

Chapter Four

The Absurd in Larkin's Poetry

The 'Absurd', normally in the lower case, has seldom been recognised as a philosophical category. It has not been accorded an entry in its own right in the major philosophical encyclopaedias, like the multi-volume *McMillan Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* by Paul Edwards (1967), or the *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* by Edward Craig (1998), or even the 2006 edition of the *McMillan Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, which has as many as 450 new entries. *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* edited by Ted Honderich however, in a brief entry defined the term as one "used by existentialists to describe that which one might have thought to be amenable to reason but which turns out to be beyond the limits of rationality". It purportedly does not figure much in Existentialist Philosophy but is believed to constitute "an important aspect of the broader cultural context of existentialism". The contemporary currency which the word enjoys is therefore primarily of a literary sort, and this is attested by the fact that the *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* by Chris Baldick defines the absurd "as a term derived from the existentialism of Albert Camus, and often applied to the modern sense of human purposelessness in a universe without meaning and value". (Cornwell 3-4)

Neil Cornwell, in *The Absurd in Literature* claims that Gorgias of Leontini, a contemporary of Socrates, may be regarded as the precursor of the absurdists. It was his treatise *On Nature* that propounded "the tripartite reasoning, according to which: first, 'that nothing is'; secondly, 'that even if it is it cannot be comprehended'; and thirdly 'that even if it can be comprehended, it cannot be communicated'" (4). Nihilism as a predominant constituent of the absurd can be traced back to the beliefs of the Megaric school, who, as William Lane Craig holds were pre-Socratics

that “ had denied all becoming and change in the world”(qtd.in Cornwell: 4)).The seeds of irrationality therefore find sufficient presence and precedence in the history of western thought.

In the previous chapter we have seen how tenuous the problem of choice is in the poetry of Philip Larkin. That the exercise of choice within the context of poetic experience is almost always followed by a latent anxiety is only natural in view of the fact that choice *per se* can never be pre-determined due to the very nature of the human being whose existence is contingent. Sartre insisted on this dilemma of choice when he held that there is no transcendental ground that determines or justifies our choice. It is this contingent human situation, both unjustified and unjustifiable that in atheistic existential philosophy becomes the very ground of the absurd. The term, most usually associated with Sartre has been defined in Hazel Barnes’s translation of *Being and Nothingness* as “that which is meaningless. Thus man’s existence is absurd because his contingency finds no external justification” (628). In other words the absurd is a direct corollary of the gratuitousness of human existence and finds its most palpable expression in the experience of Antoin Roquetin in Sartre’s novel *Nausea*:

That moment was extraordinary. I was there, motionless and frozen, plunged into a horrible ecstasy. But, in the very heart of that ecstasy, something new had just appeared; I understood the nausea, I possessed it... The essential thing is contingency. I mean that, by definition existence is not necessity. To exist is simply to be there; what exists appears, lets itself be encountered, but you can never deduce it. There are people, I believe, who have understood that. Only they have tried to overcome this contingency by inventing a necessary causal being. But no necessary being can explain existence: contingency is not an illusion, an appearance which can be dissipated; it is absolute and consequently perfect

gratuitousness. Everything is gratuitous, that park, this town and myself (187-188).

It is however Albert Camus with whom the idea of the absurd is most usually associated. The Camusean conception of the absurd in so far as confronting it through consciousness is concerned definitely corresponds to that of Sartre. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Camus contends that the absurd arises out of the “confrontation between human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” (MS 32). According to him, neither human existence nor the world is in itself absurd. It is rather the conflict which ensues from the confrontation of the two that gives rise to it. On the one hand there is the human desire to comprehend the world as a whole, to cognise it as meaningful in terms of human values, while on the other this human desire is thwarted since the world is typically resistant to all forms of intelligibility. All this would have appeared somewhat abstruse, if Camus had not specified the manifest content of his claim. The absurd as he saw it surfaces with every questioning by man of the purpose and meaning of his existence:

It happens that the stage sets collapse. Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm- this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the ‘why’ arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement (MS19).

A feeling that human existence is gratuitous, and therefore consequently meaningless, invades the human mind, and this is something that Camus shares in common with none other than Sartre, whose conception of the human predicament has already been catalogued. The self loses its much assumed rigidity but what of that? Man reaches out towards the external world with a

desire for familiarity- a feeling that he can impose some sort of unity on the discreteness of his experiences. However what he confronts is merely a negation, a sense that the world is not merely 'foreign' but also 'irreducible' (MS 20) to him: "At the heart of all beauty lies something inhuman, and these hills, the softness of the sky, the outline of these trees at this very minute lose the illusory meaning with which we had clothed them, henceforth more remote than a lost paradise (MS 20)".

The otherness of human beings, as well as the otherness that man discerns within his own consciousness can also be construed as significant manifestation of the absurd. Under its impact, the apparent illusion of meaning with which human actions are invested, starts disintegrating into what Camus terms 'meaningless pantomime'(MS 21). This is however not to assume that the comprehending self in whom the so called disintegration inhere remains unified. To his utter dismay man encounters an otherness within the very recesses of his own being:

A man is talking on a telephone behind a glass partition; you cannot hear him, but you see his incomprehensible dumb show: you wonder why he is alive. This discomfort in the face of man's own inhumanity, this incalculable tumble before the image of what we are, this 'nausea' as a writer of today calls it, is also the absurd. Likewise the stranger who at certain seconds comes to meet us in a mirror, the familiar and yet alarming brother we encounter in our own photographs is also the absurd (MS 21).

