

## Chapter Three

### Larkin and the Problem of Negation, Choice and Anguish

Even before one attempts to grapple with the problem of choice in Larkin's poetry, one is beset with a substantial body of Larkin criticism that based the reception of his poetry on 'choice' itself. Defenders and detractors alike sought to rarefy reading by recasting the poetic mould within the narrow periphery of their personal ideology. It was Robert Conquest who, in his 1956 anthology titled *New Lines*, chose to generically qualify the now much debated 'Movement' poetry as the repository of "rational structure" and "comprehensive language", against the "sentimental verbiage" that characterized the poets of the 1940's. Resorting to "dubious cultural metaphors of sickness and health" (Regan "Critics": 17), Conquest intended to authenticate Movement poetry in terms that can at best be termed partisan:

If one had briefly to distinguish this poetry of the fifties from its predecessors, I believe the most important general point would be that it submits to no great systems of theoretical constructs nor agglomerations of unconscious commands. It is free from both mystical and logical compulsions and- like modern philosophy- is empirical in its attitude to all that comes. (qtd.in Regan "Critics": 17)

This view, as Osborne points out, was thereafter rephrased and showcased by successive critics like Press (1963), Thwaite (1969), Lodge (1977), Booth (1992). Along with them was also Stephen Regan who in 1992 "pretending to challenge this stale orthodoxy" ended up by actually endorsing it (87). The criticism of Regan in this particular instance hinges on the observation that while he acknowledges that the above mentioned commentators lacked concern for the socio-political specificities of post-war England, he too is guilty of proliferating a mode of criticism

that foregrounds the dominance of philosophical discourse by way of explaining literary sensibility. In his influential book *The Critics Debate* (1992), Regan had observed:

An extremely important influence in the immediate post-war period was Alfred Ayer's *Language Truth and Logic*... While it would be unwise to regard Larkin's poetry as strictly 'empirical' (the term is problematic in any discussion of poetic technique), it would seem to be the case that Ayer's work (and the tradition of logical positivism from which it derived) gave to Larkin and his generation a welcome philosophical support for a literature that espoused the need for caution and skepticism. (80)

The detractors were not to be left out either. What for the champions was the primary saving grace of Larkin's poetry became an absolute object of scorn – a paucity, a lack- glaring in its mediocrity. For Bryan Appleyard, as Osborne catalogues, "Larkin's aversion to intellect" is an offshoot of the movement's "tub- thumping literary empiricism", while for Jeff Nuttall his "poetry not only discards the free imagination, but along with professors Ayer and Eysenck, doubts its very existence". Andrew Duncan went one step further, casting derision as it were upon Larkin's "emotional deadness to ideas". (87)

This is a malady that afflicts so much of Larkin scholarship. The euphoria of the defenders seem to stem from a sense of smug self satisfaction in assuming that Larkin does in fact toe the line of British empiricism and is therefore appropriative of the dominant philosophical tradition that was supposed to have constituted him. On the other hand, the vitriolic vituperation of the detractors take shape from some overstrained idea of what poetry should be, in accordance with their particular idiosyncrasies and orientations. The result is a criticism of a prescriptive sort,

which, in choosing what it ought to read, does not only land up with an engagement of a fractured kind but also imposes considerable constraints upon the potential of Larkin's poetry. This is so because a contemporary researcher, intent upon engaging with the problem of choice in Larkin's poetry, finds himself circumscribed within a field of irreconcilable choices. Siding up with the defenders would amount to a negation of every choice of metaphysical purport that might inhere in the poems, while the detractors would summarily assure him/her that such a choice is nevertheless not to be discerned in Larkin's poetry.

To find poetic choice truncated through critical intervention would have seemed essentially dismal. However, the fact that literary works are seldom characterized by any finality of signification is a welcome respite. In a brilliant exposition of this readerliness of literature, Alan Sinfield observes:

We must think of the literary work as a particularizing pattern laid across the (changing) grid of social possibilities....What it does is vividly to represent certain possibilities; further it draws us into those possibilities and makes us recreate their structures as we follow them through. It invites our assent that reality is thus or thus and so helps us to develop, by agreement, rejection or negotiation our own understanding of the world and ourselves in it. ("Society" 4)

Judged from this perspective, choice in Larkin's poetry can never remain confined to the level of the experiential alone, just because dominant criticism has chosen to regard them as empirical. What is therefore required is a contextual study which, according to Sinfield, can identify "the relationship of the literary text to the particular pressures and limits that condition it" ("Society"

4). In other words, it is only by reading Larkin in a proper context that criticism can hope to ascertain the exact nature of his poetic choices.

From the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the English socio-political scenario was becoming an arena of significant changes. This has been exquisitely documented by Alistair Davis and Peter Saunders in an article titled “Literature, Politics and Society” forming part of a project *Society and Literature*, edited by Alan Sinfield. The inter-war period according to them was marked by large scale unemployment; and a terrible lack of social and welfare services only led to a class divided society, the under-privileged section of which lived a life of deprivation and exploitation well up to the 1940s. Surmising that a new start was an imperative, a number of war time committees were set up to assess how a variety of social problems could be tackled. The Beveridge report proposed national insurance scheme to all citizens; the Butler report recommended free compulsory secondary education while the Uthwatt report “suggested a new scheme for comprehensive land use planning, designed to prevent speculative profit making during the post-war reconstruction” (14). At the end of the war, when the Labour party was voted in amidst immense euphoria, they set about implementing the war-time reports. Important industries like coal, iron and steel, and the railways were nationalized, so as to create the impression that a considerable part of the economy was under state control and Britain was on the path of becoming a welfare state. However the euphoria soon died down after it was found that nothing more than the mere names of the industries had changed. Throughout the ‘50s social security measures proved ineffectual and people, who even moved to government housing projects, realized that the prevailing living conditions were simply abominable. A chasm of unfulfilment therefore lay seething at the very heart of human expectations.

