrast to those of classic English nature poems, Edward Thomas's "Adlestrop" in particular' – after all, the fields are 'Too thin and thistled to be called meadows'.<sup>21</sup> We have already seen the influence of 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' upon 'An Arundel Tomb'; the otherworldly quality of Larkin's descriptions in 'Here' is redolent of what Keats called 'Cold Pastoral!'<sup>22</sup> The 'cut-price

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<sup>20</sup> Gifford, 82.

<sup>21</sup> Ingelbien, 205.

<sup>22</sup> Keats, 288-9.

crowd' and 'salesmen and relations' of Larkin's poem are like Keats's 'Fair youth' and 'Bold Lover', trapped in a two-dimensional world of stillness and silence.

Having passed over the town, 'Here' then swerves towards 'Isolate villages, where removed lives / Loneliness clarifies'. Another practical difficulty of reading presents itself here: we can only know that 'lives' is meant as a noun, and not a verb, because it rhymes with 'wives' – a feature which (like the eye-rhyme in 'An Arundel Tomb') draws attention to the poem's verbal artificiality, its ineluctable textuality.<sup>23</sup> At this stage, the imagery and syntax become incredibly complex, almost to the detriment of sense:

Here silence stands

Like heat. Here leaves unnoticed thicken,  
Hidden weeds flower, neglected waters quicken,  
Luminously-peopled air ascends;  
And past the poppies bluish neutral distance  
Ends the land suddenly beyond a beach  
Of shapes and shingle. Here is unfenced existence:  
Facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach.

How exactly might silence *stand*? Does the accompanying simile – 'Like heat' – help us to make more sense of the image? What does 'Luminously-peopled air ascends' mean? Most pressing of all, where is 'Here'? How does 'bluish neutral distance' fit into the sentence, grammatically speaking?

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<sup>23</sup> Of course, if it were a verb, the line would make no sense – but this is no help to a first-time reader trying to negotiate a grammatically complex poem; a rhyme which is visible on the page at least gives them a fighting chance.

That overtly poetic line, ‘Luminously-peopled air ascends’, comes from ‘the peopled air’ of Gray’s ‘Ode on the Spring’, showing how constructions of place are also intertextually mediated.<sup>24</sup> Could the ‘poppies’, then, be a reference to the escapism of Georgian pastoral poetry? As Gifford notes, the Georgians’ version of pastoral helped give the genre its pejorative connotations: ‘Following the horrors of the First World War, these poets sought refuge in rural images that did not disturb a sense of comfortable reassurance. They only wanted time, as W. H. Davies put it, to “stand and stare” from a gate, their minds largely disengaged’.<sup>25</sup> If the poem contrasts with classic English nature poetry, as Ingelbien has said, it also challenges the Georgian ‘therapy of retreat’: Larkin (literally) allows no space to stand and stare, for ‘past the poppies [...] Ends the land suddenly beyond a beach / Of shapes and shingle’.<sup>26</sup> The syntactical inversion of ‘Ends the land’, which sees the subject appear *after* the verb, emphasises the sudden ending of the land more starkly, and in doing so provides another instance of the poem’s awareness of its own textuality. When the poem uses the word ‘Here’ for the fifth time – ‘Here is unfenced existence’ – it is difficult now not to read the word in the abstract: ‘Here’ is not Hull, Holderness, or Spurn Point, but *here* – right now, on the page, in this moment. ‘Here’ is also ‘Facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach’. The first clause of that line might remind us of the ‘sun-comprehending glass’ in ‘High Windows’ – impossible to visualise, since to look into the sun is to be dazzled and blinded (*TCP*, 80). The description of ‘unfenced existence’ as ‘untalkative’ continues the Keatsian theme of intractable silence, showing its inaccessibility, and this is reinforced when the poem ends on a cretic, ‘out of reach’, with its metrical finality.

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<sup>24</sup> Thomas Gray, ‘Ode on the Spring’, in *The Complete English Poems of Thomas Gray*, ed. James Reeves (London: Heinemann, 1973) 47-8.

<sup>25</sup> Gifford, 71.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

One of the reasons why ‘Here’ is ‘out of reach’ is that, as a verbal construct, the place no longer exists once the poem is over, or rather exists only in the imagination. This is reaffirmed by the fact that the next poem in *The Whitsun Weddings*, ‘Mr Bleaney’, opens with another deictic: “‘*This* was Mr Bleaney’s room [...]’” (my emphasis) (*TCP*, 50). The ‘here’ is completely different, and the ‘Here’ constructed linguistically by the poem on the previous two pages has passed into an elsewhere. ‘Here’ is only where the words on the page exist. It is a highly artistic and textual construction of a place and a place’s identity. Far from expressing ‘rapt identification’ (Motion) with an actual place, the poem has created one. The identity of that place is constituted by the act of writing, not expressed within it. The existence of ‘Here’ – unlike the existence of Hull, or Holderness, or Timbuktu – remains ‘out of reach’. Readers who view the poem as expressive of either Larkin’s Englishness or his misanthropy miss the point, because ‘Here’ is a fabrication. With its Surrealist imagery and its grammatical, syntactical, and formal intricacies, it complicates and disorients our sense of place and identity by textual means.

### **Against solitude: ‘Livings’**

While most critics feel they have the measure of ‘Here’ – as a poem about Larkin’s Hull and Holderness – the triptych of poems called ‘Livings’ has openly baffled many. These poems are not impersonal in the sense of lacking a first-person narrator – there are three – but rather because each narrator is definitively *not* Larkin, or the Larkin persona. This is not because of any theoretical argument about the boundaries between author and text, but because they are *transparently* fictional inventions. The critics’ confusion is captured in Barbara Everett’s discussion of this poem’s reception. Everett cites Richard



Murphy's review of *High Windows*, which describes 'Livings' as 'bewildering' but praises Clive James for deciphering it in a 'penetrating essay'. Everett writes:

'Bewildering', 'deciphered' [...] – these are new (but also familiar) words in the criticism of a poetry that has always seemed to many to have the virtue of not requiring 'penetration'. [...] [It] is equally striking that [James's] highly appreciative account of Larkin's verse refers to the second part of 'Livings' [...] as being distractingly *obscure*: 'While wanting to be just the reverse, Larkin can on occasion be a difficult poet.'<sup>27</sup>

Usually incisive when writing about Larkin, James's comment is a strange one, which Everett challenges:

Difficulty is in itself, like obscurity, a difficult subject, but Clive James's remark helps to throw some light on it by the way it begins with what Larkin 'wants'. An effect of poetic failure is not at all general in Larkin's work: his idiosyncrasy is the flawless success of the art with which he records the life *manqué*. Clive James is therefore to some extent deriving, from critical pronouncements or from the *persona* of the poet 'behind' the poems, someone who is capable of 'wanting' anything, other than what the poems are capable of showing him getting. 'Wanting' and 'getting', like the whole concept of poetic *intention*, are inread criteria: not necessarily untrue or unhelpful in reading poetry, but more relative to the reader than to the poet. And the usual partner of 'intention' is

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<sup>27</sup> Barbara Everett, 'Philip Larkin: After Symbolism', in *Philip Larkin*, ed. Regan, 56.

‘difficulty’ or ‘obscurity’, which really means our inability to see the poet communicating what we see him as wanting to say.<sup>28</sup>

Everett’s fascinating discussion rightly scolds the view (exemplified by James) that Larkin’s ‘difficult’ poems are the result of a failure to communicate clearly, something the critics expect because of Larkin’s ‘critical pronouncements’ and seemingly straightforward persona. To this I would add two further comments. The first is my contention that much of Larkin’s art *is* difficult – and that to claim otherwise is not to praise it, but to fail to do it justice.<sup>29</sup> Secondly, what exactly is it about ‘Livings’ that critics find so difficult? In one sense, its concept is straightforward: Larkin is temporarily constructing and inhabiting the inner lives of three figures who are different from each other and different from himself. Would those same critics levy a charge of difficulty and obscurity at the author of the lines below?

