

**Larkin Lost, Larkin Found:  
Towards a New Poetics of Reading**

**A Thesis submitted to the University of North Bengal  
For the Award of  
Doctor of Philosophy in English**

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## DECLARATION

I declare that the thesis entitled **Larkin Lost, Larkin Found: Towards a New Poetics of Reading** has been prepared by me under guidance of Dr. Chandanashis Laha, Retired Professor of English, University of North Bengal. No part of this thesis has formed the basis for the award of any degree or fellow previously.

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## CERTIFICATE

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## Abstract

It is profoundly surprising to find a poet's reputation undergo a dramatic transformation in only a decade following his death. Philip Arthur Larkin (1922-85), whose reputation as a major poet was already established at the time of his death, has provoked adverse criticism to such an extent that the very basis of his claim to eminence is often questioned. This we owe almost entirely to two sources of external evidence: his *Selected Letters* published in 1992 and the authorized biography *Philip Larkin: A writer's Life* in 1993.

The publication of Larkin's first major anthology of poetry titled, *The Less Deceived* in 1955 was the occasion for the commencement of serious critical engagement with his work. The 'Lit-Crit' industry, as the poet habitually dubbed critics, chose to read his poetry in terms of a national character and his burgeoning popularity was interpreted as an outcome of his sentimental Englishness. The 'Movement' was taken as a focal point to understand the poetry of Larkin, along with other poets of the 1950s; and though most of the poets rejected the very existence of the so called 'Movement', it somehow formed the basis around which critical consensus revolved. The 1970s saw the appropriation of newer critical practices clubbed together under the umbrella term 'literary theory' and the idea of a transcendental element as well as a symbolist one began to be aligned with the poetry of Philip Larkin. There is no doubt that this change was occasioned by the changing expectations among readers of Larkin's poetry, but the effect was a spiralling one. The trajectory of Larkin criticism began to peregrinate along the familiar spaces of thematic studies.

Nevertheless, everything changed with the publication of the letters and the authorized biography. Epistolary evidence was foregrounded to project Larkin the man as racist, sexist, parochial etc, with the unhappy result that the potential of Larkin the poet got somewhat

overshadowed. The Eliotic credo which had so effectively separated the life of a poet from the life of poetry was forgotten by the then reigning critics who were actually resorting to vituperative criticism of the poet by way of safeguarding the morality of the reader from degenerate poetry. However, when literary criticism stoops to the level of verbal abuse, the desire for a change begins to gather momentum. It is in this context that the title of the dissertation **Larkin Lost, Larkin Found: Towards a New Poetics of Reading** assumes significance.

In recent times, serious engagement has begun with the poetry of Philip Larkin. Stephen Regan, arguably the most prolific and discerning among the avant garde commentators on the poet, has catalogued not only the prevailing preoccupation of Larkin criticism but has also sketched the possible epistemic territories that such criticisms need to appropriate. Strangely though, Regan's predilection for viable methodologies exposes a serious lacuna within the gamut of Larkin criticism. His prescriptive methodologies fail to address the exigencies of Larkin's poetry.

Larkin is a poet of indeterminacies and the vacuousness that afflicts human life. In fact, even a cursory reading of his poetry, confronts a sensitive reader with a poetic psyche overridden by the problem of choice, anxiety, privation of death and also a dissipated sense of the self. Under such circumstances, it would only have been too natural to expect an existential study of Larkin's poetry. But that is possibly one area which has conveniently remained outside the scrutinizing gaze of literary criticism. Whether that is a lapse, or an issue related to politics of representation therefore needs to be sufficiently ascertained.

The primary intent of this project is to expand the horizon of Larkin criticism by reading his poetry from the conceptual framework of Sartrean existentialist philosophy. Nevertheless this proposition entails a caveat. Poetry, like every other discourse, is socially structured and

therefore steeped in the specifics of history. It is this historicity that simultaneously demands a Camusean absurdist reading and, by incorporating the same, this work does not violate the conventional ethics of uniform research methodology. Despite the fact that the critical habitations of Sartre and Camus are fundamentally different, there is a common thread that binds them together. Both thinkers start from the basic premise that human existence is absurd; but while Sartre stops at its mere recognition, it is Albert Camus who goes on to devise an ethics of existence.

The introductory chapter is divided into two sections. The first is devised to catalogue the predominant tendencies of Larkin criticism, while the second questions the dominant strands of the critical canon on the basis of their ideological moorings, so that the gaps and silences may be sufficiently recovered. Since the central problem that concerns us is the quest for a new poetics of reading, such gaps and silences shall probably yield fresh insights into the existing corpus of Larkin criticism.

The second chapter examines the question of 'self' in Larkin's poetry. Dismantling the spate of biographical criticism that saw Larkin's poetic work as the direct offshoot of his lived experience, this chapter initially engages in a brief assessment of the reigning approaches to the notion of the self, before looking at the poetry of Larkin from the vantage point of Sartrean philosophy.

The third chapter of this dissertation is titled, 'Larkin and the Problem of Choice, Negation and Anguish'. The reason for aligning these three existential concepts is that they are intrinsically related to each other. Any exercise of choice brings in its wake the phenomenon of negation, while at the same time it is riddled with anxiety. Since the operation of choice presupposes a man-world relationship, I have deliberately cushioned the problem of choice in Larkin's poetry within the historical specificity of post war England.

Larkin's perpetual torment, both as a man and as a poet, by what he understood to be the meaninglessness of life is in essence the seat of the absurd which in fact is a direct corollary of the same man-world relationship alluded to earlier. In the fourth chapter, I therefore engage with a cross-section of Larkin's poems from a Camusean perspective, to show Larkin's appropriation of the same, as well as to locate any scope of agency that might lie embedded within them. The concluding chapter is in fact a brief expose`, whereby I attempt to re-locate Larkin beyond the lurking critical canon. Quite in keeping with the general spirit of research, this dissertation also demarcates probable areas through which the proliferation of the existential and absurdist discourse on Larkin's poetry may be successfully articulated.

## Preface

It is profoundly surprising to find a poet's reputation undergo a dramatic transformation in only a decade following his death. Philip Arthur Larkin (1922-85), whose reputation as a major poet was already established at the time of his death, has provoked adverse criticism to such an extent that the very basis of his claim to eminence is often questioned. Nevertheless, everything changed with the publication of the letters and the authorized biography. Epistolary evidence was foregrounded to project Larkin the man as racist, sexist, parochial etc, with the unhappy result that the potential of Larkin the poet got somewhat overshadowed. The Eliotic credo which had so effectively separated the life of a poet from the life of poetry was forgotten by the then reigning critics who were actually resorting to vituperative criticism of the poet by way of safeguarding the morality of the reader from degenerate poetry. However, when literary criticism stoops to the level of verbal abuse, the desire for a change begins to gather momentum. It is in this context that the title of the dissertation **Larkin Lost, Larkin Found: Towards a New Poetics of Reading** assumes significance.

I express my profound gratitude to my supervisor Prof. Chandanashis Laha who, in spite of busy academic schedules has always found time to assist me in the course of this research. It is his indulgence which has afforded me the freedom to pursue the subject from a perspective that I thought would be congenial to the reading of Larkin's poetry. My sincere thanks are due to Prof. Stephen Regan who, at a very early stage of the work, was kind enough to confirm the viability of this project. I am also thankful to the British Council Library, Kolkata, without whose assistance this project would not have been possible.

The memory of my late father plagues me as I recount his deep desire to see his eldest born evolve as a discerning reader of literature, and words will simply fail me to express my

indebtedness to him. It is to him that I owe every part of my being. I am also particularly indebted to my late teacher Prof. Samar Chakraborty, who taught me the divergent ways from which poetry can be engaged with. The fact that I could not live up to his expectations is solely due to my mediocrity.

I would be failing in my duty if I did not acknowledge the help that I received from my friend Abhisek Guha Roy and my student Ujjal Das. I shall not belittle their contribution by thanking them. Last but not least, I am grateful- in ways more than I can recount- to my mother, wife and daughter for ungrudgingly permitting me the luxury of abstracted existence during the course of this research.