The meaninglessness of human life, along with its elaborately arrayed train of paraphernalia, is the central theme of Larkin's poetry. Life stutters on at its usual pace, but for the poet- "Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs" (CP 42) In fact as early as 1939 he was writing poetry where the gratuitousness of a squalid existence impresses itself with nagging acerbity:

When the night puts twenty veils
 Over the sun, and the west sky pales
 To black its vast sweep:
 Then all is deep
 Save where the street lamp gleams upon the rails.

This summer time must be forgot
 It will be, if we would or not-
 Who lost or won?
 Oblivious run:
 And sunlight, if it could, would coldly rot.

So let me accept the role, and call
 Myself the circumstances' tennis-ball:
 We'll bounce: together
 Or not, whether
 Either, let no tears silent fall. (CP 232)

This identification of the victor and the loser in the context of the subject's projection of himself as "circumstances' tennis ball" was the prelude as well as the hallmark of a poetic mind wherein meaninglessness as the presiding deity ruled supreme. Even if one does away with the symbolism implicit in such words and phrases as 'night', 'west sky pales', 'summer time' and the like, the general mood of absurdity which hovers over the poem is difficult to negate. Unlike

the Sartrean absurd that leaves Roquetin flushed and confounded, Larkin's poem does not make action redundant, but insinuates that just as the metaphorical tennis ball bounces, life exists.

A fundamental difference between philosophy and poetry is that, far from being prescriptive and frontal, poetry employs language in a very special way. Thus while absurdity as the offshoot of meaninglessness and gratuitousness is for Sartre both ontological and epistemic, Larkin's poetry has always embodied the same, primarily at the level of the experiential:

The bottle is drunk out by one;
 At two, the book is shut;
 At three, the lovers lie apart,
 Love and its commerce done;
 And now the luminous watch-hands
 Show after four o'clock,
 Time of night when straying winds
 Trouble the dark. (CP 277)

It should not be surmised that this preoccupation with the absurd was a passing phase in the poetry of Philip Larkin. Even at the fag end of his poetic career, the absurd remained a pervasive presence in the way of structuring any feasible course of action in human terms, and it is this very aspect that is thoroughly wrought out in and through the lines of a poem titled, "The Winter Palace":

Most people know more as they grow older
 I give all that the cold shoulder.
 I spent my second quarter-century
 Losing what I had learnt at university.

And refusing to take in what had happened since
 Now I know none of the names in public prints.
 And am starting to give offence by forgetting faces
 And swearing I've never been in certain places.
 It will be worth it, if in the end I manage
 To blank out whatever it is that is doing the damage.
 Then there will be nothing I know,
 My mind will fold into itself, like fields, like snow. (CP 211)

Twenty-first century medical ethics would have been tempted to interpret the poem in terms of a sustained reflection on dementia, if the systemic cataloguing of oblivion had not exposed the artifice behind it all. The sensitive reader understands that this is not a poem on forgetfulness; it is rather a statement on the possible means by which the absurd might be countered. Since it is the realization of the meaninglessness of life that gives rise to the absurd, and also since this absurd predominantly manifests itself through human memory, it is Larkin's poetic certitude that obliteration of the last vestiges of memory would enable man to come to terms with the phenomenon called life.

Concerted critical enquiry into Larkin's poetry from the vantage point of the absurd has seldom been undertaken. Whether it be 'Movement' poetry in general or Larkin's poetry in particular, numerous critics from the 1950s onward have spoken disparagingly about the general attitude, tone and tenor that they thought inhered in the poet(s). Dannie Abse, one of the two editors of an anthology called *Mavericks* (1957), dubbed the Movement attitude as 'fundamentally antipoetic' and pontificated: "...it is as if they're afraid of the mystery conversing

with the mystery” (9), while Howard Sergeant, his co-editor contended that the Movement had “little of particular urgency or importance to say” (12). What exactly is implied by the phrase ‘mystery conversing with the mystery’ is largely left unexplained, but if it is logically assumed to be connotative of the self as pitted against the universe, the proposition can only assume relevance within the context of the absurd.

An unfortunate aspect of Movement criticism and particularly of Larkin, is that it is not merely dismissive, but unabashedly prescriptive too. Far from accepting the body of poetry for what it is, there are critics who impose their own standards of judgment, not as interpretative criteria but rather as thematic preoccupations with which they think poetry ought to be evaluated. Charles Tomlinson’s objection to Larkin’s poetry, way back in 1957, was incisive and poignant: “a wry and sometimes tenderly nursed sense of defeat” which according to Tomlinson was draped in racial contours: “Larkin’s narrowness suits the English perfectly. They recognise their own abysmal urban landscapes, skilfully caught with just a whiff of English films circa 1950. The stepped-down version of human possibilities... the joke that hesitates just on this side of nihilism, are national vices” (qtd. in Regan “The Critics Debate”: 27).