It little profits that an idle king,  
By this still hearth, among these barren crags,  
Match’d with an aged wife, I mete and dole

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 56-7.

<sup>29</sup> Difficulty has, of course, been the subject of much theoretical debate within modern literature and criticism, such as Eliot’s claim that ‘poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*’ – see ‘The Metaphysical Poets’, in *Selected Prose*, ed. Hayward, 118; Roland Barthes’s distinction between ‘readerly’ and ‘writerly’ texts – see *S/Z*, transl. Richard Miller (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996) 4-5; or George Steiner’s essay ‘On Difficulty’, which argues that a theory of difficulty is ‘one of the *desiderata*’ of twentieth-century practice – see ‘On Difficulty’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 36:3 (Spring 1978), 263. Larkin’s poetry ought at least to be partly considered within this context. The orthodoxy in Larkin scholarship has been to emphasise the poet’s directness and accessibility – as the comments by Murphy and James demonstrate. But if Larkin somehow achieved the double-whammy of complexity *and* accessibility, his work might provide an interesting and important case study for those wider discussions of difficulty in twentieth-century poetry.

Unequal laws unto a savage race,  
That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.<sup>30</sup>

It seems doubtful. With ‘Livings’, the problem appears to be the absence of the Larkin persona, and thus the absence of an anchor for biography. Larkin told C. B. Cox the poems were ‘miniature derivatives of Browning’s dramatic lyrics, I suppose’ – but if a poem by Larkin has to be labelled as a ‘dramatic monologue’ before we are willing to grant him permission to write from the perspective of the Other, does this not show how narrow and homogenous our thinking about his work has become (*SL*, 453)? That said, even the Tennyson dramatic monologue has been read in terms of the poet’s need to be ‘strong in will’ following the death of Arthur Henry Hallam.<sup>31</sup> The pull of biography turns out to be endlessly alluring.

Accordingly, readers of Larkin’s work *have* sought ways to connect the three lives of the triptych to the life of the poet. Although Rossen mentions the poem as another example of Larkin as ‘spokesman for England’, the majority of readings, as with ‘Here’, have tended to focus on Larkin’s love of solitude.<sup>32</sup> Paulin writes that ‘In Larkin’s tower-poem, “Livings II”, there is a bracing and delighted sense of being completely isolated, totally islanded’.<sup>33</sup> Booth concurs (although he rejects the historicist and nationalist leaning of Paulin’s reading): ‘Ever since he first moved to Hull in 1955 he had been engaged in building his own tower. [...] [The] keeper of the light in “Livings II” is a kind of sublime Mr Bleaney. [...] He prefers the best society of his

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<sup>30</sup> Alfred Lord Tennyson, ‘Ulysses’, in *The Major Works*, ed. Adam Roberts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 80-1.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>32</sup> Rossen, 49-50.

<sup>33</sup> Paulin, ‘She Did Not Change’, 248.

uncomfortable lighthouse to the warm sociability of cosy inns ashore'.<sup>34</sup> Motion refuses to believe in these 'lives and situations that *apparently* have nothing to do with his own' (my emphasis); 'For all the dramatic projection', he writes, "'Livings" can't avoid drawing on deeply personal feelings. [...] Even as [Larkin] filled his evenings imagining the "freezing slither", he spent his days introducing new students to the library, or worrying about his neck'.<sup>35</sup> This is another case of the 'failure' model which Everett critiques: Larkin simply cannot help it when the personal bleeds into the impersonal. Rowe points to the themes of freedom and detachment which he sees as being present in all three of the poems, and consequently believes that 'Livings' 'taps into some of Larkin's deepest preoccupations. No poet could be more present in his poem'.<sup>36</sup> The most explicitly politicised account is by Regan, who argues:

Larkin's evident fascination with the poignant details of outmoded lifestyles and his corresponding search for something 'elemental' is perhaps best understood in terms of an increasing sense of alienation amidst the economic and political disarray of the late 1960s and early 1970s. One of the most obvious forms that this alienation takes is a deep repugnance for the crudely exploitative modern economy and a seeming reverence for the older mercantile civilisation typified in 'Livings' I.<sup>37</sup>

Each of these critics finds a way to tap into the life in order to prise open this 'difficult' and seemingly oblique poem; all agree that lurking behind the work is Larkin's

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<sup>34</sup> Booth, *Life, Art and Love*, 370.

<sup>35</sup> Motion, *A Writer's Life*, 415-17.

<sup>36</sup> Rowe, *Art and Self*, 120.

<sup>37</sup> Stephen Regan, *Philip Larkin*, *The Critics Debate* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992) 135-6.

particular brand of alienation and self-imposed isolation. It is also significant that all of the cited interpretations (except Rowe's and Regan's) focus on 'Livings II', conveniently forgetting the existence of 'I' and 'III'. At best, this suggests a series of partial readings; at worst, a series of forced readings. To explain 'Livings' in these ways is to underestimate two important features of the three poems: for not only are these explicit exercises in the construction of identities drastically different from the poet's own, the poems also strain against the idealisation of solitude and self-autonomy.

The poem which precedes 'Livings' in *High Windows* perhaps provides the key to reading this triptych. 'The Trees' is an even more sophisticated exploration of Otherness, attempting as it does to enter into the budding consciousness of the non-human: 'The trees are coming into leaf / Like something almost being said' (*TCP*, 77-8). It is another example of Larkin's fascination with (id)entities other than his own, and another poem of impersonality. The final line is one we should heed: if 'An Arundel Tomb' expresses a need to read, not look, then 'The Trees' advises us to 'Begin afresh, afresh, afresh'. To do just this – to enter into a reading of the next three poems with a mental *tabula rasa*, cleansed of biographical presuppositions – allows us to draw out an interpretation which is distinct from the critical consensus.

On the face of it, 'Livings' *does* appear to be a celebration of the fact of living and of the solitary life. The strangeness of the title allows for some flexibility of interpretation: as a singular noun, 'living' can simply mean the fact of being alive, or the way in which one gains a livelihood. It can also refer to a benefice – the appointment of a vicar or rector by the Church, who will be provided with property and income in exchange for their pastoral work. This latter definition imbues the poem with a sense of vocation, as though we are being presented with three very particular and proud ways of life; 'Vocations' was a rejected title for this triptych (see *TCP*, 446). Although the narrator

of 'Livings I' enjoys the company of his fellow regulars at 'The — Hotel', he also appears to affirm the value of the solitary life when he describes the single room 'where I hang my hat' (*TCP*, 77-9). In popular culture, this phrase is shorthand for the assertion of self-autonomy: 'Any Place I Hang My Hat Is Home', as numerous vocalists from Barbra Streisand to Beyoncé have sung, or 'Wherever I Lay My Hat (That's My Home)', first recorded by Marvin Gaye in 1962, later to be covered by Paul Young. The narrator of 'Livings II' is more explicit, declaiming 'Keep it all off!' as he imagines the cosy habitations of people on shore. As ships sail by, he seems content to be alone, 'Guarded by brilliance'. And the narrator of 'Livings III', seemingly a don at one of the ancient universities, revels in his lifestyle of food, port, and conversation. Written in a dynamic present tense, with varied metres and rhyme schemes ('II' is unrhymed), the three poems' differences allow them to spark off each other as short-lived but intense celebrations of living in diverse places and fashions. This, however, is to take much of their content at face value, and rely too heavily on the perceived nature of Larkin's personality, when the poems, considered individually and collectively, imply the inadequacy and dissatisfaction of a life lived alone. With this in mind, let us consider each one in order.