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### Instances where selected sources appear:

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1 Chapter One Introduction: Quest for a New Poetics of Reading My acquaintance with the poetry of Philip Arthur Larkin (1922-1985) began as a purist reader in a vein somewhat analogous to what Larkin wrote to his publishers Faber & Faber when they allowed the novels of Barbara Pym to go out of print: "I feel it is a great shame if ordinary sane novels about ordinary sane people doing ordinary sane things can't find a publisher these days" (SL 375). In fact it was a delight in this Larkinesque sanity which attracted me to it in the first place. Little did I realize that the epithets Larkin chose to characterize the work of his liking, actually dogged the critical reception of his own poetic oeuvre to such an extent as to leave little room for posterity to transcend their confines. Until the last decade of the 20th century Larkin, arguably the most renowned of the so called 'Movement' poets, was known in the Anglophone world, chiefly for the wrong reasons. Widely acknowledged as the unofficial Poet Laureate of England, his popularity and credibility as a major poet was severely undermined after the publication of the Selected Letters (1992) and an authorized biography Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life (1993) by Andrew Motion. Epistolary evidences were cited to project the man as anti-intellectual, sexist, parochial etc. and the much necessary Eliotic disjunct between the man and the poet needed for objective aesthetic appreciation was comfortably consigned to oblivion. The result was a scholarship of limited insight dominated either by thematic concerns or else an ideologically charged political vituperation. It is only after the publication of The New Case Book in 1997 edited by Stephen Regan that serious engagement has begun with his poetry. There is of course no gainsaying that Regan's introductory survey of the trajectory of Larkin criticism is so succinctly documented

2 that a brief summary of the same becomes indispensable for any discourse to commence. And any work on Larkin's poetry must take into account Regan's overview. Critical enquiry into the poetry of Philip Larkin immediately followed the publication of The Less Deceived in 1955. As the most popular and widely read poet of the post war era, his poetry was conventionally read in consonance with a national character, and the popularity he enjoyed was interpreted as an outcome of his sentimental Englishness. The now much debated existence of 'The Movement' was taken as a focal point to cushion the poetry of Larkin along with other poets of the 1950s and it was predominantly through the abstracted prism of that paradigmatic exteriority that critical consensus was catered to. In a review of the New Lines anthology titled 'The Middlebrow Muse' (1957) Charles Tomlinson vituperatively attacked the second hand responses which characterized the work of the so called 'New Line Poets': "They show a singular want of vital awareness of the continuum outside themselves, of the mystery bodied over against them in the created universe, which they fail to experience with any degree of sharpness or to embody with any in stress or sensual depth ... They seldom for a moment escape beyond the suburban mental ratio which they impose on experience". This mode of engagement congealed itself into a system, when at about the same time Al Alvarez in his introduction of The New Poetry anthology berated Larkin for evincing a 'politeness' and 'decency' typically conforming to perceived English virtues. Donald Davie waxed eloquent but it was only to situate Larkin in the line of the "thoroughly English souls" as "a very Hardy-esque poet" who stoically accepted the way things were. It did not quite appear to him that a stoical acceptance of the eventualities of life may as well be a necessary adjunct to something more primeval than the socialization quotient he tried to circumscribe Larkin within.

3 The 1970s saw the appropriation of another form of reading paradigm onto that of the one already alluded to. Owing largely to the influence of newer critical practices grouped together under the umbrella term 'literary theory', the idea of a transcendental element as well as a symbolist one began to be aligned with the poetry of Philip Larkin. J.R. Watson for instance wrote an article "The Other Larkin" in 1976, which discerned "moments of epiphany" and "deeply felt longings, for sacred time and sacred space" in the poetry of Philip Larkin. No wonder this change was conditioned by the changing horizon of expectations among readers of Larkin's poetry, but the effect it registered was a vicious one. The axis of Larkin's critical reception seemed to traverse along the familiar spaces of thematic studies. However, all this changed with the publication of *The Selected Letters* in 1992 and the authorized biography *Philip Larkin: A Writers Life* in 1993. Surprising it is how a poet's reputation can undergo dramatic changes in just a decade after his death. The same poet, who by common consent was regarded as the greatest after Eliot, became a site evincing the derogation of poetic possibilities, which merited abuse critical scorn or at best indifference. The *Selected Letters* enabled reigning critics to establish a direct correlation between the man and the poet and since the former was regarded as despicable, the latter couldn't have been an exception. Germaine Greer reviewing the *Collected Poems* in the "Guardian" equated the expression of the poems with the poet's negativity when she said of Larkin: "His verse is deceptively simple, demotic, and colloquial: the attitudes it expresses are also anti-intellectual, racist, sexist and rotten with class consciousness". Then followed the clichés that were to dominate so much of Larkin criticism: "sewer under the national monument" (Paulin 1992), "foul-mouthed bigot" (Ackroyd 1993), "dreary laureate of our provincialism" (Appleyard 1993) and the like. The

4 result was that the limits of discourse thus structured, once again compartmentalized the poetry of Larkin within the ambit of pseudo-ethical pedagogy. (1-7) How does one carve out a critical space from within a critical canon that has been so prejudiced, watertight and regimented? Conforming to the confines of the already established modes of discourse and at the same time attempting to alter its balance- if ever so slightly- would appear to be the most preferred option. However to arrive at a new poetics of reading, far removed from the beaten track of doctrination alluded to earlier, a critique of the existing canon becomes imperative, to which we now turn in the following section. II What appears interesting is that these concatenations of metaphors seem to be strictly in line with the Nietzschean concernment with 'perspective' as a means of structuring reality. In order to lend authority to a particular form of thought or rather style of living, Larkin scholarship sought to perspectivize reading in terms that are overtly connotative of the historical materiality of the epoch, structuring the limits of discourse in the first place. Alan Sinfield in his brilliant book *Literature, politics and culture in post-war Britain* has substantially elaborated how Fascism, Capitalism and Welfare-Capitalism were the prime ideological options available to European politics in the 1930's. Western Europe appropriated a Welfare-Capitalist economic model which strictly followed a Keynesian line of smoothing out the Capitalist cycle of boom and slump. This consensus however broke down in the mid 1970's "when capitalism went into a slump allowing a return to Pre-Keynesian economic theories and authoritarian social attitudes" (32). Also Stuart Hall et al. in their major work *Policing the Crisis* (1978) have dealt extensively with the dissolution of consent in post-war British society leading to what they term the 'Exceptional State'. Their work specifically highlights how Britain's post-war recovery being incomplete, led

5 to the falsification of the myths of 'affluence' around which organization of consent was primarily facilitated in Britain throughout the '50s and '60s. It was the intervention of the Right wing politician Enoch Powell, who through his 1968 'Rivers of Blood' speech, shifted the debate towards 'Authoritarianism'. The conservative party which subsequently came to power in 1970 adopted authoritarian solutions, thereby legitimizing rule of law as the only means to defend hegemony in conditions of severe crisis. Thus, there evolved a general tendency, to regard all threats to social order as a transgression equivalent to violence. However this 'New Right' (Barker 235) ideology, popularly termed 'Thatcherism' was countered by what is called 'Urban Leftism' (269) - a defensive ploy against right wing ideologies. Ultimately when Tony Blair in 1995 spoke of 'community' (278) the first post- socialist response to the new right was registered as a political discourse. There was a heightened "desire to discover a foundation for national life in working class or popular culture" and also "a belief that politics should start listening to the mundane desires of common people" (279). The revival of the ideology of community therefore stemmed from the abandonment of fraternity based on class and solidarity based on nationalism. What bearing does this foray into British politics have in our understanding the trajectory of Larkin criticism? I believe that in view of the pervasiveness of critical unanimity among Larkin scholars, most of whom happened to be academics and intellectual elite, a limited consent could have initially been forged around the discourse of 'authoritarianism' leading subsequently to a general acquiescence of the ideology of 'community'. Viewed from this perspective, the general dismissive stance against Larkin's poetry would undoubtedly proffer the concept of Althusser's 'interpellation' as a factor which probably conditioned the generation of the critical canon. For nowhere is the complicity of the subject in the process of his own domination more pronounced