All these and much more have been exquisitely summarized by Regan. In a section titled “Gentility in English Poetry”, Regan, the astute commentator that he is, not only catalogues the theoretical position of the detractors but equally provides an overview of the defenders as they try to salvage the poetry by projecting arguments of affirmative purport. However, disappointment sets in when we find that though there were stark similarities among the terms of discourse of the so called detractors; Regan somehow stops short of insinuating any alternative engagement with Larkin’s poetry that could have ushered in a new poetics of reading. What eludes his attention is the fact that Abse’s ‘mystery conversing with the mystery’, Sergeant’s

‘little of...importance to say’, and Tomlinson’s ‘tenderly nursed sense of defeat’ coupled with his ‘stepped down version of human possibilities’ if read together manifest a pattern which undoubtedly borders on the absurd. In other words, these might well be the characteristics one normally associates with a poet who finds every iota of his experience invaded by an absurdity that defies interpretation.

It is in this context that Regan’s role as a responsive critic of Larkin becomes susceptible to enquiry. An apparently facile comment by Alfred Alvarez on Larkin’s ‘Church Going’ that Regan cites may be a case in point. Commenting on the poetic persona created by the poet in the aforesaid poem Alvarez has this to say in his ‘Introduction’ to *The New Poetry*:

This in a concentrated form is the image of the post-war 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, and 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(24-25).

That Alvarez exhibits a pitiful understanding of the distinction between poet and persona, not to say anything about his understanding of the poem, is of course beside the point: Regan undoubtedly has registered his dissent in this regard. However what he fails to do is to dispel the now defunct long standing romantic myth of the poet as the ‘strange creature inspired’: that typical Colridgean ‘milk of paradise’ drunk essence, who, with the magical wand called words, could possibly reconcile the antinomies of life. He also fails to impress upon with sufficient vivacity, the idea that on the face of the absurdity called life, the poet was and shall always be ‘the man next door’. In reality it is this helplessness, this peculiar sense of impotence that had led

even the greatest of the poets to escape his despicability by projecting a God like persona, which though inhabiting the ephemeral is largely unperturbed by it.

An unsettling consciousness of the absurd has always been a latent presence in the so called negative criticism of Larkin by its detractors. In most cases it is a puerile sensibility that is somewhat aware of the absurd, but when it comes to acknowledging its presence, it takes refuge under the garb of meaningless abstractions. It is this escapism that accounts for Rosenthal's gross generalization of Larkin's poetry as "the sullenness of a man who finds squalor in his own spirit and fears to liberate himself from it" (222). Almost a similar kind of exigency informs Colin Falck's complaint that "there are no epiphanies in Larkin's poetry, nothing that approximates 'beauty or truth or love'" (qtd.in: Regan "Critics Debate" 31). However problem arises as one strives to rationally cognize the implication of such statements. In the first place, what does Rosenthal exactly mean by the term 'spirit'? Is it bluntly synonymous with the mind, or are there Wordsworthian connotations attached to it? Equally questionable is the use of the word 'squalor' the dictionary meaning of which is dirt or filth. By implying that Larkin discerns filth in his own mind Rosenthal devaluates literary criticism and attempts to situate it within the constricted periphery of binary Christian ethics. Notwithstanding the flush of his figurative language, all he presumably intends to say is that Larkin confronts a vacuity lying at the centre of his existence and can never come to terms with it. Moreover it is not Larkin who is afraid of liberating himself from the so called 'squalor'; it is the nature of the absurd that makes such liberation impossible. Judged from this perspective, Falck's complaint regarding the dearth of epiphany in Larkin's poetry can be countered on the ground that epiphany is only possible in a world that is essentially construed, but the world that Larkin inhabits is completely shorn of meaning.

One therefore finds sufficient reason to engage with Larkin's poetry from the vantage point of the absurd. The texts corroborate it as does critical intervention through their unconscious avowal. However in certain instances as in Peter Snowdon's article entitled "Larkin's Conceit", these unconscious attestations assume such proportion as to make engagement imperative. Snowdon writes:

All Larkin's poetry revolves round this generalization of a quite specific emotional response hinging on an arbitrary and irrationally masochistic rejection of experience. To present Larkin as a poet who remains true to poetry as the rendering of experience is simply absurd. Larkin posits experience as a beyond into which he has no desire to enter....By assuming the knowledge before experience, that others who think that they are better off than him are only more deceived, and thus modelling all their lives on his own failures, the poet sentences himself to imprisonment in a world in which there is nothing which might help him to escape from his own limitations. ("Critical Survey"1991).

The logical lacuna underlying this observation is a little disconcerting, to say the least. In the first place, it becomes difficult for the reader to understand what exactly qualifies as experience for Snowdon. This is so because a 'masochistic rejection of experience', if it is a 'specific emotional response' is also an experience in the strictest sense of the term. Secondly, one wonders as to how a poetic response that is specifically 'emotional' can simultaneously be 'arbitrary' and 'irrational'? The problem with Snowdon's diatribe, it seems, stems from a gross misunderstanding of the functional difference between thought and emotion in so far as they operate within the gamut of Larkin's poetry. There is however sufficient veracity in the claim that Larkin assumes 'knowledge before experience' but only partially. Undoubtedly Larkin feels

that ‘others who think that they are better off than him are more deceived’, but this is a position that needs to be understood within the context of absurd thought. It is not any specific experience that repels Larkin, since experience definitely has its own validity:

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).