This disparity between expectation and reality also became manifest in the way in which Britain realigned itself to its altered stature as a global economic power. Owing largely to the fact that Britain was the leading imperial and colonial power till the Second World War, there was a tacit expectation among Britishers that Britain would have a hegemonic status in post-war economic forums. However, when in 1944 the leaders of major western allies met at Bretton Woods in America, and the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund were established, it was found that both the bodies were dominated by America by dint of the fact that the dollar evolved as the dominant unit of world currency. In 1947 India attained independence and over the next twenty years, the British Empire disappeared. The wheel had come full circle but even in the 60s Britain found it increasingly difficult to appropriate the altered scenario (13-15). Written in 1969, Larkin's poetry registers this impotence- both military and economic in a poem titled "When the Russian tanks roll westward": "When the Russian tanks roll westward, what defence for you and me?/Colonel Sloman's Essex Rifles? The Light Horse of L.S.E?" (CP 172)

The purport of this exposition is not to situate the poetry of Philip Larkin within the confines of a linear historical narrative. On the contrary, it is impelled upon by the theoretical exigencies of Existentialism in relation to the problem of choice. For unlike other categories, the problem of choice is securely embedded within the specificity of history, which in fact constitutes the human field of action. From an existential standpoint, society becomes important because the problem of choice assumes primacy only within the social context, in lieu of the fact that man is a being in the world. The intentional nature of consciousness that Husserl borrowed from Franz Brentano and which Sartre later on posited as the very structure of consciousness holds that consciousness exists only as consciousness of something. Dissociating himself from traditional idealism, Sartre subverted the claim that reality has its foundation in consciousness, and went on to argue that

consciousness is born supported by a being that is not itself (BN 4). Christine Daigle succinctly elaborates after Sartre: “It does not say that there is first consciousness, then the world. The world is primary: it is there to be grasped by consciousness. Consciousness does not create the world ex-nihilo i.e. from nothing, but rather creates what is already there by interpreting it” (21). Thus the fact that consciousness can never be its own object, but is rather the consciousness of something else is the reason why the world in the form of history becomes particularly important in the operation of human choices.

However to deal with choice as an abstract category would be a futile endeavour until it is read in consonance with what in Sartrean terminology is termed ‘negation’. Since intentional consciousness is initially empty, a void that is to be filled up through its interaction with the world, human consciousness is conceived as nothingness that encounters being. Consequently ‘negation’ is the name for that absence or lack which the human self introduces in the world; because in choosing to know something, consciousness has to appropriate the ‘is not’ as part of its necessary structure. Choice therefore is inextricably related to negation in the sense that the latter constitutes the very ground for choice to operate. How that pans out can be best exemplified by means of an analogy borrowed from Sartre (BN 5-6).

In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre has recourse to a number of examples to elucidate his subjective philosophy. By way of explaining how consciousness introduces negation in the world he falls back upon the example of Pierre’s absence in the café. The reader is apprised of the causal structure of negation when Sartre says that negation is caused due to expectation. It is only when I approach the café with the specific expectation to find Pierre that I am confronted with his absence. The café with its discrete entities is a fullness of being, but since finding Pierre is my only project, I subsume or negate the presence of every other being in the café only to be

confronted with Pierre's absence (BN 9-10). One thus discerns the interrelatedness of choice and negation through this concrete analogy. In forming a project what I basically do is exercise a choice. I opt for something or rather act in a way which necessarily entails the rejection or negation of all other possible acts. I choose, and in choosing, introduce negation into the world.

A great many poems of Larkin are fascinating, in the sense that they are subjective exploration of experiences subtle in their nuances. Larkin writes: "I feel that my prime responsibility is to the experience itself, which I am trying to keep from oblivion for its own sake. Why I should do this I have no idea, but I think the impulse to preserve lies at the bottom of all art (RW 79). As such they are replete with choice and negation- something that even the structural pattern of the poems attest to – predominantly due to the abundance of the word 'not' and the use of the negative prefix. James Booth in *The Poet's Plight* has catalogued it with a clerical dexterity. I quote him at some length:

The appearance of 'not' 150 times after 1945 (in seventy five poems) is perhaps scarcely remarkable in itself. But his 'not' phrases are peculiarly resonant, particularly those which double the negative: 'It has not done so then, and could not now'; 'not untrue and not unkind'; 'not knowing how, not hearing who'; 'The good not done the love not given'; 'Not to be here, / Not to be anywhere'. Perhaps Larkin's most notorious lexical idiosyncrasy is his fondness for the negative prefix 'un-'. 'Excluding words where the prefix lacks a negative connotation ('uncle', 'understand', 'until' etc), there are 157 such words in his work after 1945, of which no fewer than 105 appear only on a single occasion. They create a tone of diffidence or irony, though they often have positive implications. They are frequently highly distinctive. A single 'un' word may instantaneously remind a

reader familiar with Larkin's work of the phrase in which it occurs, and thus the whole poem...(8).

Common sense logic will argue that the utilitarian paradigm within which Booth seeks to situate Larkin's poetry by claiming that an 'un-' word would remind the reader "of the phrase in which it occurs" is highly preposterous. The very fact that it has been used 157 times, would, rather than reminding the reader of the appropriate phrase, act as a hindrance to memory, leading to utmost confusion. Also one feels that the justification of the prefix on grounds of rhetorical efficacy and stylistic ingenuity is a bit misplaced, since if at all overuse can merely lead to boredom and monotony. Thus Booth's version of "Larkin's most notorious lexical idiosyncrasy" as well as the over use of the word 'not' needs to be seen from the vantage point of negation informing the poet. However there is a caveat. Merely to point out negations or the choices that they project would be critically unrewarding in the way of bringing out newer reading strategies, until and unless they are aligned to the concept of anguish or existential anxiety that they generate.