The plain-speaking, plain-living narrator of 'Livings I' has a matter-of-fact tone which distinguishes him from his counterparts in 'II' and 'III'. Even the pentameters do nothing to inject lyricism into the poem; instead, the regularity of the metre gives the impression of an ordered and uncluttered mind, as in the opening line, 'I deal with farmers, things like dips and feeds'. Such a statement offers no sentimental sense of vocation, particularly given his choice of verb, 'deal', which evokes a business-like ethic of doing rather than enjoying. Everything about his lifestyle is measured and mechanical: he books the same hotel 'Every third month', allows himself 'One beer'

before dinner, which always consists of soup to start and stewed pears for dessert; he reads the same local newspaper with the same content every time, and then has ‘whisky in the Smoke Room’ with the same four regulars, discussing the same topics, and so on. Like ‘Mr Bleaney’, his bachelordom is strongly emphasised: ‘I book *myself*’ into the hotel (my emphasis), always staying in a single room, drinking *one* beer, standing *one* round at the bar, etc. Although there is community, in the form of an after-dinner smoke and scotch with the other regulars, this seems perfunctory, a means of passing dead time rather than an intimate and cherished encounter with friends; besides, all they ever talk about is business and government policy. There is no gesture to a family life, or a love life, away from the life of work. Of course, such a lifestyle would suit some, but the point is that the narrator of ‘I’ does not appear to be particularly satisfied, although this does not fit with a vocational interpretation of the triptych’s title. The only moment of lyricism in ‘Livings I’ comes in the third and final stanza, when the poem opens out from the single rooms and smoky bar of the hotel interior:

Later, the square is empty: a big sky  
Drains down the estuary like the bed  
Of a gold river, and the Customs House  
Still has its office lit.

Here, the narrator has a sense of things bigger and more sublime than his prosaic world of stock and wages; the description in this stanza would be incongruous and superfluous were it not for the underlying sense of yearning for something different. Indeed, as he drowns ‘Between ex-Army sheets’, he abandons his hitherto masculine and business-like reticence for the first time, telling of how he wonders ‘why / I think it’s worthwhile

coming. Father's dead: / He used to, but the business now is mine. / It's time for change, in nineteen twenty-nine'. Following the gentle lyricism of the preceding lines, these jarring, awkward rhythms ('worthwhile coming', 'Father's dead', and the harsh caesura in between) suggest we may be getting behind this salesman's blank exterior for once. If we initially felt that he might be satisfied, even delighted, with his particular living, then this is surely challenged by his final statement, 'It's time for change, in nineteen twenty-nine'. This at least implies that having inherited his father's business, he wishes to run it differently. What this will mean exactly, we are not told. But the status quo is not something he desires.

A number of critics have pointed out that 1929 was the year of the Wall Street Crash, which triggered a decade of economic depression across the industrialised West; accordingly, they read the poem in terms of historical tragedy (Regan, for instance, reads 'I' and 'III' as juxtaposing 'two world views that are about to be shattered').<sup>38</sup> This is valid, but it should not eclipse other possibilities. It assumes that we, as readers and critics situated later in history, have a superior perspective on the situation, and this depends upon two further assumptions. The first is that the Crash has not yet taken place (it happened in October 1929). What if it has? Could the narrator be staying in the hotel in November or December? This would give a different inflection to the Smoke Room conversation: 'Who makes ends meet, who's taking the knock, / Government tariffs, wages, price of stock'. The other assumption is that the narrator does not understand the coming consequences of the Crash; but if he is economically-literate (as the topics of conversation suggest he is), is it not possible that he might foresee the years ahead as frightening and difficult ones? This would certainly explain his resolve in declaring 'It's time for change', and his specificity in *naming* 1929 as the year for

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<sup>38</sup> Regan, *Philip Larkin*, 135.



change. Perhaps the change he desires is even more radical than this. 1929 was a year of change for many significant reasons, not just the Wall Street Crash. In the United Kingdom, the Labour Party formed a government for only the second time in history, and women aged between 21 and 29 were permitted to vote for the first time in a General Election (the so-called 'Flapper Election'). Is our narrator a Labour-voting, suffrage-supporting progressive? His reference to 'the trenches' and 'ex-Army sheets' at least enables the possibility that he is a veteran of the First World War. His silently-suffering brand of masculinity is consistent with cultural representations of the returned soldier. Perhaps the experience of war has given him his appetite for change. Perhaps he wants to strike out of his passively-inherited and staid mercantile life, and stride into a better future, whatever problems the economy might throw up. Indeed, if the 'hanging my hat' trope is associated with an individualist and self-autonomous ethic, it is also associated just as much in popular parlance with giving in or retiring from something. Perhaps our narrator will ditch the business and stand for Parliament, or take a job as a lighthouse-keeper; we can never know. I am not arguing that he *is* or *will do* any of these things, only that the text unleashes their possibility. What *is* clearly stated is his desire for change and his dissatisfaction with life as it exists.

Not that lighthouse-keeping is all it is cracked up to be, either. This is the job of the narrator of 'Livings II', which critics have read as the most celebratory of the three portraits, and the most related to Larkin's own perceived solitude fetish. On a surface level, the poem supports such a reading, with words like 'rejoice!', 'cherish', and 'brilliance', a series of poetic apostrophes, and a dynamic succession of loose trimeters and dimeters within short and punchy quatrains. There is something alluring about life alone in a tower, seventy feet above freezing and explosive waves. Much like the 'lovely, dark, and deep' woods of a famous Robert Frost poem, however, the perception

of this setting rests on a knife edge, poised between joy and something psychologically darker.<sup>39</sup> Which way we fall depends upon the way we read the poem, and a reading which looks beyond the surface at least suggests that our second narrator may be no happier than our first. If the apostrophes – redolent of the Romantics, or Rimbaud – give the impression of a heady, celebratory tone, this impression must be tempered by the fact that each one falls immediately after a cumulative description which distracts the narrator’s mind, and therefore makes necessary the apostrophe. Take the first instance:

Seventy feet down  
The sea explodes upwards,  
Relapsing, to slaver  
Off landing-stage steps –  
Running suds, rejoice!

This is a dangerous place; the sudden verbal change of direction evoked by ending lines one and two with ‘down’ and ‘upwards’ shows the violence of the sublime sea, which slavers ‘Off landing-stage steps’ – the landing-stage being, of course, not just a point of entry for a lighthouse-keeper, but also a point of exit, should he so desire. By interrupting the narrator’s focalisation of the steps with an abrupt caesura and then apostrophe, Larkin creates just the faintest hint of a mind not entirely immersed in its work or its tower. If this reading seems far-fetched, it can be supported by two further instances. The narrator’s description of mussels and limpets husbanding ‘their tenacity / In the freezing slither’ shows the sheer hostility of this environment; when even hardy, primordial creatures like these *in their natural environment* must cultivate a ‘tenacity’

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<sup>39</sup> Robert Frost, ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening’, in *The Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (London: Vintage, 2013) 224-5.

in order to survive, what hope is there for the human (and only one human) to cultivate a happy life? Again, though, the thought is cancelled; another hyphen, another apostrophe: ‘Creatures, I cherish you!’ Who exactly is he trying to convince? And if the solitary life is so fulfilling, why does he own a radio – one which insists on ‘Telling me of elsewhere’? This ushers in another instance of what I am describing:

Barometers falling,  
Ports wind-shuttered,  
Fleets pent like hounds,  
Fires in humped inns  
Kippering sea-pictures –

Keep it all off!

With freezing temperatures and a storm on its way, ports shutting down and people settling into cosy, fire-lit pubs, the ‘elsewhere’ related by the radio becomes very attractive – only for the narrator to conspicuously reject it. On each of these occasions, when the imagery starts to either seduce or trouble, the narrator self-censors and self-censures. It is as though he is trying to convince himself as much as the reader that he is happy with his lot. Indeed, ‘Keep it all off!’ is a strange phrase, given that he already is where he supposedly wants to be, with no sense at all of others trying to coax him away; there is only a radio, and radios can be switched off. But this radio takes on an unusual quality, becoming a Siren whose song might tempt the narrator away from his isolated tower – which would not be a problem, if he were so sure about his happiness and his desire to stay. The final stanza develops this underlying sense of doubt and

dissatisfaction. The narrator describes himself as ‘Guarded by brilliance’, presumably a reference to the light emanating from his tower, which gives vision to the passing sailors, but which is too bright, too brilliant, for them to see who sits within. Again, this could be read as a proud self-autonomy, but the verb ‘Guarded’ surely highlights the keeper’s reservations, since to be guarded is, in one sense of the word, to be kept against one’s will. Is this really how he feels?