What dislodges him is rather a generic sense of meaninglessness, circumscribing every human activity whatsoever, as also the inherent hierarchy in the notion that sensory experiences alone can be posited as a privileged medium for the generation of Knowledge:

And immediately
 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)

As has been insinuated earlier, the absurd which is consequent upon the man-world relationship is a perennial presence in Larkin’s poetry. The indeterminability of all conceivable human action, the utter futility of it all in the face of human contingency is something that weighed heavily on the poetic mind and finds acknowledgement in a 1949 poem, “To Failure”:

You do not come dramatically, with dragons
 That rear up with my life between their paws
 And dash me butchered down beside the wagons,
 The horses panicking, nor as a clause

Clearly set out to warn what can be lost,
 What out-of- pocket charges must be borne,
 Expenses met; nor as a draughty ghost
 That's seen, some mornings, running down a lawn (CP 28).

The title, it must be conceded at the very outset, is immensely misleading. For an uninitiated reader of Larkin's poetry, accustomed as he might be to regard the title as a condensed verbal equivalent of the poem's latent contents, the engagement becomes all the more challenging. Failure in this poem does not necessarily denote those quotidian experiences within whose bounds our beings unroll, and this is precisely what the poet insists upon through a succession of brilliant images. The 'dragons that rear up', the 'clause clearly set out' and the 'draughty ghost' intermittently seen are all rejected as overt imagerial projections of failure. The poem summarily confirms that these are not the visages through which failure manifests itself. Perception of failure, the discerning reader understands, is not consequent on the world alone. The probability of 'what can be lost', the 'charges' to be 'borne' and the 'expenses' to be 'met' are realities of the objective world, and are as such irreversible. Where does therefore failure lie? Analogous to Keats' "To Autumn", the poem goes on to locate its existence in the concluding stanza:

It is these sunless afternoons, I find,
 Install you at my elbow like a bore.
 The chestnut trees are caked with silence. I'm
 Aware the days pass quicker than before,
 Smell staler too. And once they fall behind
 They look like ruin, you have been here some time (CP 28).

It is interesting to note that this discovery of failure has been made possible only through the intervention of the human consciousness. An operation of the self-reflective consciousness on the part of the incipient speaker makes the discovery possible; but what exactly is it that constitutes this failure? Is it only a feeling of boredom owing to the awareness that ‘days pass quicker than before’ and having fallen behind ‘look like ruin’? Undoubtedly it is, but that in itself is only symptomatic of a greater malaise that had set into life. The olfactory image of time perceived as smelling ‘staler’, coupled with the indeterminacy of ‘you have been here some time’ point towards a consciousness that is imbued with the perception of the absurd in its most palpable form; and the poem therefore becomes a statement on the futility of all conceivable human action.

To claim that Larkin’s poetry lives the absurd in its most tangible form would hardly be an overstatement. In fact it would appear something of a riddle if one were to alight suddenly on a 1950 poem titled “Coming” which might well be read as a recognition of the absurd from the specific Camusean perspective that the absurd arises out of the “confrontation between human need and the unreasonable silence of the world”. This of course, in the background of the information that the Myth of Sisyphus was first translated into English by Justin O’ Brien in 1955. The poem begins:

On longer evenings
Light, chill and yellow,
Bathes the serene
Foreheads of houses.
A thrush sings,
Laurel-surrounded

In the deep bare garden,
 Its fresh-peeled voice
 Astonishing the brickwork. (CP 33)

In two successive short and precise eidetic images, the objective world has been rendered to us, complete in itself and inordinately beautiful. Far from being absurd, it stands there resplendent in its glory, and also probably possessing a meaning of its own. The problem however commences with the intrusion of the 'I' within the scheme of things:

And I, whose childhood
 Is a forgotten boredom,
 Feel like a child
 Who comes on a scene
 Of adult reconciling,
 And can understand nothing
 But the unusual laughter
 And starts to be happy. (33)

Significantly the 'I', 'whose childhood is a forgotten boredom' is also ontologically complete despite the negative epithet it chooses to embellish itself with. Consequently, therefore, the 'I' cannot be the seat of the absurd. It is only when the 'I' starts engaging with the objective world through the human faculty of feeling—"feel like a child"—that the absurd crops up. As difficult as it is for a child to understand anything if suddenly it "...comes on a scene/Of adult reconciling", the poetic persona too, through his interaction with the world confronts his own failure. This is because the world that he wishes to cognize in human terms, substantially remains immune to his concerns, and would reveal nothing. The penultimate and ultimate lines encapsulate in cryptic

poetic language, the helplessness of a mind torn asunder by the perception of an absurd predicament.

If the absurd is understood from the Sartrean perspective as connotative of anything that is meaningless, the poetic oeuvre of Philip Larkin would provide numerous exemplars of the same. In most cases the appreciation is a bit convoluted and normally concealed under the garb of essence as, for example, in “Spring” composed in 1950, and included in *The Less Deceived*:

Green-shadowed people sit, or walk in rings,
 Their children finger the awakened grass,
 Calmly a cloud stands, calmly a bird sings,
 And flashing like a dangled looking-glass,
 Sun lights the ball that bounce, the dogs that bark,
 The branch-arrested mist of leaf, and me,
 Threading my pursed-up way across the park,
 An indigestible sterility. (CP 39)

Every single image employed to arrest the operation of spring in vivid detail is handled in such a manner that the cumulative effect of the entire stanza evolves as something gratuitous, and therefore meaningless. Thus, though there is no apparent acknowledgement of meaninglessness in the verse, a sensitive reader can hardly overlook the fact that in general tone and tenor, the actions depicted here are all tinged with an aura of contingency. Much happens but they happen without a reason, and it is this very aspect that finds utterance in the remaining part of the poem:

Spring, of all seasons most gratuitous
 Is fold of untaught flower, is race of water,
 Is earth’s most multiple, excited daughter;

And those she has least use for see her best,
 Their paths grown craven and circuitous,
 Their visions mountain-clear, their needs immodest. (39)

Elsewhere the recognition as also the appreciation of the absurd is far more frontal, as may be evinced in the poem “Wants”:

Beyond all this, the wish to be alone:
 However the sky grows dark with invitation cards
 However we follow the printed directions of sex
 However the family is photographed under the flagstaff-
 Beyond all this the wish to be alone. (CP 42)

The utter gratuitousness of a squalid life that deadens itself by degenerating into a habit is fundamentally absurd, and this finds expression in a 1954 poem “Continuing to Live”:

Continuing to live- that is repeat
 A habit formed to get necessities-
 Is nearly always losing, or going without..
 It varies.
 This loss of interest, hair and enterprise-
 Ah, if the game were poker, yes,
 You might discard them, draw a full house!
 But it's chess.
 And once you have walked the length of your mind, what
 You command is clear as a lading-list.
 Anything else must not, for you, be thought

To exist. (CP 94)

One is instantly reminded of the monstrous tyranny of habit that finds an exquisite parallel in the reflections of Samuel Beckett:

The creation of the world did not take place once and for all time, but takes place every day. Habit then is the generic term for the countless treaties concluded between the countless subjects that constitute the individual and their countless correlative objects. The periods of transition that separate consecutive adaptations represent the perilous zones in the life of the individual, dangerous, precarious, painful, mysterious and fertile, when for a moment the boredom of living is replaced by the suffering of being. (qtd. in Alvarez:87)

However, a major problem with Sartrean Existentialism is that it halts at the boundary where the absurd is merely recognized. In a review of Sartre's *Nausea* Albert Camus therefore wrote: "The realization that life is absurd cannot be an end, but only a beginning. This is a truth that nearly all minds have taken as their starting point. It is not this discovery that is interesting, but the consequences and rules for action that can be drawn from it". Incidentally it needs to be noted that though Sartre and Camus are generally regarded as existentialists by the popular imagination, in essence Camus was an absurdist. This has been succinctly pointed out by John Foley in his book *From the Absurd to Revolt* (2008). Foley writes:

Although the "absurd" as we shall see, constitutes Camus' "first principle", he nevertheless defines his intellectual programme precisely in contrast with existentialism. In 1943, for example, he declares that the purpose of *The Myth of Sisyphus* is to define "an absurd way of thinking (Une pensee absurd), that is one delivered of metaphysical hope, by way of a criticism of several themes of existential philosophy". In 1944 he declares that, although it is a "great

philosophical adventure”, he believes the conclusions of existentialism to be false; a few weeks later, Sartre characterizes Camus as a proponent not of existentialism but of a “coherent and profound... philosophy of the absurd”. (2)

Furthermore, to point out Camus’ fundamental difference from Sartre with regard to the absurd, Foley alludes to an interview that Camus gave to D. Arban in 1945. On the allegation that the Camus of *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Outsider* was fundamentally different from the Camus of the post-war era, the interviewee contested:

I consider that there is a coherence....All that I can hope to do, in respect of my creative work, is to show that generous forms of behaviour can be engendered even in a world without God and that man alone in the universe can still create his own values. That is, in my opinion, the sole problem posed by our era. We give everything in order to try to clarify this, in our lives as well as in our writings. I take my place among others in the search for that solution, that is all....But why not admit that a mind which is pessimistic about the human condition can still feel within himself a solidarity with his companions in servitude, and to find there reason to act? (qtd. in Foley:4)

The realization that human life is fundamentally absurd is not reason enough for Camus to remain indifferent towards it. Thus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus insists on keeping the absurd alive rather than attempting to suppress it through philosophical or physical suicide. This he contends is only possible by living the absurd without either hope or despair:

Living an experience, a particular fate, is accepting it fully. Now, no one will live this fate, knowing it to be absurd, unless he does everything to keep before him that absurd brought to life by consciousness....Living is keeping the absurd alive.

Keeping it alive is above all contemplating it....One of the only coherent philosophical positions is thus revolt....Just as danger provided man with the unique opportunity of seizing awareness, so metaphysical revolt extends awareness to the whole experience. It is that constant presence of man in his own eyes. It is not aspiration, for it is devoid of hope. That revolt is the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it. (MS 53-54)

For a major poet like Larkin, the open pasture of ontological rambling had always been more important than a closed system of theoretical certitudes. His poetry therefore navigates the absurd in diverse ways, and if there are poems- as we have already found- stuttering and halting on the margin of recognition, there are others that do not merely problematize the issue but move towards a reconciliation of the absurd as well. An engagement with certain poems from the perspective of Albert Camus can therefore presumably shed new light on the flux of human life which Camus characterizes as ‘absurd’.

“Poetry of Departures” composed on the 23rd of January, 1954 and included in *The Less Deceived* is a series of reflections on the ‘fifth hand’ account of an anonymous person who supposedly ‘chucked up everything’ and somewhat Gauguin-like ‘just cleared off’. A general approval for this action is also arrived at when the poetic persona concedes that the voice of the person who narrated to him the incident sounded ‘Certain you approve/ This audacious, purifying/ Elemental move’.