6 than in the majority of critical work centered on the reading of Larkin's poetry. The interpellated subject in the form of the reader having been structured and subjected by the aforesaid ideologies I referred to earlier, disseminated or rather replicated the same in writing; creating reading paradigms and stereotypes in the process. The circulation of terms like 'racist', 'sexist', 'suburban', 'parochial', etc within the central canon of Larkin scholarship should substantiate my claim. In fact the class belonging nature of English culture can seldom be disputed. What the English called 'High Culture' was predominantly the culture of the leisured upper middle class. Even T.S Eliot in Notes Towards the Definition of Culture upheld the same class-fixation in so far as culture was concerned (Sinfield 95). Philip Larkin, it is true, did not belong to the leisured middle class but Alan Pryce- Jones editor of the Times literary supplement found in 1956 that most writers irrespective of their class affiliations were co-opted within leisured middle class value structures (89). The central problem of dealing with the canon of Larkin criticism is that since the publication of Selected Letters it appears obsessed with epistolary evidences in way of levelling charges, despite the fact that the poetic oeuvre of Larkin provides little vindication of such claims. This is particularly true of the charge of 'racism'. Critics such as Germaine Greer, Tom Paulin, Peter Ackroyd and Bryan Appleyard, oblivious of their own ideological appropriation sought to stigmatize a poet without granting him similar leverage in return. I however submit that even if this charge is partially tenable it has got to do with the 'New Right' ideology which as John Gray has pointed out "brought into conservative discourse a sectarian spirit that belongs properly not with conservatism, which is

skeptical of all ideology but with the rationalist doctrines of the Enlightenment" (qtd. in Barker:243). "Homage To A Government", a

7 poem by Larkin highly commented upon for championing a cause ironically dubbed as 'the white man's burden', is specifically worthy of note: Next year we are to bring the soldiers home For lack of money and that is all right. Places they guarded or kept orderly, Must guard themselves, or keep themselves orderly. (CP 171) If there is racism here it is comfortably couched under the garb of colonialism. However, the connotation of the word 'orderly' being essentially culture-specific point towards the intensification of cultural orthodoxy and sectarian spirit which was a defining characteristic of new right ideology in and around the 1970s. Composed in May 1960, Larkin's "MCMXIV", chews the cud of by-gone days by reminiscing about what was once traditional England: 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) Almost the same angst informs the following lines in "Going Going": And that will be England gone The shadows, the meadows, the lakes, The guild halls, the carved choirs

8 There'll be books, it will linger on In galleries: but all that remains For us will be concrete and tyres. (CP 190) That the aforesaid passages are steeped in class-consciousness can hardly be debated and my own subject position as a post-colonial reader of Larkin's poetry is equally indisposed to salvage the English poet from the charges brought against him, when I know that much of the class-consciousness appropriated by the English was at my own peril. However, notwithstanding Larkin's ideological appropriation, an empathetic understanding of a twentieth century alienated poetic persona striving frantically to resist the incessant spate of change in and around him also needs to be registered. Furthermore this charge is also mitigated if we care to consider the subversion effected in such a poem as "The Large Cool Store" where the divide between the working class and the leisured class is not only brought to the fore, but brought out with utmost compassion: To suppose They share that world, to think their sort is Matched by something in it, shows How separate and unearthly love is, Or women are, or what they do, Or in our young unreal wishes Seem to be: synthetic, new, And nature less in ecstasies. (CP 135) Incidentally this poem was written in June, 1961 exactly a year after Larkin wrote "MCMXIV".

9 This trajectory of Larkin scholarship, truncated and fractured as it was, merited immediate redress and The New Case Book on Philip Larkin edited by Stephen Regan in 1997 sought to do precisely the same. For the first time, after decades of essentialist reading, this book proffered the idea that the poetry of Larkin merited newer modes of critical engagement far beyond the certitudes established by erstwhile critical practices. Starting with the symbolist dimension in Larkin's poetry ( Andrew Motion's "Philip Larkin and Symbolism"), this book went on to accommodate not only David Lodge's Structuralist engagement ("Philip Larkin: The Metonymic Muse"), but at the same time anticipated that much talked of post modern openness in approach through Graham Holderness' brilliant article entitled "Reading Deceptions- A Dramatic Conversation". Four critics of different theoretical orientations are made to stage an imaginary debate around Larkin's "Deceptions" to show how "Critical theory can 'open up' Larkin's writing to a variety of illuminating, if not always reconcilable viewpoints"

(11). Apart from these, certain other approaches (Feminist, as in Janice Rossen's "Difficulties with Girls" and Historicist, as in Stan Smith's "Margins of Tolerance") had been incorporated probably to foreground the Barthesian 'Readerly' text openness as opposed to the 'Writerly' text paradigm Larkin had long been circumscribed within. What however appeared to be so novel though, was not an unmixed blessing. The sequence of essays Regan selected was absolutely in keeping with the avowed publication policy of New Casebooks which in its own way sought to rarefy the subject of discourse. In the general editors' preface, John Peck and Martin Coyle of the University of Wales, Cardiff wrote: "Central to the series is a concern with modern critical theory and its effect on current approaches to the study of literature" (X1). Voicing the same sentiment was Stephen Regan, who in the introduction to the

10 title claimed: "Modern literary theory ought to find much of interest in Larkin's work, and yet the poems have remained curiously impervious to some of the newer critical methodologies such as feminism, psychoanalysis and deconstruction" (11). The present project however takes issues with such attestations on the ground that it prioritizes certain reading practices even at the cost of abrogating the demands of the text. Had Regan's project been motivated solely by the demands posited by Larkin's poetry rather than a somewhat stilted wish to secure for Larkin a pan-theoretical praxis, he would have seen that the poetic oeuvre of Larkin proffered broad overtures which clearly pointed towards a crisis of 'being'. A dissipated sense of self, overridden by negation and anxiety; a perennial preoccupation with the privation called 'death' unassuaged by any flicker of hope, points unequivocally towards a philosophy of existence, thereby necessitating the search for different sets of methodological apparatuses. Andrew Motion in his introduction to Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life talks of the contradictions in Larkin's will, which I believe shall go a long way towards connoting the parameters of my argument. In relation to Larkin's published and unpublished work, he has pointed out how in three different clauses of the same will Larkin had "entrusted his trustees, the power to publish his unpublished work; instructed them to destroy it; and told them to discuss the matter with the literary executors" (xvi). Is this only the caprice of an author intent upon posthumous fame, or should it be construed as the ontological anxiety of a man in the face of irreconcilable choices – choices which he had not been able to come to terms with, even in his 'Writer's Life'. Again Richard Bradford in his biography of the poet, *First Boredom, Then Fear: The Life of Philip Larkin* has called attention to how Larkin's self marginalization was effected not only at the cost of the world, but at its own peril. Larkin's inability not just to act but even to conceive acting is exemplified by Bradford through allusion to a lecture incident where Larkin

11 urinated in his clothes, because he couldn't summon the will to go to the restroom and relieve himself (66). The question is: shall we see in this incident, the contours of a fundamental pattern of existence, or should the same be consigned to the domain of behavioral psychology? The decision I am tempted to infer would be a matter of perspective. Parallel to such external evidences, here is the existential Philip Larkin in a 1949 poem called "Sinking like Sediment through the Day": Huge awareness, elbowing vacancy, Empty inside and out, replaces day, (Like a fuse an impulse busily disintegrates Right back to its root.) Out of the afternoon leans the indescribable woman: 'Embrace me, and I shall be beautiful'- 'Be beautiful and I will embrace you'- We argue for hours. (CP 27) Twenty five years later the same

sense of vacuity, the same problem of choice giving way to anxiety can be seen to inform his poetry, and I allude to the first stanza of a poem entitled "The Life With a Hole in it" to substantiate my point: Life is an immobile, locked Three-handed struggle between Your wants, the world's for you, and (worse) The unbeatable slow machine That brings what you'll get. Blocked,

12 They strain round a hollow stasis Of havings-to, fear, faces. Days sift down it constantly. Years. (CP 202) Existential concerns therefore do not merely colour Larkin's poetry. It might seem that he had been an existentialist throughout. On the face of such compelling evidences, one would have expected Larkin scholarship to pick up the existential axis as a tool for further engagement, but here too contemporary criticism seems predominantly obsessed with thematic studies. Prominent issues such as loneliness, death, old age, conflict between desire and reality and the illusory nature of choice do find a place in article length work and sometimes monograph as well. However such thematic concerns have seldom been dealt with from the vantage point of an existential crisis besetting the poet in his historical and contextual totality. In fact the problem of choice and a pervasive sense of emptiness did find a place in Larkin criticism from the early '70s, whether that be in Calvin Bedient's 1974 monograph entitled *Eight Contemporary Poets*; Philip Larkin : *Writers and their Work* by Alan Brownjohn (1975) or John Wain's journal article "The Poetry of Philip Larkin" published in *The Malahat Review* (1976). This is also particularly true of such later journal articles as Martin Stannard's "The Men Running up to Bowl: Aspect of Stasis in the work of Larkin and Amis" (1989) and "The Theme of Death in the poetry of Philip Larkin and Charles Tomlinson" (1991) by Eckhard Auberleben which looks at images of entrapment stasis, hesitation and enforced silence in the writings of Philip Larkin and Kingsley Amis. It is these aspects that have been merely touched upon by a handful of critics but never dealt with extensively which shall form the crux of this enquiry.