The human being or the 'being-for-itself' in Sartrean Existentialism is defined in terms of an unqualified freedom. Being a negating or a nihilating agent, the 'for itself' is never determined and is perpetually free to shape its self through its deliberate choices. But herein crops up a problem. By way of exercising its choice, the 'being-for-itself' realizes that there is nothing that binds it towards a particular course of action. His choice always remains on the plane of possibility and pre-supposes counter-possibilities as well. Sartre observes:

But these actions, precisely because they are my possibilities do not appear to me as determined by foreign causes. Not only is it not strictly certain that they will be

effective; but also it is not strictly certain that they will be adopted for they do not have existence sufficient in themselves ... I am in anguish precisely because any action on my part is only possible, and this means that while constituting a set of motives for repudiating that situation I at the same time apprehend these motives as not sufficiently effective. (BN 30-31)

This then is the very ground for existential anguish and should also provide the rationale behind my titling the chapter as “The Problem of Negation, Choice and Anguish in Larkin’s Poetry”. For the ability to choose is not an unmixed blessing as is usually thought to be. It is a problem perennially afflicted and jeopardized by a sense of anguish which constitutes its necessary structure.

For quite some time, choice as a thematic construct in Larkin’s poetry has figured in contemporary criticism. Commenting on Larkin’s predilection of poetic subject, Andrew Motion in his *A Writer’s Life* writes:

While still a schoolboy, he (Larkin) squared up to the themes of isolation, evanescence and choice which were to dominate much of his later work. Furthermore he began to wonder what chance he had of controlling his own destiny when he knew that he was bound to die- bound to hear the wind ‘blowing over the graves/ of faded summers’ in ‘Winter Nocturne’ and to see the seasons passing in ‘Fragment from May’ and ‘Summer Nocturne’. At this stage, his anxieties are insisted upon rather than re-created, and the treatment seems static and monotonous. (35)

However it becomes difficult to understand how a poet “squares up to the themes of isolation, evanescence and choice”. To assume thus is to assign too much of agency to the poet and also indulge in the now much debated malady of anthropocentrism which had long been a reigning characteristic of every form of human activity. The observation also undermines, or even obliterates the role of the objective world as the ground or context upon which isolation is formed, evanescence structured and choice executed. There is no doubt that the poetic persona in “Winter Nocturne” suffers from an anxiety, but one ought to realize that in his anxiety he is not pre-determined. It is rather the facticity of the phenomenon called death which goes on to shape his poetic anguish:

The pale pond stands; ringed round with rushes few

And draped with leaning trees, it seems to wail

But for the coming of the winter night

Of deep December; blowing o’er the graves

Of faded summers, swift the wind in flight

Ripples its silent face with lapping waves. (CP 225)

It is somewhat strange that there is a close-knit uniformity of approach among Larkin critics, when it comes to commenting upon different facets of his poetry. Marcus Herold from the University of Cologne comments: “Reading Larkin for the first time, one is struck by the characteristically glum atmosphere that pervades most of his poems. The vast majority of his verse is devoted to what is generally taken to be negative aspects of life, such as loneliness and dejection, disappointments, loss, and the terrifying prospect of impending death” (Herold). Time

and again the same formula is repeated- assigning too much of agency to the poet, and essentializing the poetic self in terms of the clichéd pseudo-ethical binary: optimist/ pessimist. This at best leads to a naïve reading of poetry whereby manifestations of negativity are treated as thematic components, which the poet – rather the much celebrated Carlylean poet- as-hero – illumines with his celebrated omniscience for the ontological welfare of his lesser known counterparts. So pervasive is the appropriation of this poet- as- hero ideology, that it debars the astute critic from realizing that the poet like his afore-mentioned counterparts is also like him a victim of history. In other words, he does not choose negativity as his theme; rather history compels him to be negative. Again, commenting upon the dilemma that besets a typical Larkinesque poetic persona, the author observes: “The basic pattern of these dilemmas is always the same; the persona cannot get what he wants, and doesn’t want what he can get; or, as a variation, what he is stuck with” (Herold). This indeed is true, but then this is not a dilemma. On the other hand this is the very nature of the human self – Sartre’s Being- For- Itself- which is defined as a being that is what it is not, and is not what it is. In common parlance, he is a being confronted with the perennial problem of choice to impose some sort of unity to the flux he calls life.

In connection with the problematic of discourse I am trying to counter, a dissertation titled *Existentialism as Humanism in Philip Larkin’s Poetry* by Mr. Omar Kamel needs to be mentioned. Submitted to M’hamed Bougana University, in Algeria, this work deals with such existential concepts as alienation, freedom, choice, time and death from a typically thematic point of view. Closer engagement reveals that it is an exercise in possibly the weakest form of existential study with gross misappropriation of Sartre, whereby pessimism is not merely equated with existentialism, but is also projected as one of its aspects. The project is not marked by any

close reading of Larkin's text, and the intricacy underlying the interdependence of negation, choice and anguish is compromised by means of generic statements, substantiated by citations from Larkin's poetry as if to fit them within the scheme of things.

A difference, though somewhat qualified, may be evinced in the doctoral thesis of Mohammed Abbas Niazi: *Themes and Imagery in the Poetry of Philip Larkin*. Choice in Larkin's poetry crops up here as well, and though the author engages himself in close reading of certain texts, the approach is all too thematic and lopsided due to over-dependence on biographical evidences in way of reading poetry. Mr. Niazi is also guilty of pre-judging Larkin's poetry, whereby seemingly conclusive generalizations are made at the outset of every section and the text is manipulated in a way so as to bail them out. Moreover it appears as if it is the artificer rather than the artifice that Mr. Niazi intends to unravel through his work. Such endeavour like these can at best be regarded as precursors of the existential orientation, but they do not necessarily widen the horizon of critical epistemology.

By far the most meaningful work that one may encounter on the subjects of choice and anxiety is to be found in *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*. This book does not merely destabilize critical stereotypes in Larkin criticism, but goes on directly to engage with existentialism as well. Osborne contextualizes Larkin's poetry within the calamitous history of the 1930s, dominated by an either/or syndrome which inevitably leads to a problem of choice: "By way of context, it is worth reminding ourselves that the rivalry between Communism and Fascism in the inter-war period and between NATO and the Soviet bloc thereafter, meant that Larkin's career was conducted in an ideological climate dominated by a them or us, for or against, 'two camps' doctrine, with an intense psychological pressure to choose" (83). Such was the animus between the contending factions that on the eve of the Spanish civil war, Nancy

Cunard, as Osborne reminds us, circulated a questionnaire to 150 British writers, so that their political position may be categorically ascertained. It read: “Are you for or against, the legal government and the people of Republican Spain? Are you for, or against, Franco and Fascism? For it is impossible any longer to take no side” (83). The problem of choice therefore, we feel, is of utmost significance to the reading of Larkin’s poetry.