The second stanza in attempting to decipher the only possible rationale behind such an ‘elemental move’ confronts the absurd. It is discerned in the midst of ordinary human living crouched as disgust and ennui consequent upon a gratuitousness called life:

And they are right I think

We all hate home
 And having to be there:
 I detest my room,
 Its specially-chosen junk,
 The good books, the good bed
 And my life, in perfect order... (CP 85)

Nothing, it seems, can dispel the gloom of this sordid existence. Thus within the context of the poem, the ‘fifth hand’ information that the persona receives of the escapee who ‘walked out on the whole crowd’ becomes an occasion for an identical move on his part, and he effuses out: ‘Surely I can if he did’? A possibility is thereby suggested, but would it necessarily correspond to divesting the absurd of its pervasive might? It would not, one presumes, since the persona too realizes that escape would tantamount to negating the very terms of engagement with the absurd. It is only by living the absurd indifferently that the absurdity of human existence can be countered, an aspect that finds utterance in the lines: ‘And that helps me stay/ Sober and industrious’.

However, Larkin, like Keats, is a poet of ambivalence and contradictions. Analogous to the dialectic that informs the movement of “Ode To a Nightingale”, the speaker (in the final stanza of the poem) once again wills an abstracted move:

But I’d go today,
 Yes, swagger the nut- strewn roads,
 Crouch in the fo’c’sle
 Stubbly with goodness... (CP 85)

It would have been a victory of the will, had the persona been able to effect such a transition. The word ‘Yes’, though punctuated with a comma, is so loaded with emphasis as to clearly signal the feasibility of such a move. But no sooner does the intent get articulated than the speaker confronts the absurd permeating every nook and cranny of human experience. Every conceivable action being fraught with meaninglessness, it does not quite make sense for him to take “Such a deliberate step backwards/ To create an object: / Books; China; a life/ Reprehensibly perfect” (CP 85-6). This naturally entails that he revert to his primary resolve of staying ‘sober and industrious’, and in doing so, he (like Sisyphus) decides to accept and participate in life with neither hope nor despair.

An impulse of a similar kind appears to inform another poem titled “Toads Re-visited” which is an internal monologue on the relative claims of action and inaction played out against the backdrop of immanent absurdity of the human situation. The speaker, apparently pictured as tired and exhausted, muses:

Walking around in the park

Should feel better than work:

The lake, the sunshine,

The grass to lie on,

Blurred playground noises

Beyond black-stockinged nurses-

Not a bad place to be.

Yet it doesn’t suit me, (CP 147)

These temptations to inactivity may be enticing in themselves but the speaker recoils at the idea:

Being one of the men

You meet on an afternoon:

Palsied old step-takers,

Hare-eyed clerks with the jitters'

Waxed-fleshed out-patients

Still vague from accidents,

And characters in long coats

Deep in the litter-baskets-

All dodging the toad work

By being stupid or weak. (147)

The circularity of a humdrum human existence, the utter ennui and satiety involved in the repetitiveness that circumscribes all human actions is the proper seat of the absurd awaiting recognition which now takes place:

Watching the bread delivered,

The sun by clouds covered,

The children going home;

Think of being them,

Turning over their failures

By some bed of lobelias,

Nowhere to go but indoors,

No friends but empty chairs... (147)

However it is not merely a recognition at which the poem ends. The speaker of 'Toads Revisited' knows for certain that within the context of the absurd, inactivity is equivalent to spiritual suicide. Thus in the penultimate stanza of the poem it is action that is opted for, howsoever meaningless that action might seem:

No, give me my in-tray,

My loaf-haired secretary,

My shall-I-keep-the-call-in-sir:

What else can I answer... (CP 148)

The speaker realizes that some kind of action is imperative if life has to be successfully endured. There is thus no prioritization of one form of action over another, since the absence of moral values renders it meaningless. The only option left with the absurd persona is to replace the quality of experience by their quantity, thereby ensuring a life vivaciously lived:

When the lights come on at four

At the end of another year?

Give me your arm, old toad;

Help me down cemetery road. (148)

In fact it is precisely through this quantification of experience that the absurd, if at all, may be plausibly confronted. "Vers de Societe" (literally meaning 'social verse') discursively dramatizes in unequivocal poetic terms the total meaninglessness of all modes of human action, against the background of a world that is cognized as absurd. Structured in the form of a monologue, the poem envisages a somewhat snobbish and detached speaker who embarks upon a process of reflection on receipt of an invitation letter from a certain Warlock-Williams, which he

consciously tampers: *My wife and I have asked a crowd of craps/To come and waste their time and ours: perhaps/You'd care to join us?* (CP 181).

An invitation is a social gesture which presupposes a commensurate social response but the invitee in this case is bluntly indisposed. He refuses to honour the invitation extended by Warlock-Williams but the rationale he posits is a queer one: *Day comes to an end./The gas fire breathes, the trees are darkly swayed./And so Dear Warlock- Williams: I'm afraid-* (181).

It is not incumbent on the reader to read the lines in terms of its implicit symbolism, whereby 'day' coming 'to an end' and 'trees' being 'darkly swayed' are interpreted as eidetic equivalent of imminent death, evoking the absurd. Even if one abstains from relying upon such overt symbolism, and takes the lines literally, the very fact that they do not really constitute any form of rationale, but merely insinuates an over-arching sense of futility of all human endeavour is equally potent enough to evoke the absurd. In other words, the speaker rationalizes his reluctance to socialize on grounds of futility structured against the larger futility that life entails.