Like the narrator of ‘Livings I’, but in his own way, this narrator also has a sense of something other than his present circumstances: after dinner, he uses divining-cards. This shows an interest in, and desire for, the mystical and the other-worldly, just as the salesman of ‘I’ looks up to the sky and out to the estuary. Meanwhile, liners can be seen passing by; they ‘Grove like mad worlds westward’. Although ‘Grove’ has grotesque connotations, particularly of a sexual nature, the word also conveys uncertainty, a need to feel one’s way towards the unfamiliar. With the liners sailing westward, we might wonder how many passengers on board are leaving behind unsatisfactory lives in the hope of finding better ones in the New World. (Is it too fantastical to wonder whether the changed narrator of ‘Livings I’ might be among them?) Despite his disapproving vocabulary (‘Grove’, ‘mad’), and his professed love for his current situation, this makes the narrator more akin to those passengers than he or we might think; after all, being partial to divining-cards, he also has an eye on the future, not just on the present – which makes it harder still to read ‘Livings’ as a celebration of the simple fact of existence *now*. Critics have drawn comparisons between ‘Livings II’ and Larkin’s earlier volume of poems, *The North Ship*, with its salty, wind-battered maritime aesthetic. But whereas in 1945 the poems looked towards a cold and empty North, this poem ends by looking West, and the shift in co-ordinates is surely also a shift in

sensibility. As with our previous narrator, the lighthouse-keeper of 'II' does not seem *completely* settled on the idea of life alone.

The narrator of 'Livings III' is, on the evidence of the text, a university don. Mention of a 'sizar' rules out Oxford, leaving Cambridge and Trinity College Dublin in contention; arguably, the reference to Snape (there are villages of this name in Suffolk and North Yorkshire) makes England, and thus Cambridge, the most likely. The 'Jack Ketch' reference places the narrator no earlier than the seventeenth century, and his archaic register might place him within that century, although the conversation and patter would not be entirely out of place in a twentieth-century Oxbridge dining hall or common room. But these details of place and time are fairly unimportant. The point is simply that our present narrator differs in identity from those of 'I' and 'II'. As with those two figures, however, there is a superficial projection of enjoyment by the poem. Dining 'without the Master', who appears to be temporarily out of action thanks to the excesses of college life, 'The port goes round so much the faster'; there is genial but untaxing and unintellectual chatter, including some discussion of the female genitals; the butler keeps a good fire roaring, and sets up a screened jordan so that the diners do not have to venture far to relieve themselves; and so on. The tetrameters, unencumbered due to a scarcity of in-line punctuation, skip along with a snappy *ababcdcd* rhyme scheme, creating a pace which matches that of the speedily circulating port. Clearly, college life is a feast for the senses.

A closer reading, however, draws out a darker and more grotesque subtext. One of the poem's defining features is its corporeal intensity: there are references to decapitation ('Jack Ketch', 'Regicide'); the bowels ('jordan', 'the bogs'); genitalia ('*pudendum mulieris*'); blood ('The wine heats temper and complexion'); and illness ('Nocturnal vapours do not please', 'rheumy fevers'). Nearby, a 'sizar shivers at his

study' from the cold, and a cat 'has made a kill'. Moreover, the butler's name is Starveling, which in noun form literally means a starved person or animal. Of course, this highlights the disparity between the privileged dons, drunken and gouty, and those who wait on them. This, however, is to project too basic a politics onto the poem. The grotesque corporeality of the poem's various people – from the Master to the butler – shows just how precarious and prosaic human life is; no matter how grand the sensory life of a college don might be perceived to be, he can easily go down with gout, or a runny eye, and besides – to misquote Swift – the narrator, the narrator, the narrator shits! This emphasis on the frail, imperfect physicality of the human body is compounded by the (now familiar) movement upwards, as the narrator (like his predecessors) abandons the here-and-now in order to mentally pan out and up:

The bells discuss the hour's gradations,  
Dusty shelves hold prayers and proofs:  
Above, Chaldean constellations  
Sparkle over crowded roofs.<sup>40</sup>

Bells and prayer books are shorthand for the spiritual life, and proofs for the intellectual and scientific one, but the concluding image of 'Chaldean constellations' again shows

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<sup>40</sup> 'The bells discuss the hour's gradations' is a textual echo of one of Larkin's letters to Sutton, where he writes 'bells debate the exact moment of 2 o'clock' (21 May 1941, discussed in Chapter 2). These moments can be found throughout Larkin's writings; another example is the narrator's description of a postman wearing 'cycle-clips' in *Trouble at Willow Gables*, which would later be echoed in 'Church Going'. I would argue these are textual manifestations of Larkin's early rehearsals of particular styles, discourses, and identities – which again weakens the idea of the letters being confessional. If the letters to Sutton and the Coleman works were Larkin's most accomplished and original writings of the 1940s, it is unsurprising to see words and phrases, as well as themes and ideas, being recycled in later writings which are removed from the time, place, and context of the original – particularly in poems like 'Livings' and 'Church Going', which pack a novel's worth of description.

the narrator to possess an awareness of something bigger and other than his present highly physical and sensory condition – and what can be bigger than the universe? ‘Chaldean’ introduces an anachronistic and occult element (even for the seventeenth century), much like the lighthouse-keeper’s divining-cards, perhaps suggesting an inner life not totally committed to the empirical pursuit of scientific truth which the narrator’s employment might require.

In short, then, these three poems between them debunk the solitary life, showing it to be inadequate. Whether looking up to the sky, out across the land, the sea, towards the west, or at a set of divining-cards, each narrator implicitly asks a fundamentally existential question: *Is this all there is?* Such a reading is made possible by rejecting biography, an approach which has caused either bafflement or forced readings. Superficially a triptych presenting three celebrations of the vocational and self-autonomous individual, ‘Livings’ offers up, on a deeper level, three arguments against such an analysis. The narrator of ‘I’ drowsily confesses his desire for change; the narrator of ‘II’ is unconvincing in his attempt to convey happiness; and the narrator of ‘III’ is betrayed by his own mental drift away from the wining and dining of College life towards a greater consciousness of the skies and the wider universe. Such an interpretation finds no evidence of Larkin’s alleged quintessential Englishness, nor does it support a biographical comment on his misanthropic personality.

### **Different from yourself: ‘The Explosion’**

In celebration of Larkin’s fiftieth birthday, BBC Radio Three broadcast a programme containing contributions and readings by friends and admirers, including Auden, Betjeman, and Amis. The final contributor was Larkin himself, who, in reflective mood, had this to say:

There's a great pressure on writers to 'develop' these days. I think the idea began with Yeats and personally I'm rather sceptical of it. 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. That's why I've chosen to read now a poem that isn't especially like me, or like what I fancy I'm supposed to be like. (*FR*, 92-3)

The poem he chose was 'The Explosion', the final work in what would be his final collection, *High Windows*. Few would disagree with Larkin's analysis of the poem as being different from himself. Like 'Livings', the poem has challenged and confused critics accustomed to finding Larkin's personality made more readily available within the verse. A number of book-length studies of Larkin make no reference at all to 'The Explosion'; others only make passing remarks. Where the poem is studied, dubious attempts are often made (as with 'Livings') to connect it to the perceived facts of Larkin's life. It is, for instance, one of the poems Heaney selects as evidence of Larkin's 'Elysian' Englishness.<sup>41</sup> Motion on the other hand relates the poem to Larkin's experience of the Blitz: 'it's still possible to see the lasting impression that the Coventry raids made on him. [...] [The] blasts around Manor Road echo underground in "The Explosion"'.<sup>42</sup> Knowing that the impulse to write the poem came from a television documentary which Larkin watched with his mother, Motion also provides an explicitly biographical reading, arguing that its 'strength and value depend on the surviving "wives", just as the structure of Larkin's own life depended on Eva'.<sup>43</sup> Carey builds on

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<sup>41</sup> Heaney, 'The Main of Light', 29.