13 In a monograph entitled *Double Lyric: Divisiveness and Communal Creativity in Recent English Poetry* (1980), Merle Brown contends that recent British poetry is neither marked by the presence of a distinctive world view nor an existential stance but rather a hesitancy to adopt one. Philip Larkin's poetry is seen to occupy a special place, by adopting a habitually dismissive attitude. The present project however intends to contest this gross generalization because the so called 'habitual' is not as pervasive a presence as it is made out to be. On the other hand the poetic oeuvre of Larkin will show beyond doubt that the existential stance is probably a habitual stance with Larkin undercut only at times by a posture of dismissiveness which, as Richard Palmer had convincingly argued in his book *Such Deliberate Disguises: The art of Philip Larkin*, was only a mask. Eulogizing Larkin's poetic aspirations, James Booth in a recent biography of the poet published in 2014 and titled *Philip Larkin- Life, Art and Love* observes: "At the age of thirty in 1953 Larkin set out his aim in a tone of jokey presumptuousness: 'I should like to write about 75-100 new poems, all rather better than anything I've ever done before, and dealing with such subjects as Life, Death, Time, Love and scenery in such a manner as would render further attention to them by other poets superfluous'" (10). What for Booth is simply a matter of 'tone' and that too of 'jokey presumptuousness' merits critical engagement not only because the majority of Larkin's chosen subjects are dominant existential themes but also because the phrase "further

attention to them by other poets superfluous", construed from an altered perspective, hinges on the word 'manner'. It is the manner which according to Larkin "would render further attention [...] superfluous". The question however is whether the word manner be understood in terms of stylistic ingenuity of composition, or whether it pre-supposes and insinuates an approach (presumably philosophical) which Larkin intended to appropriate in order to fulfill his

14 cherished aim. Again, by way of accounting for Larkin's deep seated anguish of failure, Booth in the penultimate paragraph of his introduction asserts: "From the beginning he [Larkin] was horrified that our precious existence, here, now, must inevitably falter and be extinguished in death. Larkin's biological clock ticked more loudly than those of other people. Unalloyed happiness was, he felt, unattainable, if only 'because you know that you are going to die'" (18). Undoubtedly Booth talks of 'existence', but then he comfortably situates it within the confines of romantic 'reflection'. It does not occur to him that the sense of failure which haunted Larkin could be inextricably bound to a crisis of an existential sort and consequently turn out to be complex and personal than he thinks it to be. Anglo- American literary criticism therefore appears to be somewhat reticent in even acknowledging the feasibility of an existential engagement with Larkin's poetry. By and large there is a hush-hush silence around the word existential, which in turn calls for some degree of socio-political deliberations. The cold-war ideology which developed from 1947 onwards saw Britain collaborating in the US ideology of the defense of freedom of those which it felt were subjugated. This Truman ideology appropriated from Monroe posited communism as the primary antagonist and a perception evolved that communist gains in whatever part of the world was threatening to British interests. Again since this much propagated freedom was conceived in opposition to communism, the defense of 'high culture' became identified with anti-Stalinism. Antipathy for communism inevitably led to an antipathy towards its practitioners, with the result that a deliberate attempt was made by the Western Alliance to consign the foremost existentialist of the time, Jean Paul Sartre and his brand of existentialism to the dustbins of history. (Sinfield 148, 159). Nevertheless history testifies to the fact that through into the '60s, Sartre with his principles of commitment was a dominant intellectual influence in British culture. Though

15 Sinfield discerns the impact of Sartre in a very limited area- in so far as the latter's ideas about commitment was used to constitute the 'other' (141), it would be my endeavour to trace the discursive relationship that the poetry of Larkin transacts with certain primary existential constructs as enunciated by Jean-Paul Sartre. Furthermore, using Sartre alone as a scaffold to engage with the existential concerns in Larkin's poetry would prove inappropriate precisely because in the 1960s the choice of the British intellectual which predominantly wavered between Sartre and Camus got congealed with the latter. In opposition to Sartre's idea of artistic freedom through an insistence on commitment, British intellectuals clung to the belief that it was possible to preserve 'freedom' by avoiding political attachment Sinfield 143-145). In *Myth of Sisyphus* (1942, Trans 1955) Camus had expounded absurd freedom: "There is no future, henceforth this is the reason for my inner freedom" (57). The move, it ought to be admitted, was a quietist one. Nevertheless it enabled British writers to position themselves as the comfortable other in relation to those discredited French bourgeoisie who were being coaxed by Sartre to venture into the domain of committed literature. Camus the high priest of

British culture, prescribed: "When all is collapse and nothingness, one can accept such a universe and draw from it his strength, his refusal to hope, and the unyielding evidence of a life without consolation" (58-59). It would therefore be obvious to discern in this overarching quietist mood the germ, not only of 'Movement poetry' in general but a major part of the poetry of Philip Larkin as well: Hours giving evidence Or birth, advance On death equally slowly. And saying so to some

16 Means nothing; others it leaves Nothing to be said. (CP 138) Quietist freedom however can be slavish and may as well be identified with the freedom of the condemned if it is not aligned with rebellion. And it is here that I fall back on Hartley's description of the 'Movement' being 'dissenting'. What exactly then is the nature of Larkin's revolt or dissent? The nature of rebellion in Sartre as the British intellectuals read it was predominantly material. With Camus however dissent was interpreted to be metaphysical. Introducing *The Rebel* (Trans1933) Herbert Read asserted: "The nature of revolt has changed in our times. It is no longer the revolt of the poor against the rich. Camus displays our metaphysical revolt, the revolt of man against the conditions of life, against creation itself" (qtd. in Sinfield: 146). Is this not the vein in which the major part of Larkin's poetry impress themselves upon the reader? And if it is so, would it be unfounded to trace the exact nature of dissent in Larkin's poetry- to try and understand the various sociopolitical nuances which might have led to such appropriation. It will be seen that I have been consistently pleading the case of existentialism as an epistemic tool to engage with the poetry of Philip Larkin. A couple of pertinent questions therefore crop up: what exactly is existentialism and why do I proffer it as a viable orientation for this project. To answer the first it ought to be pointed out that there is a certain amount of elusiveness about this term, and also that there are as many types of existentialism as there are existentialists. In the absence of a common body of doctrine to which all existentialists subscribe, John Macquarrie describes existentialism "not as a philosophy but rather as a style of philosophizing" (14). In a brilliantly lucid book entitled *Existentialism* he strives to demarcate the basic characteristics of

17 this style of philosophizing. I quote him at some length since the spirit of that exposition will constitute the crux of this project: It is a philosophy of the subject rather than of the object. But one might say that idealism too took its starting point in the subject. Thus one must further qualify the existentialist position by saying that for the existentialist the subject is the existent in the whole range of his existing. He is not only a thinking subject but an initiator of action and a centre of feeling. It is this whole spectrum of existence, known directly and concretely in the very act of existing, that existentialism tries to express. (14-15) In answer to the second question raised, I maintain that the choice of existentialism as a theoretical framework is dictated by the fact that it is typically suited to unravel the emotional life of man caught in crisis. This, as the survey of relevant literature had already shown is something that Larkin scholarship has summarily ignored. In its search for objective knowledge, western philosophy has for a long time been dominated by a restricted form of rationalism, whereby changing feelings and moods of the human mind have been considered irrelevant to philosophy's task and at times even a hindrance. However as Macquarrie states, "It is precisely through these that we are involved in our world and can learn some things about it that are inaccessible to a merely objective beholding. From Kierkegaard to Heidegger and Sartre, the

existentialists have provided brilliant analyses of such feeling states as anxiety, boredom, nausea, and have sought to show that these are not without their significance for philosophy" (17-18). Existentialism therefore doesn't merely concern itself with the man but man in relation to his world. It is this historical contextuality, this situatedness in time that one feels can open up Larkin's poetry to a host of untraversed nuances.