In the second and third stanzas Larkin projects a speaker who, unable to comprehend the absurd that informs his situation, strives to transcend it by not only hiding behind a veneer of isolation but also by foregrounding certain actions which for him encapsulates the idea of meaningful activity:

Just think of all the spare time that has flown
 Straight into nothingness by being filled
 With forks and faces, rather than repaid
 Under a lamp, hearing the noise of wind,
 And looking out to see the moon thinned
 To an air-sharpened blade. (181)

No human action however has any value on the face of the absurd. The hierarchy on which certain actions were anointed as privileged begins to crumble and the ratiocinative speaker comes to appreciate the abstraction implicit in his solitude:

A life, and yet how sternly it's instilled
All solitude is selfish. No one now
 Believes the hermit with his gown and dish
 Talking to God (who's gone too); the big wish
 Is to have people nice to you, which means
 Doing it back somehow.
Virtue is social. (181)

This realization that 'virtue' is a social construct is a great leveller in the sense that the speaker from the fifth stanza refrains from imputing value to human actions. All action being equally meaningless, it is no longer a question of ensuring the quality of a life well lived. The speaker enquires:

Are then these routines
 Playing at goodness, like going to church?
 Something that bores us, something we don't do well
 (Asking that ass about his fool research)
 But try to feel, because, however crudely,
 It shows us what should be? (181)

The speaker therefore gravitates towards a quantification of experience, and this is borne out categorically in the final line when he ultimately concedes to the invitation: "Beyond the light stand failure and remorse/ Whispering *Dear Warlock-Williams: Why, of course*" (CP 182).

Resolution of ambivalence that the absurd presents is certainly impossible, albeit reconciliation is not ruled out as may be evinced from the three poems we have engaged with. Is this too far from the Camusean concept of revolt which is no more than an acceptance of the fact of the absurd? For Camus it is the mythical Sisyphus who becomes a sort of objective correlative for absurd revolt: “Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition... the lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn” (MS 109). Needless to say, in Larkin’s poetry too it is scorn that conditions the speakers and this is obvious from the general tone of sarcasm which they wield to narrate their experience.

It is, however, the inexorable certainty of death that projects the absurd in its most diabolical visage. Like Heidegger, Camus’ contention is that though death is not an experience in the sense that it can never be lived yet the inevitability of it is the very seat of the absurd. This irreversibility surrounding death, working itself out through the passage of time, is for Camus a certitude that “all the pretty speeches about the soul” cannot undermine:

The horror comes in reality from the mathematical aspect of the event. If time frightens us, this is because it works out the problem and the solution comes afterward. All the pretty speeches about the soul will have their contrary convincingly proved, at least for a time. From this inert body on which a slap makes no mark the soul has disappeared. (MS 21)

Conceptual categories of every kind are historical constructs and can never be regarded as trans-historical apriori, pervading the human mind. The *Myth of Sisyphus* was written in 1942 against the background of the German occupation. Consequently the absurdity that Camus discerns at the very heart of human existence as also in death is but a natural outcome of the spectacle of

death and devastation he actually espied in and around him. This is equally true of Philip Larkin, whose early poetry in total consonance with the lived life manifest a preoccupation with death wherein the scourges of the Second World War assume significant proportions. Sometimes this is couched in figurative language as in “Going”:

There is an evening coming in
 Across the fields, one never seen before.
 That lights no lamps
 Silken it seems at a distance, yet
 When it is drawn up over the knees and breast
 It brings no comfort. (CP 3)

Elsewhere the treatment is much more frontal as in the poem titled “Traumerei” wherein the speaker recounts a dream vision, detailing how each letter of the word ‘death’ appeared before him sequentially if only to make him aware of the impending gloom that awaits us all:

In this dream that dogs me I am part
 Of a silent crowd walking under a wall,
 Leaving a football match, perhaps, or a pit,
 All moving the same way. After a while
 A second wall closes on our right,
 Pressing us tighter. We are now shut in
 Like pigs down a concrete passage. When I lift
 My head, I see the walls have killed the sun,
 And light is cold. Now a giant whitewashed D
 Comes on the second wall, but much too high

For them to recognize: I await the E,
 Watch it approach and pass. (CP 12)

Written in 1946 and published in the anthology *In The Grip of Light*, the poem is part of Larkin's early attempt at verse and qualitatively does not merit much attention. However the manner in which the dream unfolds itself with a 'silent crowd' walking 'the same way' and enclosed within 'walls' is cogent enough to evoke numerous mental images of war-ravaged Europe tottering towards a destination that is shrouded in mystery:

By now
 We have ceased walking and travel
 Like water through sewers, steeply, despite
 The tread that goes on ringing like an anvil
 Under the striding A. (12)

It would be interesting to note that the absurdity centring on death in this poem is appreciated in terms of life as its exact polar opposite. The presupposition that life should ordinarily be meaningful is frustrated by the cold inevitability of impending death, and the speaker shudders at its approach:

I crook
 My arm to shield my face, for we must pass
 Beneath the huge, decapitated cross,
 White on the wall, the T, and I cannot halt
 The tread, the beat of it, it is my own heart,
 The walls of my room rise, it is still night,
 I have woken again before the word was spelt. (12)