<sup>42</sup> Motion, *A Writer's Life*, 49-50.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 395.



this information when he writes that ‘the female voice speaks “The Explosion” [...]. It is about widows; [Eva] was a widow; and what triggered the poem was a television documentary about the mining industry that Larkin watched with her during Christmas 1969’.<sup>44</sup> Rowe finds the opposite to be true, pointing out that in this poem and across *High Windows*, ‘the masculine dominates, and there is no poem where a woman or a woman’s experience is central’ (although ‘The Explosion’ arguably disproves his claim, given the extraordinary closing vision experienced by the wives of the miners).<sup>45</sup> Regan diagnoses a case of ‘political liberalism’, arguing that ‘The Explosion’ and ‘Dublinesque’ are ‘concerned with moments of grief and loss within working-class communities’.<sup>46</sup> As the *least* biographical interpretation, there is value in Regan’s reading, with its acknowledgement of identities *not* the poet’s own, but the class reading needs to be more focused, since Larkin has carefully located his poem not merely within a generic working-class community, but a Nonconformist Protestant one. Of course, class and faith here are related, given that Nonconformist communities developed in reaction to state religion, with the Church of England perceived as elitist and remote, its ministers often unresponsive to, and sometimes even absent from, the communities they were supposed to serve. In short, there *is* a political element to the poem’s setting, but I want to focus on the spiritual aspects of this poem, whilst maintaining a strict textual rigour.

This is because, by setting the poem in a *specifically* Nonconformist context, Larkin references and foregrounds that community’s emphasis on the Word, on preaching and sermons, and on the collective and sometimes ecstatic experience of worship. He also borrows from the Nonconformist culture of orality in a poem which throws everything it

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<sup>44</sup> Carey, 59-61.

<sup>45</sup> M. W. Rowe, ‘Unreal Girls’, 94.

<sup>46</sup> Regan, *Philip Larkin*, 138.

has, formally and linguistically, at the creation of an extraordinary and ecstatic poetic experience. In this sense, I want to argue that ‘The Explosion’ *is* a poem of faith – spiritually and poetically – but I want to qualify this claim with two further points. Firstly, that the poem’s faith, in the words of the poem itself, lasts only ‘for a second’; secondly, that the poem’s spirituality has little, if anything, to do with Larkin’s private attitude(s) to Christianity and religion more generally. The purpose of the textual examination here is to read the poem on its own terms, not to extract from it an attitude to faith which may or may not belong to Larkin.

Indeed, Raine – with full knowledge of Larkin’s numerous statements of disbelief – has been prepared to argue that “‘The Explosion’ toys, quite seriously, with the mystical, leaving a trail of Christian trace elements’”.<sup>47</sup> Although it is not unusual for Larkin to write about the mystical (one immediately thinks of ‘Church Going’, ‘Faith Healing’, ‘Solar’, ‘Water’), it is *perhaps* surprising to find him letting go of the agnostic idiom present in those poems. From the very beginning of ‘The Explosion’, the mystical makes itself felt – at first with a strong sense of foreboding:

On the day of the explosion  
Shadows pointed towards the pithead:  
In the sun the slagheap slept. (*TCP*, 95)

The pointing shadows are an omen of the disaster which, because of the matter-of-fact opening line, we know will happen. By personifying the shadows and the slagheap, Larkin invests them with an eerie presence, a little like the clustering urban skyline of

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<sup>47</sup> Raine, 76.

‘Here’; Raine plausibly suggests ‘pithead’ might be ‘a near-miss – “godhead”’.<sup>48</sup> Before a single miner steps out, then, this site of industry which will be the site of disaster is imbued with a disconcerting consciousness of impending doom. And then, ‘Down the lane came men in pitboots’, their physicality emphasised by present participles, ‘Coughing’ and ‘Shouldering’. As well as physicality, there is a strong sense of vitality – about to be extinguished – in their ‘oath-edged talk’, their pipe-smoking; one chases a rabbit and comes back with some lark’s eggs, which he then lodges in the grass. There is further symbolism here: if the nightingale has traditionally sung a sorrowful song in English poetry and culture, then the lark has been associated with joy, with the heady freedom of the skies – as in Shakespeare’s ‘Sonnet 29’; George Meredith’s long poem, *The Lark Ascending*, with its soaring lyricism; and Ralph Vaughan Williams’s musical score of the same name, which was inspired by Meredith’s verse. Here, though, it may be that the mother-bird has departed due to foreknowledge, and the larks’ association with soaring freedom is contrasted with the men coming ‘*Down the lane*’ (my emphasis), unconsciously heading towards a hellish disaster. Not that the poem suggests Hell is their destiny: as they pass ‘Through the tall gates standing open’, the language subtly conveys their passing not just into the colliery, but from life to death; those gates are surely also the heavenly ones guarded by St. Peter, ‘standing open’ to receive them.

At this point, it is vital to discuss the poem’s formal qualities, which have been much debated – vital, because it is Larkin’s inheritance and subsequent modification of form which enables him to set up and release the extraordinary, ecstatic ending. Peter Hollindale, identifying the poem’s trochaic tetrameter, has perceptively compared ‘The Explosion’ with the metre’s most famous use, Longfellow’s 1855 epic *The Song of Hiawatha*. He has sensitively analysed the ‘verbal and experiential rhythm of continuity

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 76.

which [...] causes nothing to stop: condition merges with condition, like season with season, by almost imperceptible gradations’ – an incredible effect for a poem (Larkin’s) which shows men passing from life into death.<sup>49</sup> Hollindale’s reading of the *Hiawatha* metre represents some fine criticism, and subsequent scholars have built on his analysis. Booth and Osborne have both pointed to the absurdity of this metre, which has been endlessly parodied since the publication of Longfellow’s poem. Booth, one of Larkin’s staunchest admirers, finds it hard to praise ‘The Explosion’, calling it ‘one of Larkin’s most riskily artificial poems [...]. [If] the reader tunes into the metre too consciously it can sound over-insistent and mechanical’.<sup>50</sup> Osborne has been at pains to demonstrate the inherent multiculturalism of the *Hiawatha* metre (and thus of Larkin’s poem), tracing a genealogy containing (*inter alia*) Native American, Finnish, Romanian, and German influences: ‘wherever one drills into the textual surface of Larkin’s poem one meets, not resistant English bedrock, but one exotic stratum after another in a potentially infinite recession of layers’.<sup>51</sup> This is an important intervention, given the quantity of Anglicised readings, such as Heaney’s. But Osborne also draws attention to ‘the damage done to Larkin’s poem by the inherent risibility of the *Hiawatha* metre. [...] Larkin’s “The Explosion” cannot involve *The Song of Hiawatha* in a way that quarantines it from its parodies’.<sup>52</sup> As such, Osborne suggests:

[O]ne might claim that ‘The Explosion’ relates a nineteenth-century pit disaster to a theology then at its peak but establishes the supersession of that belief system by using a contemporaneous poetic measure that has dated particularly

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<sup>49</sup> Peter Hollindale, ‘Philip Larkin’s “The Explosion”’, *Larkin*, special issue of *Critical Survey*, 1:2 (1989), 141.

<sup>50</sup> Booth, *Life, Art and Love*, 359.