Removed from the malaise of erstwhile biographical criticism, Osborne’s engagement with Larkin’s poetry is highly original. In a chapter length exposition called “Larkin and Existentialism”, he goes in for a close reading of “Next Please” from the perspective of Sartre’s ‘Mauvaise Foi’ (Bad Faith), and also a detailed exposition of “Church Going” as a reaction against Kierkegaard’s version of Existentialism. Though the readings in themselves are highly illuminating, and though Osborne does mention both choice and angst in the context of Larkin’s work, yet the fact that he does not quite go on to problematize the issue by delving into the interrelatedness of negation, choice and anguish is what grants radicality to this project.

Negativity, unlike the way it is generally cognized in the liberal humanist tradition is not to be equated with ‘negation’. Whereas negativity is normally understood as both essential and pathological, negation, is according to Sartre, only a form of “behaviour” that is “objectively apprehensible” and that which along with other kinds of behaviour can enable us to fathom the man-world relationship (BN 4). Judged from this position, Larkin’s “I Remember, I Remember” written in 1954 and published in *The Less Deceived* can be read in terms of an exact reworking of existential negation so elaborately enumerated by Sartre. The poem conjures up a persona, who, travelling by a different route through England, happens to find out that co-incidentally the train he is travelling in has stopped at a station which was the place of his birth: “Why, Coventry! I exclaimed. I was born here” (CP 81). Leaning out of the train he quaries for some

‘sign’ through which he could associate in his memory, the town he had long forsaken, but doesn’t find any. The town has changed beyond recognition.

It is not imperative in any objective reading to remind oneself that Coventry was the place where Larkin was born, and thus the experience inheres within the poet. Even if the poem is read from the perspective of an anonymous poetic persona, the contextualization remains meaningful due to the fact that it is embedded in history. Since the poem was composed in 1954, the chances that a traveller would not decipher any trace of familiarity with the town as he knew it, lies absolutely within the realm of probability. History does confirm that the Coventry blitz was a series of bombing raids carried out by the German Air Force, the most devastating of which occurred on the evening of 14<sup>th</sup> November 1940, and continued into the morning of 15<sup>th</sup> November. This was followed by two more raids, the first in April 1941 and the final one in August 1942. Due to the irreparable damage inflicted and the immediate reconstruction work carried out, it is only natural that the place in 1954 would defy recognition.

However, beyond this historical situatedness, there is already an element of negation that has surreptitiously crept into the poem. The town as the narrator views it is a fullness of being. Every discrete element that the narrator presumably views (since he doesn’t enlist them) adds up to constitute the undifferentiated ground of nihilation against which the nothingness of his once-known town pans out. One by one they isolate themselves from this undifferentiated ground, proffer themselves up before consciousness, and on non-recognition, falls back and melts down into the undifferentiation itself. The narrator fails to find his town:

I leant far out, and squinnied for a sign

That this was still the town that had been ‘mine’

So long, but found I wasn't even clear

Which side was which. From where those cycle-crates

Were standing, had we annually departed

For all those family hols? (81)

This is not a negative judgment that he forms but an intuition, that is structured by his expectation to find the town as unaltered as he left it. The train begins to move and the process of recognition commences: "By now I've got the whole place clearly charted" (81). While the narrator was so long witness to the disappearance of everything he looked upon, now with recognition, his intuition is solidified and the entire town organizes itself around it:

Our garden, first: where I did not invent

Blinding theologies of flowers and fruits,

And wasn't spoken to by an old hat.

And here we have that splendid family

I never ran to when I got depressed,

The boys all biceps and the girls all chest,

Their comic Ford, their farm where I could be

‘Really myself’. I’ll show you, come to that,

The bracken where I never trembling sat,

Determined to go through with it; where she

Lay back, and ‘all became a burning mist’.

And in those offices, my doggerel

Was not set up in blunt ten-point, nor read

By a distinguished cousin of the mayor,

Who didn’t call and tell my father *There*

*Before us, had we the gift to see ahead-* (CP 81-82)

Surprisingly though, the concatenation of negative words, - ‘did not’, ‘wasn’t’, ‘never’, etc. - coupled with the negativity that seems to engulf the narrator, is the seat of a yet profounder negation, occasioned by the word ‘unspent’. Seeing the narrator’s over-enthusiasm with Coventry, a friend who seems to have been accompanying him asks, “‘Was that...where you have your roots’”? It is in response to this apparently harmless question that the narrator muses: “No, where my childhood was unspent” (81). In this context, it ought to be noted that my use of the verb ‘muse’ is a conscious one, since the response alluded to above is not vocal. The absence of inverted commas in penultimate and ultimate line of the third stanza along with the purport of

the clause 'I wanted to retort' would testify to that. From here onwards, everything that the narrator appears to say takes the form of an interior monologue with negation as the sole motif. What conditions this negation is the conceptual expectation of a childhood well-spent, in relation to which the loci comprising 'our garden', 'that splendid family', 'their comic Ford', 'their farm', 'the bracken' and 'those offices' constitute the ground of nihilation. Turn by turn, childhood activities of the narrator associated with those places are projected before consciousness, and being unrecognized sink back into the undifferentiated ground. One negation gives way to another until it tends to spill over and colour everything in its own hue. The poem evolves as an experience in pure negation.