18 It will be further remembered that I had sought to locate the operational domain of existentialism within the emotional life of man caught in crisis. A relevant question once again stares us at the face: How does this crisis manifest itself? In this context, it ought to be understood that though 'Existentialism' as a philosophical orientation is a recent phenomenon, existential thought is as old as human civilization itself. Karl Jaspers' conception of the 'axial age' corroborates this fact by locating it at a point in time, around 500 BC, when "there took place an extraordinary and worldwide stirring of the human spirit" (Macquarrie 38). The phenomenon was pan-cultural, commencing with the Hebrew prophets (Amos, Hosea, Isaiah), running through the pre-Socratic Greek philosophers (Thales, Heraclitus, Parmenides), and encompassing the likes of Confucius, and Lao-Tse in China, Zarathustra in Iran, and Buddha in India (38). Summarizing the central characteristics of the period Jaspers writes: "What is new about this age...is that man becomes conscious of being as a whole, of himself and his limitations....By consciously recognizing his limits, he sets himself the highest goals. He experiences absoluteness in the depths of selfhood and in the lucidity of transcendence" (qtd. in Macquarrie 39). Acknowledging that the 'axial age' was prompted by a crisis, Macquarrie traces the origin of the same in the preponderance of what he calls the 'mythical mentality' in so far as "this was a timeless mentality in which the sequence of events repeats itself in a never ending series of cycles". Consequently the turning envisaged was not merely a turning away but a turning which would make man "face the radically temporal and historical character of human existence" (40). The advent of Christianity with its insistence on 'end-time' as a time of decision continued the aforesaid existential search and "although Jesus talked of rewards and punishments, he saw the chief motive for obedience in the desire to gain one's authentic being" (44). However, as

19 Christianity moved into the middle ages, it tended to become "rationalistic, propositional and metaphysical" (48). This crisis was further aggravated by recurrent plagues, wars, political and ecclesiastical ferments, which subsumed rational thoughts as being able to tie things up in too neat a package. Confronted with this crisis a new form of mysticism evolved in the personage of Meister Eckhart whose influence on German philosophy can be traced even in Heidegger. It was Eckhart who claimed that "It is God's nature to be without a nature". By analogy therefore, "man being made in the divine image affords a clue to the mystery of God" (49). In fifteenth century Europe Renaissance science and the Reformation once again generated crises within the emotional life of man, though obviously from diverse vantage points. First there was a diminution of human status whereby he was displaced from the centre of the cosmos to the circumference due to the subversion of a geo-centric universe in favour of a helio-centric one. Secondly, a crisis also took place in the religious order of things whereby it was perceived that religion had become too much of a matter of giving assent to dogmas. It was here that an existentialist understanding of life came as a refuge to man, organizing and giving direction to the manifold ambivalences he was circumscribed within. In

this regard, Macquarrie astutely reminds us of both Desiderius Erasmus and Pico della Mirandola but it was the latter who by hitting out at the "essentialist idea that man has a fixed and inalterable nature...anticipates Sartre's claim that man must define himself" (51). Mirandola writes: "A limited nature in other creatures is confined within the laws written down by us. In conformity with thy free judgement, in whose hands I have placed thee, thou art confined by no bounds and thou wilt fix limits of nature for thyself....Thou like a judge appointed for being honourable, art the moulder and

20 maker of thyself; thou mayest sculpt thyself into whatsoever shape thou dost prefer". (qtd. in Macquarrie 51) It is therefore a specific historical crisis that inevitably breeds an existential cognition of life. A survey of the geo-political specifics of the 1950s will probably enable us to ascertain the crisis of the period, so that the applicability of the framework chosen may be convincingly argued. As has been already observed, the cold war rhetoric was structured around the U.S manipulated definition of freedom which throughout the western alliance and particularly in Britain was interpreted in opposition to communism, or to be more precise anti-Stalinism. This in turn generated political quietism, since "literature is most itself in the Free World, both because of the shared attachment to freedom and because the free activity of literature will eschew political commitment" (Sinfield 158). North American New Critics aspired to engage with literary texts through a complete avoidance of external evidences, and as Sinfield reminds us, "the Abstract Expressionist's more or less random assault on the canvas seemed a graphic illustration of freedom" (159). The English literary scenario was not much different from what has just been enumerated. In his introduction to *Interpretations*, a collection of essays on individual poems, John Wain, an eminent poet of the 1950s and a contemporary of Larkin claimed that the poems were engaged with as separate artifacts because "analysis can only concern itself with one object at a time". Herein lay the crisis as Sinfield quoting Christopher Lasch brings out: "The more intellectual purity identifies itself with 'value-free' investigations, the more it empties itself of political content and the easier it is for public officials to tolerate it: thus the state gains the cooperation of writers, teachers and artists not as paid propagandists or state censored time-servers but as free intellectuals capable of policing their own jurisdictions" (161). We understand that the aforesaid

21 crisis took place because reigning political ideology sought to subsume and annihilate subjectivity by way of hegemonizing the intellectual elite. The result is that the Foucauldian Panoptic with its all encompassing gaze operates but operates so pervasively that the much talked of freedom itself is undermined. It can therefore be logically anticipated that an existential approach will do justice not only to the emotional life of the poet but to his poetry as well. It shall be seen that my objective in this introductory chapter was not simply a conventional exercise, devised to catalogue the predominant tendencies of Larkin criticism. On the other hand, the primary impulse was to question the dominant strands of the critical canon on the basis of their ideological moorings, so that the gaps and silences could be sufficiently recovered. Since the central problem that concerns me, is the quest for a new poetics of reading, such gaps and silences, shall probably yield fresh insights into the existing corpus of Larkin criticism. In the second chapter, I examine the question of 'self' in Larkin's poetry. Dismantling the spate of biographical criticism that saw Larkin's poetic work as the direct offshoot of his lived experience, this chapter engages in a brief assessment of the

reigning approaches by way of explaining the notion of the self. 'Subjectivist', 'social-relational', and 'narrativist' accounts of the self are weighed against one another, and in predilecting to opt for the 'existential' account, I have in accordance with my stated position, merely foregrounded the dictates of the genre under consideration. Barring the 'existentialist', almost all other approaches to the self posit or presume an apriori, which, I believe, is untenable with the self of poetry in general. The third chapter of this dissertation is titled, 'Larkin and the Problem of Choice, Negation and Anguish'. The reason for aligning these three existential concepts is that they are intrinsically related to each other. Any exercise of choice brings in its wake the phenomenon of negation, while at the same time it is riddled with anxiety. Since the operation of choice

22 presupposes a man-world relationship, I have deliberately cushioned the problem of choice in Larkin's poetry, within the historical specificity of postwar England. Larkin's perpetual torment, both as a man and as a poet by what he understood to be the meaninglessness of life is in essence the seat of the absurd and it is a direct consequence of the same man-world relationship alluded to earlier. In the fourth chapter, I therefore engage with a cross-section of Larkin's poems from a Camusean perspective, to show Larkin's appropriation of the same, as well as to locate any scope of agency that might lie embedded within them. The concluding chapter is in fact a brief expose, whereby I attempt to re-locate Larkin beyond the lurking critical canon. Quite in keeping with the general spirit of research, this dissertation will also demarcate probable areas through which the proliferation of the existential and absurdist discourse on Larkin's poetry may be successfully articulated.

23 Chapter Two The Question of Self in Larkin's Poetry In a non-fictional prose piece compiled by Anthony Thwaite in 2001 under the title "Further Requirements" Larkin had claimed that "novels are about other people and poetry is about yourself" (FR 24). A statement apparently as innocuous as that made presumably either to sound aphoristic or else to pander to the herd mentality of ordinary readers pertaining to literary genres, should ordinarily have merited little attention. For neither are all novels about other people (Joyce, Woolf and Lawrence being predominant examples), nor is poetry merely about the self (Auden and Spender summarily proving that). The comment however assumes significance within the ironic context of an interpretative obsession which has afflicted Larkin's poetry for too long a time- an obsession with his self. To assume Larkin's naiveté with relation to his craft would tantamount to being oblivious of the flip flops and double entendres he frequently indulged in while talking about them. One is instantaneously reminded of his celebrated quips: denying any knowledge of foreign poetry and claiming to have nothing to do with Modernism. This in spite of the fact, that John Osborne in his monograph, *Larkin- Ideology and Critical Violence* has amply unveiled his more than usual knowledge of both the aforesaid phenomenon. There is no denying the fact that the self is a dominant and pervasive presence in the poetry of Philip Larkin. Poetry for him was a way of preserving experience: "It seems as if you have seen this sight, felt this feeling, had this vision and have got to find a combination of words that will preserve it by setting it off in other people" (R.W 58). In a book entitled *Philip Larkin*, forming part of a series called "Writers And Their Work" Laurence Lerner has pointed out how "Larkin