<sup>51</sup> Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, 70.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 75-6.

badly. Either way, a poem that purports to subscribe to Christian ideology exposes that religion's falsity by refusing to succeed, the rhetoric giving itself away, honestly ringing false.<sup>53</sup>

But is it possible that these critics have overstated the waft of the *Hiawatha* metre in Larkin's hands – 'tune[d] into the metre too consciously', as Booth puts it? Indeed, Larkin has not been faithful to the trochaic tetrameter throughout, using *and abusing* it to create particular effects, and attention to his rhythmic infidelities might perhaps form a defence against criticism of the metre's 'risibility', as well as highlight how the poem achieves its impact, textually.

Of course, in a line such as 'In the sun the slagheap slept', the *Hiawatha* metre breaks through loud and proud. But reading the poem closely, one encounters a number of deliberate disruptions to that pattern. In doing so, Larkin appears to have made the *Hiawatha* metre respectable again, which is an impressive feat. Hollindale has superbly dealt with the success of the metre *where it is deployed* – i.e. the way in which it allows for conditions such as life and death to be merged effortlessly. But I want to draw attention to where the metre disintegrates, as well as some of the poem's other formal features. The first five stanzas, for instance, are all self-contained, in the sense that one tercet is equivalent to one grammatical sentence. This both complements and mitigates the impact of the *Hiawatha* metre. If the metre, as Hollindale suggests, is responsible for creating a sense of transition 'by almost imperceptible gradations', then Larkin's self-contained tercets complement this by assuming the role of narrative units, each new stanza progressing the story. However, when compared to Longfellow, Larkin's version can also be seen to have a mitigating, regulating effect:

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

By the shores of Gitche Gumee,  
By the shining Big-Sea-Water,  
Stood the wigwam of Nokomis,  
Daughter of the Moon, Nokomis.  
Dark behind it rose the forest,  
Rose the black and gloomy pine-trees,  
Rose the firs with cones upon them;  
Bright before it beat the water,  
Beat the clear and sunny water,  
Beat the shining Big-Sea-Water.<sup>54</sup>

In this passage, the combination of thumping trochaic tetrameter and accumulating but repetitious detail ('Stood the wigwam of Nokomis, / Daughter of the Moon, Nokomis') creates a ludicrous sense of going down and round in circles, like a helter-skelter. The repetition of end-words – 'water' appears four times in these ten lines – worsens the effect. Larkin's poem is much more subtle. If the opening stanza gestures explicitly to the fate which awaits the miners, then the metre and end-stopped stanzas dramatically but poignantly delay that disaster. This is partly because of the 'freshened silence' *between* stanzas, which is palpable, and partly because of the nature of a trochaic foot, which follows a stressed-unstressed pattern. The effect, rhythmically, is of hurtling towards something and then pulling back. When this is combined with the first five tercets, each one presenting a new narrative unit before a very definite pause, the effect is of moving towards something – disaster – with varied speeds. The refusal of rhyme

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<sup>54</sup> Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *The Song of Hiawatha*, in *Poems and Other Writings*, ed. J. D. McClatchy (New York: Library of America, 2000) 157.

reinforces this effect. Booth has argued that ‘the general expectation of rhyme in [Larkin’s] work certainly makes his choice not to rhyme momentous and highly expressive’.<sup>55</sup> Here, the use of tercets might make the expectation of rhyme even stronger, given their close association in poetic history with the interlocking *terza rima* scheme. There is, then, a kind of emotional austerity taking place at a formal level in ‘The Explosion’ which, when lifted, will result in the poem’s final emotional and visionary outpouring.

The fifth stanza is the last to be self-contained in this way, but the first to significantly disrupt the metrical pattern established hitherto. (Although stanza three contains four semi-colons, these always fall *after* a metrical foot, therefore allowing the trochees to be maintained without damage.) The ‘tremor’ occurs ‘At noon’, so that the poem is poised between two temporalities, just as it is poised here between two rhythmical experiences. With the literal tremor comes a series of rhythmic ones, exploding the trochaic tetrameter: lines 13 and 14 shift towards the iambic, generating an internal resistance to the *Hiawatha* metre; when the trochaic pattern reasserts itself in line 15, it is, crucially, catalectic – its premature end evoking with pathos the miners’ premature deaths. The caesura (semi-colon) placed after ‘tremor’ also bears a poetic burden, standing in for the explosion and thus for the exact moment of the men’s death. The choice of a semi-colon is significant, then, creating a pause in the poem pregnant enough to evoke grief, but not sufficiently final to make the poem stop completely. This reaffirms the concept of the men *passing* ‘Through the tall gates’ into the afterlife – death is a semi-colon, not a full-stop. The subsequent lines state this in Christian terms:

*The dead go on before us, they*

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<sup>55</sup> Booth, *The Poet’s Plight*, 12.

*Are sitting in God's house in comfort,*

*We shall see them face to face –*

Plain as lettering in the chapels

It was said [...]

From where do these italicised lines emanate? Are they the words of a preacher? Or words displayed on the walls of the chapel? The subsequent lines are grammatically ambiguous: is this a simile (the words are as plain as the lettering found in chapels), or are the words 'said', or quoted, in the form of lettering on the walls? A number of critics have argued that the typographical distinction, and the phrase 'It was said', are distancing techniques, Larkin's way of showing-without-endorsing the community's spiritual response to grief (Raine, for instance, thinks Larkin is protecting himself by quoting 'hearsay').<sup>56</sup> In this sixth stanza, the metre shifts to become more iambic, and therefore more consoling to ears better pleased by iambs than trochees. But to diagnose this distancing as evidence of Larkin's agnosticism or atheism is a distraction from what the poem is seeking to do. Regardless of whether the italicised typography designates the words as reported speech or text, those words take on an eerie and disembodied quality, *almost* as though they are divinely uttered. 'It was said' may also have a distancing effect, but it has a biblical, declamatory aesthetic too, as in, for instance, Matthew 5:21: 'Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill'. As with 'Livings', the interpretive difficulties here are an aspect of Larkin's poetic practice, rather than a failure of communication, and they mimic the inexplicable quality of religious experience, whether oral or textual.

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<sup>56</sup> Raine, 77.



Indeed, it is at this point that the poem truly makes use of its Nonconformist context, specifically the act and the *impact* of Nonconformist styles of worship. If the poem bears the mark of D. H. Lawrence, as critics have quite credibly suggested (the mining context evokes *Sons and Lovers* in particular), then we might also be reminded of Lawrence's upbringing within Eastwood's Nonconformist community; in 1928, Lawrence wrote 'Hymns in a Man's Life', an essay which, as Andrew Harrison writes, 'separates off (in startling fashion) his childhood love of the Nonconformist hymns from his critical and dismissive attitude to religious doctrine'.<sup>57</sup> Osborne has made the case for the poem's possible setting in South Wales, home to 'the largest chapel-going mining community in the British Isles'.<sup>58</sup> Whether England or Wales, my point is that Larkin has placed his poem within a *specifically Nonconformist* chapel-going mining community; as such, he references the spiritual aesthetic of this faith group, which is one of fervent and passionate oratory designed to impact upon the heart and the body as much as the head of the worshippers who gather before the pulpit. Nonconformist Protestantism has a long tradition of ecstatic worship. The historian Glanmor Williams has written about this tradition in Wales, describing how:

Preaching was the bellows through which the divine wind of Heaven was blown to raise the emotional temperature of the hearers. Only in the volcanic heat created by inspired pulpit oratory could the stubborn heart be melted by the

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<sup>57</sup> Andrew Harrison, 'Hymns in a man's life: the Congregational chapel and D. H. Lawrence's early poetry', in *Ecstasy and Understanding: Religious Awareness in English Poetry from the Late Victorian to the Modern Period*, ed. Adrian Grafe (London: Bloomsbury, 2008) 46.