Having engaged thus far, a diligent reader may stumble on a problem. The conception of a childhood well-spent is almost always socially constituted, and is a resultant of the reigning ideology that shapes it. Considered from this view, it becomes easier for the reader to appreciate once again the situatedness of the poem in history. Almost all the activities associated with childhood, which the narrator catalogues as having missed out in the fifth stanza, are in fact cultural stereotypes of the second half of the twentieth century; with the capitalized 'Ford' and the word 'call'(possibly denoting a telephone) remaining as tangible attestations to the same. However, what are we to make of the sardonic tone that characterizes the narrator as well as the narration from the fourth stanza onwards? Since it is 'irony', an essentially conscious rhetorical device that dominates the poem from this juncture, would it be misplaced to claim that the poem from this point onwards has become self-reflexive. In other words, is Larkin staging a negation in poetic terms? The final line indeed would make us feel so, not only because it sounds like a one-line adage, but also because it floats free of the adjoining verse, wherein the involved

narrator of the poem has yielded his part to the omniscient poet: “Nothing, like something, happens anywhere”.

If the negation in ‘I If “I Remember, I Remember”’ was occasioned by a perceived loss of childhood, in “MCMXIV” it is an offshoot of the same perceived sense of what England ought to have been. In tone, tenor and content therefore, the two poems are closely aligned where loss as a reigning deity shapes the discourse. However whereas in “I Remember, I Remember” the ground of nihilation was eidetic and tangible, in “MCMXIV”, it is left absolutely unattended, possibly because the narrator knows that it can be recounted from history:

Those long uneven lines

Standing as patiently

As if they were stretched outside

The Oval or Villa Park,

The crowns of hats, the sun

On moustached archaic faces

Grinning as if it were all

An August Bank Holiday lark... (CP 127)

Completed in May 1960, the poem was published in Larkin’s 1964 volume *The Whitsun Wedding*, where ‘MCMXIV’ is the year 1914 in Roman numerals. The context of the poem and its historical relevance is therefore patent in the title itself, and the reader cannot but help identify ‘Those long uneven lines’ with men who had queued up gleefully in order to enlist themselves

for the impending First World War. In addition to this, the place names in ‘Oval’ and ‘Villa Park’ also stand out as further contextualization of nationality. The poem comprises four eight-line stanzas and yet the first three are intended to operate as a single agential unit affixed to one another with the conjunction, ‘And’. Thus the second and third stanza in consonance with the first enlists the nostalgic reminiscences that in their typicality constitute both the narrator’s sense of a utopian England as also his field of expectation, owing largely to the fact that they are experienced as missing:

And the shut shops, the bleached  
 Established names on the sunblinds,  
 The farthings and sovereigns’  
 And dark-clothed children at play  
 Called after kings and queens’  
 The tin advertisements  
 For cocoa and twist, and the pubs  
 Wide open all day;  
 And the countryside not caring:  
 The place-names all hazed over  
 With flowering grasses, and fields

Shadowing Domesday lines

Under wheat's restless silence;

The differently- dressed servants

With tiny rooms in huge houses,

The dust behind limousines... (127)

The World Wars that followed, within a gap of two decades, had changed everything. Not only the visage of what the narrator had known to be his country, but its mind as well:

Never such innocence,

Never before or since,

As changed itself to past

Without a word- the men

Leaving the gardens tidy,

The thousands of marriages

Lasting a little while longer:

Never such innocence again. (CP 127-128)

Interestingly, the poem is conceived as a single reminiscence whereby an unbroken series of reflection finds culmination with the final period of the concluding line. However, coming back to the question of negation, it is evident that the historical specificity of post-war England would

constitute the ground for its nihilation. Nevertheless, though the poem in itself does not create that ground yet its localization in recent history enables the reader to re-constitute it. ‘Bleached, established names’ had been decimated, perhaps due to heavy bombing while the ‘farthings’ and ‘sovereigns’- marks of English regality- had succumbed to the hegemonic gaze of the dollar. Similarly in a shattered economy, the ‘huge houses’ occurring in the penultimate line of the third stanza, as well as the tidy ‘gardens’ have given way to government housing projects. Judged from an existential perspective, all these elements enumerated above designate a fulness of being. The narrator looks towards them, they project themselves up towards him but the narrator is unwilling to accept them as real. They sink back into the ground and lose their entity. The negation of all existing entity is therefore complete and what hovers over the poem is total absence.

These engagements, without the determining influence of any external evidence whatsoever, should make it pretty clear that a state of pure negation is a practical possibility. Since the narrator is not a determined agent bound within the confines of causality, negation for him becomes only a mode of behavior through which he engages with the world. The man-world relationship that becomes manifest through the posture of the narrators in these poems is one in which they prefer to remain in a state of undecidability without opting to choose. However there are poems in which this man-world relationship becomes highly complicated, due to the transactive liaison among different modes of behavior. In Larkin’s “Church Going” for example, negation, choice and anxiety weave a pattern that is so intricate as to be literally confounding.

“Church Going” written in 1954 and published in the anthology *The Less Deceived* is not so much about the ‘Church’ as about the ‘Going’. Also the intentional pun in the title compels the reader to place it within the context of institutional dissolution of that celebrated edifice

immortalized by Nietzsche in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*: “This old saint in his forest has heard nothing yet about God being dead” (7). The poem has been commented upon by many a critic, though it is Osborne alone who has sought to give an existential interpretation of it. His claim is that “Church Going” should be read as a reversal of Kierkegaard’s stated position on Christianity, the Church and those manifold institutions, which for him (Kierkegaard) were the primary impediments to faith. Osborne writes:

From this fierce either/or, Kierkegaard’s last pamphlets and articles proceed to a vitriolic critique of the institution of the Church. The clergy is vilified for hypocritically prospering in the praise of Christ’s sufferings. Church rites and rituals are ‘a fake, a forgery’: infant baptism is dismissed as an absurdity since spiritual rebirth demands decision, dedication and suffering, and cannot simply be conferred at birth; confirmation likewise functions ‘as a false guarantee’ of acceptance into the faith, the marriage ceremony is a ‘Christian comedy’; and the confining of religious observances to weekends and public holidays is denounced as the ‘Christianity of the Christmas pudding’. In his ferocious drive to sift the wheat of Christian truth from the chaff of Christendom’s institutional life, Kierkegaard concluded that even the buildings and their fitments stood in the way of spiritual illumination.... This is the position Kierkegaard had reached in July 1855, four months before his death at the age of forty – two, and this is the position that ninety nine years later, to the month, Larkin systematically reversed in the poem ‘Church Going’. (95)

Undoubtedly this makes for good reading, but then a major literary work can seldom be conceived as a mere intellectual frolic that an author engages in to make a point. By confining

the discourse to the domain of existentialist philosophy alone, Osborne has not only abstracted it from the ideological specifics of its epoch but also engaged himself in escapism of sorts. For when a major poet writes, it is the exigencies of his generation that concerns him rather than some philosophical exposition of an eminent predecessor. Obviously therefore, the multifarious nuances of this oft-cited poem can best be appreciated by situating it in its historical context.