24 disliked the view that poems are born from other poems, insisting that they must come from 'personal non-literary experience'" (44). It is in this prioritization of the "personal"-locating the source of a poem in the poet's own experience- that Lerner discerns a "strikingly Romantic statement" and also goes on to equate the same with Larkin's hostility to T.S.Eliot and Dylan Thomas: the first being the "most celebrated modern defender of Tradition" while the second, a poet whose poems were "resonant with hints of myth" (44). The question is whether this can constitute a sufficient ground for Larkin scholarship to evaluate his poetry from the vantage point of autobiography. However, if interpretation of poetry predominantly hinges on the autobiographical on account of the poet's own admission why cannot the obverse become a viable basis of evaluation as well. In response to the question: "why do you write and for whom?" posed by the interviewer of Paris Review Larkin had said: "... the duty is to the original experience. It doesn't feel like self expression, though it may look like it. As for whom you write for, well, you write for everybody. Or anybody who will listen" (Larkin "The Art of"). It therefore becomes obvious that the personality cult quotient of Lerner stands quite definitely on insecure grounds. Further Requirements (2001), Anthony Thwaite's collection of previously unpublished non-fiction prose of Larkin contain comments which furthermore appear to subsume the biographical claim. Speaking in connection to his poem "An Arundel Tomb", Larkin in an interview observed: "I was delighted when a friend asked me if I knew a poem ending 'what will survive of us is love'. It suggests the poem was making its way in the world without me. I like them to do that" (FR 58). This detachment of the poet from his poetry, of the artificer from his artifact, speaks volumes of the approach that Larkin fostered for his poetry. However if this doesn't suffice, here is Philip Larkin opening a reading session of "The Explosion" on a BBC Radio

25 Three programme with the following words : "What I should like to do is to write different kinds of poems that might be by different people. Someone once said that the great thing is not to be different from other people but to be different from yourself. That's why I have chosen to read now a poem that isn't especially like me, or like what I fancy I'm supposed to be like" (FR 92). Notwithstanding all these, the fact remains that the major bulk of Larkin scholarship post the poet's death has traversed a hermeneutic trajectory wherein the self of the poet and the self of poetry have been crassly equated. Detractors like Germaine Greer, Bryan Appleyard, Tom Paulin, Lisa Jardine and the like latched upon the secondary evidences provided by Anthony Thwaite's *The Selected Letters of Philip Larkin*, and Andrew Motion's biography *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* with a cannibalistic abandonment. The duality existing between life and art was dumbly repressed in predilection for a mode of scholarship that verged only on the autobiographical. However, to assume that this penchant for biography as an interpretative tool is predominantly conditional would be naïve and erroneous. This is because reading poetry through the limited and abstracted prism of the poet's life had traditionally been the most sought-after methodology even among Larkin admirers – a facet exquisitely elaborated by John Osborne. Surveying the phenomena Osborne points out how David Timms in a 1973 monograph, *Philip Larkin* had already set in place "many of the exegetical vices that would be used much less responsibly by Larkin's detractors" (17). "Larkin", according to Timms, "writes his poetry not from a preconceived set of principles but as a direct and personal response to particular experiences" (qtd.in Osborne 17). *Larkin: Ideology and Critical Violence* is a path breaking work in the sense that it unleashes a concerted reaction

against the most dominant mode of critical engagement that had plagued Larkin's poetry. Acknowledging Timms' work as both 'diligent' and 'perceptive', Osborne none

26 the less goes on to catalogue how Timms rolled all the narrators of Larkin's poetry into one and conflated the same with the author. I quote him at some length: The analysis of poem 'xx' begins: 'Out walking in winter, Larkin sees a young girl'. A little later we are told, 'The poet in poem 'xxxii' has spent the night with a girl and he stands looking out of the hotel window while she brushes her hair'. Moving on to *The Less Deceived*, Timms describes 'Dockery and Son' as 'the reminiscence of the poet on his journey home, having visited his old college'; while the plot of 'Church Going' is summarized as follows: 'Out for a bicycle ride, the poet stops at a church and goes in to look around'. Not only are the differences between the various protagonists minimized on the assumption that they are all Larkin but, conversely, and yet more damagingly, these narrators are repeatedly referred to as 'the poet' when in not a single case is it vouchsafed that they pursue that singular vocation....Worse follows. Of 'Reference Back', Timms says, 'the speaker is a man in his thirties visiting his parents' home. Mother and son have little in common.... (17-18) It would have been absolutely logical for a contemporary researcher to forgo Timms' interpretative lacunae and analytical complacency on grounds of puerility, had not Osborne pointed out the recurrence of the same critical mode in recent scholarship on Larkin as well. Regarding the interpretation of "Reference Back", he says: Since Timms this has become the *don née* for all interpretations of this poem: approximately twenty years later, Professor Trevor Tolley asserts that 'In "Reference Back" ...Larkin recalls an attempt by his mother to reach out to him

27 emotionally in the "time at home" that she "looked so much forward to"; a further six years on, Warren Hope's *Student Guide to Philip Larkin* unequivocally asserts that ' "Love Songs in Age" and "Reference Back" deal with Larkin's loyal but strained relationship with his mother'. (18) Fortunately though, the identity of the poetic self is seldom structured through biography. With major poets, it is a presence which almost always remains elusive, somewhat beyond grasp. To read biography into poetry is to confine the joy of its openness within a closed system of certainties and certitudes- something that 20 th century critical theory had vociferously reacted against. Eliot brought about a clear- cut dissociation between the self of the poet and that of poetry, when alluding to the "significant emotion" he held that it "has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet" (53). "Poetry" for him "is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality but an escape from personality" (52-53). Wimsatt and Beardsley deplored the reductivity underlying the biographical approach when in *The Intentional Fallacy* (1946) they held that "the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art"(Lodge 334). However, it was Roland Barthes who in "The Death of the Author" came out with the most categorical denunciation of biographical criticism, when he rightly observed: The image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his life, his passions, while criticism still consists for the most part in saying that Baudelaire's work is the failure of Baudelaire the man, Van Gogh's his madness, Tchaikovsky's his vice. The explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the

28 end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the author confiding in us. (143) Furthermore it appears that there had been an unintended complicity on the part of Larkin, in generating a notion of the kind of poetry he was writing and the interpretative modality that they presupposed. Poetic creation according to him commences with an "emotional concept" which compels the poet "to do something about it". The poem for Larkin is a product of his "second stage", "a verbal device" intended to reproduce the emotional concept in anyone who reads it, "anywhere, at any time". This is followed by the "third stage" that becomes a "recurrent situation" of people "setting off the device" and thereby recreating for themselves "in different times and places" what the poet felt when he wrote it (RW 83). This apparent congruity projected by Larkin as existing between the self of the poet and that of his poetry, has tempted critics not only to conflate the two, but in certain cases to identify the process with the romantic theory of poetry. However, we understand that an insistence on 'emotion' alone cannot be regarded as the hermeneutic touchstone to align the poetry of Philip Larkin with those of Romantic proper. A poetic architectonic almost similar to that of Larkin is what T.S.Eliot too pleads for, when in "Hamlet and His Problems", he explicates the way by which emotion in art is expressed. Eliot writes: The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked (92). Unprejudiced reading will show that the Larkinesque 'verbal device' is a linguistic equivalent to the Eliotic 'objective correlative'. The very fact that a poem for Larkin is a 'device' is proof of its fictionality. Consequently therefore, the "emotional concept" that he intends to recreate with

29 such device would always be a transmuted one—something in which the self of the poet happily resigns its part in predilection of the self of poetry. The biographical approach as a means to unravel the poetic self of Larkin is further undermined if only scholarship cares to remind itself that even within the Romantic tradition the stated theoretical position has always been one of transcendence. The Wordsworthian poetic theory undoubtedly talks of 'emotion recollected in tranquillity' (251) but also reminds us that in poetic creation it is not the original emotion of the poet that finds expression; rather one that is "similar to that which was before the subject of contemplation" (252), which finds utterance. There is thus a distinction of kind between the two emotions analogous to the two selves. And if that is not enough, here is John Keats categorically stating

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the distinction: A poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence; because he has no identity- he is continually in for- and filling some other body- The Sun, the Moon, the sea and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute- the poet has none; no identity- he is certainly the most unpoetical of all God's creatures....