Larkin's poetry surfaced at a time when the smug satisfaction of being protected by an all-caring God had yielded itself to the over-arching hegemony of the Nietzschean Godless universe. With the industrial revolution then fully ensconced, human modes of existence were getting automated and this in turn paved the way towards alienation. To make matters worse, there was the rise of high capitalism which, through its insistence on competition rather than cooperation, hastened the distancing of one human being from another. It was a dreary mental landscape that northern Europe in general and England in particular exhibited- a dreariness that finds expression in the obsessive preoccupation with death:

On short still days
 At the shut of the year
 We search the pathways
 Where the coverts were.
 For kindling-wood we come,
 And make up bundles,
 Carrying them home
 Down long low tunnels.
 Soon air-frosts haze
 Snow-thickened shires;
 O short still days!
 O burrow fires! (CP 91)

This poem, titled "Gathering Wood", was written in 1954. Eighteen years later, in 1972 the same obsession lingers, though with an altered perspective. The detached onlooker musing objectively

on the shortness of 'still days' in the above mentioned poem has abrogated his role in preference for a speaker who is far more empathetically attuned:

On pillow after pillow lies
 The white wild hair and staring eyes;
 Jaws stand open; necks are stretched
 With every tendon sharply sketched;
 A bearded mouth talks silently
 To someone no one else can see.
 Sixty years ago they smiled
 At lover, husband, first- born child.
 Smiles are for youth. For old age come
 Death's terror and delirium. (CP 194)

Death is an absurdity since it is not an experience in the strict sense of the term. The realization that it can never be authentically lived makes it an 'other' and it is this very otherness that is worked out in the lines of a short poem, "I have started to say":

I have started to say
 'A quarter of a century'
 Or 'thirty years back'
 About my own life.
 It makes me breathless.
 It's like falling and recovering
 In huge gesturing loops
 Through an empty sky.

All that's left to happen
 Is some deaths (my own included).
 Their order, and their manner,
 Remain to be learnt. (CP 185)

When it comes to talking about his 'own life', the speaker is never short of words; but death is a privation of which only the 'order' and the '...manner/ Remain to be learnt'. This presumably by an anonymous other, as the shift to a third person from the first person narration adequately confirms.

The most sustained statement on the absurdity of death however is to be found in the poem "Aubade" composed in 1977. Written in the form of a dramatic lyric, this poem is the last major work that Larkin undertook, wherein the fear of approaching death, the vacuity it entails, as also the helplessness it presupposes are all worked out in great detail. The poem commences:

I work all day and get half drunk at night.
 Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare.
 In time the curtain- edges will grow light.
 Till then I see what's really always there:
 Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,
 Making all thought impossible but how
 And where and when I shall myself die. (CP 208)

In the second stanza, the speaker concedes that the all-pervasive gaze of death is something that makes perception impossible: 'The mind blanks at the glare'. However this is not in remorse of the fact that his has been a life of conscious inaction- "The good not done, the love not given, time/ Torn off unused" (208) – since, on the face of the absurd that encumbers life, all and every

action is deemed to be equally meaningless. The vacuity of the mind in fact stems from a sense of loss, a feeling of void and nihilation of possibilities consequent upon the irreversibility of death:

But at the total emptiness forever,
 The sure extinction that we travel to
 And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,
 Not to be anywhere,
 And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true. (208)

Religion has long been used as a means to palliate the absurdity of death, but it has failed miserably. The poem does remind us of Kierkegaard who, in seeking to subsume the absurd under Christian faith, indulged in what Camus calls ‘spiritual suicide’:

This is a special way of being afraid
 No trick dispels. Religion used to try,
 That vast moth-eaten musical brocade
 Created to pretend we never die.
 And specious stuff that says No rational being
 Can fear a thing it will not feel... (208)

Furthermore, death in “Aubade” is not a metaphysical problem that Larkin sets out to grapple with. Rather it is the otherness of death, an otherness that manifests itself only in abstraction. The fear of the speaker in this poem is not directed towards death per se but to the fact that he shall not be privy to it at the level of the experiential. This is the real seat of the absurd. Death shall be his, and yet it shall not be an authentic death since he would be bereft of even an iota of experience:

... not seeing

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

However, Larkin as a poet refrains from halting at the discovery of the absurd. Ordinarily the realization that 'Death is no different whined at than withstood', ought to have made the speaker indifferent towards life, though in reality he goes on to embrace the same:

Meanwhile telephones crouch, getting ready to ring
 In locked-up offices, and all the uncaring
 Intricate rented world begins to rouse.
 The sky is white as clay, with no sun.
 Work has to be done
 Postmen like doctors go from house to house. (CP. 209)

This acceptance of the 'Intricate rented world' is undertaken with neither hope nor despair, but with absolute scorn as the imperative 'Work has to be done' amply testifies. On the whole, the poem stands out as a superb rendition of Camusean revolt wrought out in excellently moving verse.

Larkin's poetry therefore evolves as a great synthesizer of the absurd, effecting in its inimitable way a reconciliation between Sartre and Camus. As has been adequately demonstrated in this chapter, if there are poems wherein the absurd is merely recognised, there are also others that move beyond a mere recognition in registering what may be called dissent or revolt on the face of human vulnerability. It is of course true that an awareness of the absurd is related to

individual consciousness and its relation to the world. But while Camus' absurd heroes have generally been dubbed as solipsists, Larkin by dint of being a poet is easily absolved from that charge. Far from being the subjective meditation of a solitary figure, his poetry is the verbal equivalent of a common human condition the recognition of which enables them to create solidarity with the readers.