The genesis of “Church Going”, I contend, is shrouded in a crisis. This crisis commenced with the publication of Charles Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* in the Victorian period, that saw the debunking of the concept of an all-caring God, and consequently a teleological existence, according to which life was regarded as a penance by a devout Christian, in preparation for the heavenly abode that was promised him. Long acquired beliefs die hard, and the minimal faith which still existed was shattered by the scourges of the two World Wars, when human suffering compelled man to ask a fundamental question which can be framed thus: If there is an all-caring God in the universe, can he be so immune to my concerns? Again Larkin’s firsthand experience of the Second World War, when in 1940 Coventry was indiscriminately bombed by the German Air Force leading to a huge loss of life and property, could also be seen as the final nail in the coffin of his religious belief. Possibly because of this, we find that within the confines of the poem, the question of faith is absolutely irrelevant. The speaker, who enters the Church, does so only after he is ‘sure there’s nothing going on...’ It is this irreverence, or rather indifference to religion that is fore grounded at the outset of the poem:

Another Church: matting, seats, and stone,

And little books; sprawling of flowers, cut

For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff

Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;  
 And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,  
 Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off  
 My cycle-clips in awkward reverence... (CP 97)

In the absence of faith, the Church is only an edifice, a composite material structure of “Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky” (97). How does one therefore justify the narrator’s visit? Arguably this can best be done from the vantage point of the man-world relationship, in which the Church as it were forms a liminal space, where the narrator’s ratiocinative consciousness contends with his existential behavior to impose some kind of meaning upon life. The narrator’s physical engagement with the church is in the mode of negation. The first two stanzas with their long drawn sentences coupled with the pace of the verse, project a persona whose entry within the church premise is not a matter of choice but a contingency. The posture is that of a tired uninformed traveller, who espying a forlorn building, enters it, and thereafter realizes that it is a church that he has entered. He dispassionately observes almost all the objects housed in that premise, engages in reading certain printed inscriptions, and leaves the place after negating the entire experience as a meaningless enterprise:

Move forward, run my hand around the font.  
 From where I stand, the roof looks almost new-  
 Cleaned, or restored? Someone would know: I don’t.  
 Mounting the lectern, I peruse a few

Hectoring large-scale verses, and pronounce

‘Here endeth’ much more loudly than I’d meant.

The echoes snigger briefly. Back at the door

I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence,

Reflect the place was not worth stopping for. (97)

Negation is here consequent to an expected state of affair that in the consciousness of the narrator constitutes the conception of the church. It is this unformulated expectation, hidden both from the narrator as well as the reader which confronts the tangible ground for nihilation, structured by the holistic ambience of the church. All discrete elements starting with the ‘matting’, ‘seats’, ‘books’, ‘sprawling of flowers’, ‘the small neat organ’, the ‘unignorable silence’, ‘font’, ‘lectern’, and the visitors ‘book’, are projected before consciousness, but since they are not recognized as authentic, they sink back into the ground. The church, though in itself a fullness of being, becomes for the narrator a place where something is missing.

From the third stanza onwards, the reflective consciousness begins its operation. From here, the entire poem evolves as a reflection that the narrator indulges in, so as to impose a seeming coherence to his just terminated experience. He envisages a time when churches as institutions would ‘fall completely out of use’ and presents a number of tangible and pragmatic options which might then be conducive in ensuring the utility of those deserted structures:

When churches fall completely out of use

What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep

A few cathedrals chronically on show,  
 Their parchment, plate and pyx in locked cases,  
 And let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep. (97)

However, the last line of the third stanza changes direction with the narrator contemplating the future role of churches from a wide array of functions. In the absence of faith, it is unfaith in the garb of superstitions that is personified and presented as an antithesis:

Or, after dark, will dubious women come  
 To make their children touch a particular stone;  
 Pick simples for a cancer; or on some  
 Advised night see walking a dead one?  
 Power of some sort or other will go on  
 In games, in riddles, seemingly at random... (CP 97-98)

It is difficult for us to overlook the insinuation that the options proposed as legitimate antithesis to faith are in the form of choices staring at the face of futurity. May be they are, but what is important is that the existentialist narrator is quite comfortable in placing them beyond the purview of ethicality. He discerns no transcendental ground, based on which he can create a hierarchy between faith and unfaith, thus giving way to anguish: "But superstition, like belief must die, / And what remains when disbelief has gone? / Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky," (Cp.98). This anguish is the anguish of freedom- the freedom of being of the narrator, separated from his past by a nothingness that is its necessary structure.

The narrator does however make a choice, but this is a choice that is neither conditioned by faith nor unfaith. On the other hand it is impelled upon by the man-world relationship: a consciousness in the narrator that he is a being-in –the-world, and as a social being it is only his socially structured choice that would be truly authentic:

A serious house on serious earth it is,  
 In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,  
 Are recognized, and robed as destinies.  
 And that much never can be obsolete... (98)

The church is and shall remain a significant institution not because of faith or unfaith, since the narrator knows that being ideologies, they are bound to either mutate or perish. But there is something that is unchanging and unchangeable, which is the continuity of human life on this planet. As long as there is life, there will be society, and as long as there is society the church will be there to validate its primary institutions of marriage, birth and death. It is therefore in the domain of civic virtues that the narrator finds validity of his choice, an unequivocal utterance of which may also be found in the poem titled, “Best Society”:

Giving requires a legatee,  
 Good neighbours need whole parishfuls  
 Of folk to do it on- in short,  
 Our virtues are all social; if,  
 Deprived of solitude, you chafe,

It's clear you're not the virtuous sort. (CP 56)

With Larkin then, as with most major poets, the ability to exercise a choice is not an unmixed blessing but one that is riddled with anxiety. Having arrived at a conscious choice, regarding the significance of the church, and that too through a process of dialectic argumentation, it was expected that the poem would achieve a resolution of opposites that had plagued the narrator throughout. However the pleasure of a Miltonic 'Kommos' (loosely translated as calm of mind, all passion spent) is normally denied in a Larkinesque poem. In the context of the authentic choice that the narrator arrives at in the last stanza, what are we to make of the terminating line which reads, "If only that so many dead lie round". The relationship of this line is in no way linked to any metaphysical questions that one normally associates with the church. Moreover the growing 'wise in' cannot be related to the 'many dead' that 'lie round', since in the last stanza the narrator has already effected the necessary disjunct between the metaphysicality associated with the church, and the church as the repository of social virtues. Under such circumstances the final line can only be seen in terms of another anguish besetting the narrator, The de-contextualization of the final line coupled with the benumbing irony made all the more pungent by the word 'only', is representative of anguish because it jeopardizes the narrator's value ascription of the church through the finality of death. The line typically undermines the possibilities generated in the last stanza, and the narrator in the face of the terminality of death sees his choice as somewhat meaningless or absurd.

Choice is a dilution of the limitless possibilities of human life and very few poets suffer it with intensity greater than Larkin. "To My Wife" written in 1951 is a poetic rendition of the problem that choice presupposes and the consequent anguish which follows: "Choice of you shuts up that peacock-fan/ The future was, in which temptingly spread/ All that elaborative

nature can” (CP 54). The poem can be read as a caustic comment on the Sartrean concept of existential choice, which makes it feasible for the human being to lead an authentic life based on its original project. However, even if assurance of happiness through domesticity is taken to constitute the original project of the speaker, the probability of his project attaining fulfilment is considerably compromised by the contradiction underlying the exercise of choice itself. The speaker understands that the world as opposed to him is an ensemble of possibilities; yet they are unlimited and enticing, so long as one has not exercised his choice. To choose is to delimit oneself and forgo the claim of every other:

Matchless potential! But unlimited

Only so long as I elected nothing;

Simply to choose stopped all ways up but one,

And sent the tease-birds from the bushes flapping.

No future now. I and you now, alone. (CP 54)

It is this realization that furnishes the ground for anguish. The choice having been exercised, the speaker realizes that as a free being, he is detached from his past by a nothingness. In other words there is nothing that binds him to the ‘face’ or the ‘properties’ he has opted for:

So for your face I have exchanged all faces,

For your few properties bargained the brisk

Baggage, the mask-and-magic-man’s regalia.

Now you become my boredom and my failure,

Another way of suffering, a risk,

A heavier-than-air hypostasis. (54)

The ensuing anguish is not only to be gauged in the way in which the object of choice gets transposed into the speaker's 'boredom' and his 'failure'. On the other hand, its cogency is affected in concrete terms, through the seemingly ambivalent purport of the medico-philosophical term 'hypostasis'. I use the phrase 'seemingly ambivalent' consciously, in order to point out the subtlety of Larkin's craftsmanship, which relies more on complicating issues rather than reconciling them. There are two predominantly available lexical meanings of the term 'hypostasis'. The medical connotation of the word refers to the accumulation of blood in the lower part of the body as in the case of death; the philosophical connotation designates an underlying reality, as opposed to its attributes. Within the context of the poem, and in view of the fact that the chosen object has already been confirmed as the 'boredom' and 'failure' of the speaker, it is most unlikely that the philosophical connotation has been implied here. Thus the anguish under consideration is anguish akin to death, and it is the palpability of the medical metaphor, which lavishes upon the speaker an opportunity, to render in concrete terms, the ineffable presence of anguish he has so long been circumscribed by.

In Larkin's poetry, anguish issuing out the never ending tussle between action and inaction, being and non-being is pursued with a zeal so insistent that at times it appears to border on obsession. The Shakespearean problematic of 'To be, or not to be' which encapsulates the interminable contradiction informing and inhabiting the polar opposites of life becomes the defining mark of a poetry that in the variety of its treatment can give the most regimented of

existentialist a run for his money. Consider for instance an eight-line poem “To put one brick upon another” written alongside the earlier poem in 1951:

To put one brick upon another

Add a third, and then a fourth,

Leaves no time to wonder whether

What you do has any worth.

But to sit with bricks around you

While the winds of heaven bawl

Weighing what you should or can do

Leaves no doubt of it at all. (CP 58)

Though it is tempting to read the poem from a trans-historical perspective, owing to the intended symbolism attached to the primary image yet the historical specificity of post war England as a conditioning factor can seldom be ignored. A shattered economy with rising unemployment, which was then the prevailing scenario, would normally generate despondency whereby the very notion of action would be questioned. The problem of choice in this poem is staged in its widest sense. It is not a choice between two probable and possible courses of action, but between action in its most rudimentary form on the one hand and action pitted against inaction or inertness on the other. The speaker knows that choice is the fundamental prerogative of human life. But in the face of the imminent terminality called death, captured so exquisitely through the bawling ‘winds

of heaven', anguish appears to be his only recourse. The problem of choice remains unresolved, held in abeyance, and this is borne out through the abstruseness of the final line where choice itself has been rendered absurd.

Larkin's poetry, therefore, is plagued with ineptitude when it comes to making choices. However, there are poems wherein this existential dilemma centering on choice is somewhat resolved, and the poetic speaker moves towards embracing the authentic life he had long desired. Written in 1958, and published initially in the anthology *The Whitsun Wedding*, "Self's the Man" is a poem which contrasts the deliberate choice of the narrator's celibacy with the presumed marital bliss of Arnold, apparently just to point out the difference:

Oh, no one can deny

That Arnold is less selfish than I.