<sup>58</sup> Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, 73.

overpowering emotions of guilt, fear, shame, anguish, hope, joy, and certainty, and so surrender itself to the great decision.<sup>59</sup>

Anthony Jones has similarly discussed this method of preaching in Welsh chapels, beginning in the eighteenth century:

The preachers were the master allegorists of the day. They were theologians, poets, philosophers, and their sermons were dramas [...]. These were exceptional individuals possessed of great stamina, fierce conviction, and imaginative oratorical skills. Their sermons were vivid and poetic, full of clarity of expression and fresh immediacy, and especially effective in a nation particularly susceptible to this kind of spellbinding narrative.<sup>60</sup>

According to Jones, these were ‘Kings of the Pulpit’, ‘whose passionate sermonizing could bring a congregation to a state of religious ecstasy and frenzy’.<sup>61</sup> In more recent times, such a phenomenon has been made famous by events at one neocharismatic evangelical church in Toronto where, since 1994, ecstatic worshippers have reported involuntary bodily reactions such as laughing, shaking, crying, and heaving (the phenomenon has been dubbed the Toronto Blessing). It is important to draw attention to this ongoing tradition of ecstatic worship because it is precisely this which takes place in ‘The Explosion’:

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<sup>59</sup> Glanmor Williams, *The Welsh and their Religion: Historical Essays* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991) 56.

<sup>60</sup> Anthony Jones, *Welsh Chapels* (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1996) 15-16.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

Plain as lettering in the chapels  
It was said, and for a second  
Wives saw men of the explosion

Larger than in life they managed –  
Gold as on a coin, or walking  
Somehow from the sun towards them,

One showing the eggs unbroken.

The impact of the words which are italicised in the poem seems to cause a collective alteration of consciousness amongst the widowed congregation, an ecstatic experience resulting in an exploded (i.e. enlarged) and golden vision of the ‘men of the explosion’, a phrase with heroic and mythical connotations. But critics have, once again, read the insertion of ‘Somehow’ as a qualification, a sign of Larkin’s agnostic or atheistic attitude to faith, as though he simply cannot stop his own scepticism from intruding upon the poetry; yet the word may also convey astonishment and wonder at the extraordinary vision taking place. After all, this is the moment when Larkin really borrows from the rousing, ecstatic worship of Nonconformism: by abandoning the pattern of end-stopped, self-contained stanzas, Larkin lets one long sentence reverberate across three stanza breaks. This leaves behind any sense of tragic delay evoked by the first five stanzas, and instead lets a gushing and intensifying sense of the fantastic take hold. In other words, the restrained austerity of roughly the first half of the poem, with its stop-start stanzas and metre, gives way to a verbal rush, long and rich in golden imagery. One can easily imagine a preacher using similar techniques in order to rouse

his congregation. In doing so, Larkin unites the ecstatic *spiritual* moment with the ecstatic *poetic* moment, so that ecstasy becomes a shared experience for the wives and the reader. The ‘Somehow’ is only one example of the poem’s astonished search for an anchor in reality: the ‘coin’ image may seem disappointingly prosaic and realist amidst a spiritual revelation, but it represents an inadequate attempt to express the inexpressible, to write the Divine using only human language – after all, the men are only described as being ‘Gold *as on* a coin’ (my emphasis). If the simile reads as weak, this is because the poem has been charged with the impossible task of describing the ineffable. In place of linguistic perfection, the simple image of golden coinage will have to suffice.

Of course, the vision is also ineffable because it lasts only ‘for a second’. The final line of the poem, which is isolated and thus breaks the pattern of tercets, may well gesture to the concept of cyclical life – the symbol of the eggs ‘unbroken’ showing that life goes on. But ‘unbroken’ is an awkward word, rhythmically. Its choice cannot be justified by the need to find a trochee, since ‘broken’ is a spondee, and thus the poem ends with a final disintegration of the original metre. Larkin has form here: in ‘The Building’, also from *High Windows*, he layers an eight-line rhyme scheme onto seven-line stanzas, resulting in an astonishing final and isolated line which allows for the completion of the rhyme scheme (*TCP*, 84-6). This final line is the image of the ‘wasteful, weak, propitiatory flowers’ which visitors to the hospital bring with them each evening. One may liken the inadequacy of the flowers in the face of mortality to the inadequacy of the image of the ‘eggs unbroken’ in the face of death. Having united the ecstatic spiritual and poetic moments, Larkin ends them simultaneously too, as rhythm and vision expire.

Again, this may be Larkin's refusal of the consolation of faith; Hollindale comments that the poem 'retains the integrity of its scepticism. It is not a poem of faith, though it is a poem about the need for faith'.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, Hassan has written that 'Larkin himself is disillusioned with this idea because it is wrapped with a religious numbness'.<sup>63</sup> But interpretations such as these do not read the poem on its own terms; instead, critics mine the poem for evidence which might shed light on Larkin's relationship to Christianity and the idea of an afterlife. As a poet, however, Larkin has used the textual tools of his trade to create a moment – only fleeting – of poetic vision and ecstasy, and as such, aligns himself with the archetypal preacher of Nonconformism. It is doubtful that this is because Larkin wants us to think of him as a Nonconformist Protestant, or even just a Christian. But it is further evidence of Larkin's interest in writing poetry which achieves a wider range of effects, and explores a wider range of experiences and identities, than his Welfare State sub-poet, chronicler-of-the-everyday persona has led us to expect from him.

In an essay on the metaphysical poet Henry Vaughan, Geoffrey Hill quotes with approval from a 'brilliant' piece by Walter J. Ong:

Christian theology and poetry are indeed not the same thing, but lie at opposite poles of human knowledge. However, the very fact that they are opposite extremes gives them something of a common relationship to that which lies between them: they both operate on the periphery of human intellection. A poem dips below the range of the human process of understanding-by-reason as the subject of theology sweeps above it.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Hollindale, 144.

<sup>63</sup> Hassan, 114.

<sup>64</sup> Quoted in Hill, *Style and Faith*, 86-7.

This is a useful comment for a poem like 'The Explosion', which takes place 'on the periphery of human intellection'. The poem references a theology which is at one end of human knowledge, and produces an experience which lies at the other. In doing so, it demonstrates what poetry and faith have between them, without conflating either. This says nothing about Larkin's theology (or lack of), but much about his attitude to the writing of poetry. 'The Explosion' is not a poem of empiricism, or of 'lowered sights and patiently diminished expectations'.<sup>65</sup> Along with 'Here' and 'Livings', it is a work which shows Larkin being 'different from' himself, writing poems that are not 'especially like me, or what I fancy I'm supposed to be like'.

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<sup>65</sup> Donald Davie, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979)

# *Conclusion*

This study set out to protect and respect the integrity and autonomy of Larkin's writings. It did so against a background of accusations about Larkin's life which have significantly affected readings of his work for thirty years and more. Because Larkin's detractors focus on his simplicity and his identity politics, this study explored the diverse and complex textual identities which he constructed and inhabited in different kinds of writing during the course of his life. The underlying method used was a textual examination, which meant sharp and focused close readings guided by the texts themselves. Rather than take a book-by-book or thematic approach, I chose instead to focus on writings which are most in need of a revisionist approach, and which most effectively dramatise the possibilities of that revisionist approach.

Part I looked at three of Larkin's correspondences in order to demonstrate the diverse identities constituted by the act of letter-writing. The differences between them, and their dialogic nature, were used to form a critique of the dominant notion of letters as portals onto the author's soul, and the textual approach complicated the usual interpretations of them. Part II applied the same concept – identity as constituted by the act of writing – to the 1943 Brunette Coleman works, which are read by critics almost exclusively in terms of Larkin's sexuality and his pornographic perversions. The textual examination bypassed biographical speculation, and instead located an extensive concern for genre and gender, showing this to be a far more interesting and progressive *oeuvre* than has been acknowledged, with positive consequences for the later Larkin. Part III adopted the same approach to textual identity in a representative selection of Larkin's mature poems. After analysing the way in which a vivid public Larkin persona was created by the 1964 BBC documentary *Down Cemetery Road*, a number of 'persona' and 'impersonal' poems was closely examined in order to demonstrate how Larkin's poetry can signify in ways that are valid but distinct to dominant perceptions of



his work. There is no obligation to read the poetry as the expression of personality; by treating Larkin's poems as constructions and explorations of different identities, it was shown how they may benefit from an alternative practice in unexpected ways.