When I am in a room with people if I ever am free from speculating on creatures of my own brain, then not myself goes home to myself, but the identity of everyone in the room begins to

press upon me that, I am in a very little time annihilated—not only among Men; it would be the same in a nursery of children.... (Keats, "Selected Letters" 195) Osborne's reading of the majority of criticism on Larkin's poetry tempts him to situate them within the context of Bowdlerism. Extending the purview of deletions to encompass not merely the textual but the interpretative as well, Osborne unleashes a scathing attack on the phenomenon

30 of biographical criticism which afflicted Larkin's poetry in the second half of the twentieth century. In stark opposition to Dr. Bowdler who in expurgating the indecent and blasphemous passages believed that he was "conferring a benefit not only on the reader but on Shakespeare as well", the "late millennial Bowdler" as Osborne dubs them operated to "diminish rather than enhance the reputation of the chosen author". The pervasiveness of such critical endeavor may be gauged from the fact that "of the twenty to thirty critical books and sixty or so worthwhile essays on Larkin, well over ninety percent employ the biographical approach" (24-25). No wonder therefore that in the dissemination of such hegemonic methodology, Osborne rightly discerns the operation of a dominant ideological pattern. In contemporary times the self as a philosophical construct is enmeshed within a field of discursivity. Michael Kuhler and Nadja Jelinek in an edited book *Autonomy and the Self* forming part of the philosophical studies series (vol :118) enumerates three distinct approaches for explaining the nature of the self. In the first place there is the 'subjectivist account' prioritizing "subjective or individual traits of the person in question". Secondly we have what is called the 'social-relational account' "pointing to a person's social involvement and social interdependencies"; while the 'narrative account' highlights "a constructivist approach by way of viewing the self as nothing other than what is created anew each time a story is told about who a person is". Evolving from the seminal works of the American social behaviorist George Herbert Mead, the social- relational accounts of the self "emphasizes the dependence of the self's genesis and continued existence upon social and cultural context". For Charles Taylor who presupposes certain psychological states like desires, motivation, feelings, inclinations as 'a-priori', the self is always a product of 'articulation'. These vague and inchoate attitudes and states await

31 interpretation (articulation) and since interpretation necessitates language, the role of culture specific society assumes paramount importance. Thus crops up the significance of socially conveyed concepts in way of definition of the self. Proponents of the Narrative Accounts of the self on the other hand, subvert the claim that it is possible to have direct access to the self, be they subjective or social-relational. They construe the self as a linguistic construction formulated in the form of narratives. Paul Ricoeur for example holds that it is the identity of the narrated story which forms the very basis of a person's self. Kuhler and Jelinek therefore rightly observe: "The crucial point is that single aspects of a story gain their meaning only in relation to each other and to the story as a whole. Hence in order to make sense of individual aspects in one's life, we need to tell a story, in which these aspects are put in some form of meaningful order, i.e., in which different aspects are construed as relevant for one another and for the story as a whole" (x-xvii). The problem with these approaches is that some sort of a self as an already existing phenomenon is regarded as a priori, even at the outset of any discourse on the same. While most social-relational accounts presuppose certain psychological states as innate and therefore constitutive of the essence of the self; the

Narrativist accounts too, tacitly presuppose the presence of a rudimentary self, which at best is susceptible to mutation but nevertheless existent. This hypothetical assumption of 'presence' becomes a major hindrance for any meaningful engagement with the self of poetry. For unlike the self of the poet which may be regarded as a monolith (in the nominal sense), the self of poetry is always provisional in essence. Consequently the much talked of poetic persona is not something that the poet assumes at the outset of poetic creation but rather a resultant of poetic experience. Had the assumption of a self been apriori to poetic experience, poetry would at best be a posturing- a masquerade that the poet

32 staged in order to befool his audience. In saying that he intended "to write different kinds of poems that may be by different people", Larkin probably missed out on a very important point. He couldn't possibly have written poetry that might have been by different people. But his poetry undoubtedly could proffer different people to whom the poetic experience inhered. Unfortunately the provisionality of the poetic self I alluded to earlier is something that is bound to be subverted by a dominant proponent of the subjectivist theory of the self. The theory in question which Kuhler and Jelinek terms the Essential Nature account "claims that the essential nature of a person is not chosen by the person herself but given". Harry J. Frankfurt the most prominent advocate of the essential nature account floated the concepts of 'caring' and 'volitional necessities" wherein the former term is defined "as an essentially volitional attitude which can, but does not have to be accompanied by feelings, emotions and value judgments". The Essential Nature account therefore as Kuhler and Jelinek maintain "claims that a person is confronted with the fact that she cannot help but care about certain things, which means that she can merely discover her already given essential nature- but cannot alter it at will" (xiv). Explicating the nature of the poetic self, way back in 1818, John Keats in a personal letter addressed to Richard Woodhouse said: "... As to the poetical character

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itself- it has no self- it is everything and nothing- it has no character- it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated-

It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the chameleon poet" (194-195). If this description of the poetic self is anything valid, the only subjective account that can do justice to Larkin's poetry is the existential account or to be more precise the existential account as was enunciated by Jean Paul Sartre.

33 Western philosophy from Plato onwards had projected a self that with its coherence and unity can sift through the amorphous chaos of experience and arrive at a structured notion of itself and the world which it inhabits. With Descartes this self got congealed into a nomenclature, an institution, the 'Cogito'- I think therefore I am- which was disseminated through subsequent philosophical phases. The British empiricists structured reality differently but the essentiality of the structuring self remained unchallenged. The same can be said of Hegelian idealism and Kantian metaphysics. Intent upon converting metaphysics into a

scientific discipline, Kant systematized it but did not move away from the concept of the self as a structuring unity. Kant regarded the phenomenal world as the only object of cognition, but it was primarily due to the 'analytic unity of apperception' and the 'synthetic unity of apperception' that (according to Kant) cognition was made possible. From the view of life as pure essence, the focus shifts to existence for the first time and in a concerted manner in the Phenomenological philosophy of Edmund Husserl. Husserl defined phenomenology as the science of the essence of consciousness (Ideas 1) and in a way prioritized the first person point of view of consciousness, by making it an intentional act always directed towards an object. However Husserl made a categorical distinction between the object of an experience and its content. For Husserl the content which he preferred to call 'Noema' was aligned to the generation of a concept or percept which was eternal and could exist irrespective of the object. However the question still remained: who appropriated the concept? And it is here that Husserl provides an answer which by no means is different from any other Idealist philosophers. The self is once again proffered but in a new garb, a new nomenclature- 'The Transcendental Ego'.

34 With Martin Heidegger's anti-foundational philosophy, totalitarian and essential narratives received a tremendous jolt. In his theory, the notion of the self even if not displaced is at least placed on infirm ground. 'Dasein' as conceived by Heidegger being inherently temporal, it becomes difficult to define the 'who' of 'Dasein' in terms of a self. The implication is that the self for Heidegger is neither a subject nor a substance, but something which is open to transformation. A significant advancement no doubt, but does that in any way imply that the self is dead? This essential, debilitated 'self' however dies paving way for a contingency that is perennially in a state of flux and change, realizable but never fully realized; and it is Jean Paul Sartre whose philosophy puts the final nail in the coffin. While Descartes discovered his primary truth through the experience of the 'cogito', Sartre probes vertically into the depths of subjectivity, thereby uncovering a multilayered consciousness. In his essay *The Transcendence of the Ego* Sartre enumerates the three stages to one's self-discovery: 1. Consciousness (as consciousness of something); 2. The non-conscious (the world, that consciousness is conscious of, corresponding to the en-soi); 3. The self (corresponding to the pour-soi and that which is not the world). The topology of consciousness that Sartre devised speaks of three levels of consciousness: the pre-reflective which is merely consciousness of something; the reflective; and the self-reflective where consciousness becomes its own object. The distinction among these three levels has been deftly brought about by Sartre himself through an analogy of the act of reading. Christine Daigle summarizes it as follows: When you are engaged in the act of reading, you are also conscious of the room you are in, the temperature of the room, the chair on which you sit, etc, all on a