He married a woman to stop her getting away

Now she's there all day,

And the money he gets for wasting his life on work

She takes as her perk

To pay for the kiddies' clobber and the drier

And the electric fire... (CP 117)

The tone of condescension and sarcasm that characterizes the poem is part of a process which sees marriage and procreation as a meaningless façade, operating only to curb the much cherished sense of freedom, which is the narrator's prerogative:

And when he finishes supper

Planning to have a read at the evening paper

It's *put a screw in this wall-*

He has no time at all,

With the nippers to wheel round the houses

And the hall to paint in his old trousers

And that letter to her mother

Saying *won't you come for the summer.* (CP 117)

However, then comes the leveller in the sixth stanza. The narrator concedes that qualitative hierarchization of choice is a social construct and therefore untenable as a conceptual category. What really matters for the human agent is to make a deliberate choice, and judged from that perspective, both he and Arnold having exercised their respective choices have ensured their authentic existence:

But wait, not so fast:

Is there such a contrast?

He was out for his own ends

Not just pleasing his friends;

And if it was such a mistake

He still did it for his own sake,

Playing his own game.

So he and I are the same,

Only I'm a better hand

At knowing what I can stand

Without them sending a van-

Or I suppose I can. (CP 117-118)

The subject/object dichotomy is considerably bridged, but again it is the terminating line, "Or I suppose I can", that spills the beans of discord. Asserting one's own superiority, with regard to Arnold by way of agency, can doubtless be construed as a valid human proposition; but the underlying doubt in the last line is too obvious to be negated. It is anguish setting in to obfuscate the very basis of choice itself.

Five years after he composed "Self's the Man", Larkin's penchant for life-choices found another poetic equivalent in the poem "Dockery and Son". The thread of thematic affinity

running between the poems is startling in the sense that in the latter too, the narrator and his friend Dockery are projected as having reconciled themselves to their respective deliberate choices of celibacy and marital life. Progeny symbolized by the ‘nippers’ in “Self’s the Man” is supplanted with Dockery’s son; but while “Self’s the Man” thrives on identification between the speaker and Arnold, in “Dockery and Son” it is difference that characterizes the concerned personae:

Only a numbness registered the shock

Of finding out how much had gone of life,

How widely from the others. Dockery, now:

Only nineteen, he must have taken stock

Of what he wanted, and been capable

Of...No, that’s not the difference: rather, how

Convinced he was he should be added to!

Why did he think adding meant increase?

To me it was dilution. (CP 152-153)

The ratiocination that follows, assures the speaker of the validity of his deliberate choice, and also enables him to place his own self beyond the clutches of anguish. This he effects not by negating Dockery’s life-choice, but by situating it within a domain of difference. Whatever

choice one might adopt life for the speaker turns out to be a great leveller if only because of the common extinction that awaits us all:

Life is first boredom, then fear.

Whether or not we use it, it goes,

And leaves what something hidden from us chose,

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

This is not abstruse philosophy garbed in poetic language. This is rather high poetry which in spite of incorporating, interrogating and problematizing a reigning philosophical discourse of its time, remains true to its vocation. “Do not all charms fly/ At the touch of cold philosophy? (190)”- John Keats enquired, relenting on the heterogeneous admixture of the two disciplines. But with Larkin, philosophy far from clipping the angelic wings of poetry lavishes upon it such ornate embellishments, so as to fortify the latter for longer flights.

An intricate re-working of a problem that choice presupposes is furthermore evinced in a poem published in Larkin’s last volume of poetry *High Windows*. This poem, written in 1967, and bearing the same title as the anthology, conjures before us an imaginary speaker who, contemplating the sexual freedom of his younger contemporaries, effuses out:

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 (CP 165)

To the consciousness of the speaker- which is always a nothingness in relation to its past- this permissiveness of youth proffers itself in the form of a desire to be appropriated. It is a choice that awaits the speaker's embrace, but can he respond to its call? Of course he can, but not in the form of youth, for he has already transcended that stage. The issue is not the glib temptation of sex; it is rather the unbridled freedom of youth. To his utter dismay, the speaker realizes that choice is a temporal phenomenon, as the question of choice is inextricably related to the nature of options provided by the historical epoch in which one lives:

Everyone old has dreamed of all their lives-

Bonds and gestures pushed to one side

Like an outdated combine harvester,

And everyone young going down the long slide

To happiness, endlessly. (165)

This would normally have constituted sufficient ground for anguish, had not the astute speaker dexterously effected a displacement of his desires. Whereas in the first stanza it were the 'kids' who had agency, from the third stanza it is the speaker who assumes control. A set of choices, he knows he can no more appropriate, is countered by another set which presumably his predecessors would have failed to adopt:

I wonder if

Anyone looked at me, forty years back,

And thought, *That'll be the life;*

*No God any more, or sweating in the dark*

*About hell and that, or having to hide*

*What you think of the priest. (165)*

The problem however, remains unreconciled. Choice counterpointed by choice can at best be an exquisite discursive activity, but since the desire of the speaker remains unfulfilled, it fails to provide a viable ontological option. The result is a sublimation instituted beyond the bourne of the man-world relationship:

Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:

The sun-comprehending glass,

And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows

Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless. (165)

Finally, it would be observed that I have by way of praxis engaged with a handful of poems, selected from not only Larkin's major anthologies, but his earlier collections as well. However, it was a deliberate choice on my part to abstain from any sequential engagement, in accordance with their date of composition. For it has never been the stated aim of this project to trace what in liberal humanist discourse is known as poetic development. As a matter of fact, this project commenced by destabilizing, the now redundant concept of the essential poet, in total control of his material. Thus, the order in which the poems appear have been dictated by the exigencies of the search rather than by any extraneous concerns. Larkin's poetry, we have found, suffers

interminably from the inability to adopt deliberate choices. The poetic persona in most poems we have delved upon writhes in anguish, in the face of the limited choice they are circumscribed by and this in turn debars them access to the authenticity which alone can qualify existence. Should we take this inauthenticity for granted, or should the cleavage lying at the very heart of choice, form the ground for a differently oriented search? This is the question that would concern us in the next chapter.