If this study's selection of texts appears to be eccentric or partial, this is because they are writings which benefit most from textual scholarship, and which dramatise effectively its necessity and potential. As a methodology, textual scholarship may not seem as conspicuous or concentrated as, say, a biographical or historicist approach, or a thematic one looking at nature, or women and sex. But this is the study's strength, not its weakness. It allows texts to speak for themselves, and accepts their guiding hand. Theoretical, biographical, and thematic approaches are too often guilty of reading *into* literary texts rather than *out* of them. This, perhaps, is the failing of the scholar rather than a problem inherent to the approach – but devolving hermeneutical authority to the texts themselves is a powerful thing to do in Larkin studies, where presuppositions, political ideologies, and forced readings have dominated the field and violated the texts. This is not to say that theoretical or thematic concerns have not played a significant part in this study – they certainly have; but the point is that textual scholarship only licenses their application where appropriate or beneficial, such as a theoretical consideration of the camp sensibility which is present within the Brunette Coleman *oeuvre*.

The potential consequences of this study are manifold, and reach beyond scholarship on Larkin. The diverse identities constructed and explored by Larkin reveal him as a far more complex and radical writer than is acknowledged by either the public imagination or scholarly assessments. In this sense, the textual approach possesses possibilities that can benefit any author, although Larkin seems to have suffered *especially* badly from biographical revelations and readings. A number of issues and concepts explored by this study also invite further consideration. Might the nature of Larkin's epistolary writings

unlock a more general theory or poetics of letter-writing? Could more work be done on the concept of the literary afterlife – on the ways in which writers and their critics, editors, and biographers manipulate an afterlife, for better or worse? Does the Brunette Coleman *oeuvre* deserve further investigation? Is Larkin’s treatment of identity in line with major contemporaries like Ted Hughes, Seamus Heaney, Elizabeth Bishop, and Geoffrey Hill, or does it stand out? Does his work reframe ideas of difficulty in modern poetry? Indeed, the consequences may run wide and deep. However original and unique a writer, Larkin is also a major vector of post-war literary and cultural developments. If the reader of this study is convinced by the argument that Larkin’s work is complex and progressive, that it radically explores gender politics, that it enjoys a rewarding relationship with Eliotic modernism, that it complicates traditional notions of identity and authorship – then it surely follows that the current critical configuration of modern and contemporary British poetry will need to be revamped and reframed.

This is more than a question of whether Larkin deserves to be taught in university English departments. As I have argued, the dominant understanding of post-war British literature is that an insular, unambitious, and borderline philistine gang known as the Movement deliberately sabotaged modernism, thereby delaying the onset of postmodernist experimentation in this country for at least a decade. This is a narrative which editors and authors of major post-war literature surveys and guides accept and propagate. G. S. Fraser, writing in the seventh volume of the *Sphere History of Literature in the English Language*, argued in relation to Larkin and other Movement writers that ‘Their immediate sources and influences were various, but not ever the main sources and influences of high “modernism”: not Pound, or Eliot, or even Yeats’.<sup>1</sup> His words and phrases are the usual ones associated with these writers: ‘clarity and

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<sup>1</sup> G. S. Fraser, ‘English Poetry 1930-1960’, in *The Sphere History of Literature in the English Language, Volume 7: The Twentieth Century*, ed. Bernard Bergonzi (London: Sphere, 1970) 303-4.

honesty', 'the rational control of feeling', suspicion of 'a romantic "high style"', and so on.<sup>2</sup> Fraser continues:

Nearly all this poetry, in fact, had the plainness and honesty of prose; the question that critics asked was whether it did not have also, too often, the prosiness. Did it skim the ground, but with strong wings? Or did it merely walk along the ground, and had it wings at all? Could it fly if it wanted to? There was also a moral question; was this poetry, much of it written by university lecturers and librarians, the work of a new elite, a group comfortably off on the whole, not wanting to change its world *very* radically – it was odd how these enemies of the Establishment so rapidly became pillars of it, quietly supplanting the older generation on the Third Programme, in the Sunday reviews, and in the literary weeklies – and could the poetry of Philip Larkin, for instance, be fairly summed up, as a radical poet of the Left, Christopher Logue, summed it up, as 'genteel bellyaching'?<sup>3</sup>

Neil Corcoran, in *English Poetry Since 1940*, has characterised the Movement in similar terms, describing its

fundamental hostility to Modernism itself [...]. In Larkin this memorably takes the form of the replacement of the early seductive influence of the 'Celtic' Yeats with the English Hardy, and of an attack on the 'pleasantly alliterative' (and

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 303.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 304.

representative) Parker, Pound and Picasso for their ‘irresponsible exploitations of technique in contradiction of human life as we know it’.<sup>4</sup>

For Corcoran, Larkin is ‘the major case in post-war English poetry of a thoroughgoing resistance to Modernism’.<sup>5</sup> His poetry is melancholy, and ‘its sense of loss, its fatalism or weary determinism are profoundly in tune with the deepest insecurities and anxieties, hesitations and fumbings of identity of an English audience suffering the withdrawal from imperial and colonial power in the aftermath of the war’.<sup>6</sup> Steven Connor, in his influential *Postmodernist Culture*, cites ‘Alan Sillitoe, Kingsley Amis and Philip Larkin’ as three writers who typified ‘The narrative of the decline or supersession of modernism’ in the literature of the 1950s and 1960s. Either as a ‘regression from or progression beyond’ ideas about self-sufficient form, they turned to ‘modest realism’, refusing ‘what seemed to them the high-minded and elitist obscurity of the modernist inheritance’, and ‘fostered a return to a writing which was lodged in experience rather than form. In theory, at least, such writing would be less closed off and more permeable to “life”’.<sup>7</sup> And, in 1993, the editors of *The New Poetry* posed the following questions: ‘[W]hat does the British poet write about? How is it to be written? How can it escape the negative inheritance of British poetry: its ironies, its understatements, its dissipated energies?’<sup>8</sup> In drawing attention to British poetry’s ‘negative inheritance’, it is not

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<sup>4</sup> Neil Corcoran, *English Poetry Since 1940*, Longman Literature in English Series (Harlow: Longman, 1993) 82.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 87

<sup>7</sup> Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) 103, 108.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Hulse, David Kennedy and David Morley, eds. and introd., *The New Poetry* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1993) 22.

difficult to infer that they are thinking of Larkin – who, ‘even when his subject was horses at grass, rarely strayed far from the political decline of England’.<sup>9</sup>

Although these accounts – all by important critics – largely focus on modernism’s cause of death, there is more than this at stake. By characterising Larkin and company as anti-modernist, they also characterise them as realist, regressive, simple and direct, politically unambitious and Establishment, using traditional forms to express everyday experiences and chap-next-door personalities. Does this do justice to Larkin’s writing? Not at all. In his correspondences, Larkin inhabited – not expressed – various identities, at least one of which (the one shared with Monica Jones) involved a progressive view of gender, sexuality, and nationalism. His earlier work, produced under the Brunette Coleman heteronym, also tore up traditional ideas about gender and sexuality, as well as the politics of high and low literature. And the critics’ emphasis on traditional forms and direct treatments of everyday experience does not sit well with the Eliotic ‘Church Going’, or the formally loose, modernist and Symbolist ‘Livings II’, or the supernatural ecstasy of ‘The Explosion’, or the Surrealist ‘Here’, or the sparky, myth-busting ‘Annus Mirabilis’. In other words, when the business of revising our understanding of Larkin’s work is done, we will need to look again at the basis for our understanding of post-war literature, and the critical narratives surrounding modernism and postmodernism.

There is time yet for all this to be done; in the meantime, reading and enjoying and valuing Larkin’s work should cease to be some kind of dirty secret. I am sure arguments about the life will go on, but this study has resolutely made the case for the integrity and autonomy of that which should matter most for readers and critics: the texts.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 17.

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