35 pre-reflective level. But you are also actively engaged in the reading, which is a reflective activity that requires the second level of consciousness. As a reflective consciousness, you are using reflection to be conscious of something in a different way...at the same time you can also think of yourself as reading, i.e. actively thinking about your reading, you are conscious of yourself as a reading- self. (22) Of course it needs to be understood that though Sartre presents the levels of consciousness in a sequence, ultimately they are contemporaneous moments of consciousness. Apparently Sartre's philosophy moves by means of a revision of

the Cartesian 'ego' and Husserl's 'intentionality', but the resolution he achieves is of a radical kind. Whereas both Descartes and Husserl posit the 'ego' as the unifier of conscious experiences, for Sartre this role resides typically with consciousness. The ego for him is a reflective by-product of conscious activity. Sartre writes: The world has not created the 'me' the 'me' has not created the world. These are two objects for absolute impersonal consciousness, and it is by virtue of this consciousness that they are connected. This absolute consciousness, when it is purified of the 'I' no longer has anything of the subject. It is quite simply a first condition and an absolute source of existence. (Sartre, "Transcendence" 105-6) As has been already mentioned, the phenomenological approach that Sartre employs has been adapted from Husserl and in keeping with the latter, Sartre too believes in the intentional structure of the consciousness. However where he primarily differs is in the way Husserl distorts the reflective nature of consciousness by making it reflexive (turning back) and in the way generates a subject in the form of a transcendental ego. Sartre on the other hand argues as Robert

36 Denoon Cumming explicates: "When I become self conscious, I am reflecting upon my pre-reflective consciousness of something else, and the self (the ego) of which I become conscious is not the subject performing this act of reflection, but its intentional object, which has emerged in retrospect from the pre-reflective consciousness I am reflecting upon" (12). Self consciousness therefore in the philosophy of Sartre cannot secure for the self that privileged role of transcending experience as it does in Descartes and Husserl. The result is that the self has finally become a transitory object, delusive and mutable and thereby ceased to be the anchor of experience that it had been since the inception of philosophy. An engagement with the poetry of Philip Larkin from the perspective outlined above can open up new avenues of interpretation and effectively counter interpretative stereotypes, which his detractors have chosen to, embellish him with. One of his early poems 'Two Guitar Pieces' composed in 1946 and included in the anthology *In the Grip of Light* may be a case in point. The poem opens with a cluster of photographic images as in a montage with obvious associations of a post-war landscape, just subtle enough to touch upon the impending vacuity of the scene: The tin-roofed shack by the railroad Casts a shadow. Wheat straws in the white dust And a wagon standing. Stretched out into the sun A dozen legs are idle in dungarees... (CP 8) What is obvious is that the consciousness of the speaker is in the Sartrean pre-reflective mode, whereby the world, manifesting itself through beings of discrete kind is simply registered as

37 existents. The experience as it gathers up and presents itself before consciousness is predominantly eidetic whereby the speaker merely catalogues whatsoever it is that surround him: One frowns above a guitar: the notes, random From tuning, wander into the heat Like a new insect chirping in the scrub, Untired at noon. A chord gathers up and spills, And a southern voice tails out around one note Contentedly discontent. (8) The mode of consciousness however changes from the pre-reflective to the reflective in the penultimate and ultimate lines of the first stanza whereby the 'southern voice' is perceived by the speaker as 'contentedly discontent'. The oxymoron is not intended to be decorative but rather connotative of acceptance of 'discontent' of the inmates of a no-where, no-when provincial town, of which the 'southern voice' is an emblematic representative. The reflective mode of the speaker already alluded to persists in the second stanza as well when he despairingly

informs: "Though the tracks/ Burn to steel cities, they are taking/ No one from these parts." A telling comment no doubt, on the imbalance of economic opportunities existing between provincial towns and cities, but what are we to make of the self of the speaker? It is a specific poetic experience that proffers the semblance of a self, and though not nominally projected, it is a self that is anguished and 'discontent', one that has contentedly embraced the stasis that the material conditions of life had thrust it into.

38 It would be interesting to note that "Two Guitar Pieces" is comprised of two sections written with a gap of three days between 15 th and 18 th September 1946. However it may be construed that they were not intended to be separate poems, since a thread of thematic unity in the form of the 'guitar' binds the two parts. Neither has the landscape changed nor the mood and once again at the outset of the second section, the speaker is back to the pre-reflective mode: "I roll a cigarette, and light/ A spill at the stove. With a lungful of smoke/ I join you at the window that has no curtain"... (8). Experience is randomly catalogued as the existent brushes shoulder with all other existents surrounding him: A man is walking along A path between the wreckage. And we stare at the dusk, Sharing the cigarette. Behind us, our friend Yawns, and collects the cards. The pack is short, And dealing from now till morning would not bring The highest hands. Besides, it's too dark to see. So he kicks the stove, and lifts the guitar to his lap, Strikes this note, that note. (8-9)

39 That the modes of consciousness are contemporaneous and not sequential, is attested by the fact that the speaker, while unreflectively registers the presence of his yawning friend collecting the cards also becomes reflectively apprehensive of whether countless deals would bring unto him 'the highest hands'. Again a self proffers but on this occasion it is not the erstwhile self submerged in anguish but a self that is apprehensive of the prospects of life and chooses to remain resigned. For the first time in the poem, the third stanza of the second section, confronts a diligent reader with a consciousness that is self-reflective. In other words, a consciousness that is conscious of a previous experience inhering to it surfaces, creating in its wake an ego-the 'I'- which is not merely nominal but real, in the limited sense, that it can now structure the very experience which had constituted it. Interestingly however, the stimulus to that end had been of a kinesthetic sort- 'I am trembling'- and is significantly experienced as 'sudden'. The impersonal notes of the guitar project a self only when the nominal persona of the poem becomes kinesthetically aware of it as a human construct- 'language'- and reflexively turns back upon experience: I am trembling: I am suddenly charged with their language, these six strings, Suddenly made to see they can declare Nothing but harmony, and may not move Without a happy stirring of the air That builds within this room a second room;

40 And the accustomed harnessing of grief Tightens... (9) What follows is a brief interjection of a self, vainly striving to organize and structure experience only to dissipate itself into nothingness: And so I watch the square, Empty again like hunger after a meal. You offer the cigarette and I say, keep it, Liking to see the glimmer come and go Upon your face. What poor hands we hold, When we face each other honestly! And now the guitar again, Spreading me over the evening like a cloud, Drifting, darkening: unable to bring rain. (9) Holding 'poor hands' while facing 'each other honestly' is a relational perception dependent upon self-

reflective consciousness. But does the consciousness abide? The concluding image of the guitar spreading the speaker 'over the evening like a cloud' is so numinous and abstract, that any such possibility is summarily precluded. In 1938, Jean Paul Sartre citing a description of the death of the American Joe in a French café from the novel *U.S.A* went on to claim that "Dos Passos is the greatest novelist of our time": "Joe laid out a couple of frogs and was backing off towards the door, when he saw in the mirror

41 that a big guy in a blouse was bringing down a bottle on his head held with both hands. He tried to swing around but he didn't have time. The bottle crashed his skull and he was out". (qtd. in Cumming 3) The passage held special importance for Sartre in the light of the fact that it operated as an exquisite analogy, enacting as it were in fictional form the workings of consciousness and the consequent evolution of the self. The analogy as Robert Denoon Cumming rightly pointed out in his introduction to *The Philosophy of Jean Paul Sartre* "appeals to him (Sartre) because a mirror is a surface. It lacks depth" (7). What Dos Passos' description reveals are successions of random images, and that is also precisely how human consciousness behaves. Furthermore, Sartre's intention is not to abjure reflection as an explanation of human action in the traditional sense of the term. What he simply asserts regarding reflection may be adequately summarized in the language of Cumming. I quote him at some length: ... that the self or character of which we then become conscious, is an outcome of this process of reflection; it is not an antecedent structure which, when disclosed by reflection, will provide a causal explanation of why I am doing what I am doing. He is further asserting that to the extent that I construe as an explanatory principle the self or character of which I become conscious through reflection, my self-consciousness is self-deception. (8) An exquisite poetic equivalent of the thesis that the self is an object of reflection and not an antecedent structure finds expression in a poem entitled "Best Society" (1951). The speaker in the poem while deploring the abrupt loss of solitude which marked his transition from childhood

42 to maturity reflects on the comparative merits of socialization as against his self imposed isolation: Then after twenty, it became At once more difficult to get. And more desired- though all the same More undesirable; for what You are alone has, to achieve The rank of fact, to be expressed In terms of others, or it's just A compensating make believe. (CP 56) What is quite obvious is that a reflective consciousness is at work here, directed specifically to a cluster of consciousnesses lived in the past. The semblance of a self is also projected in retrospect, that being appreciative of the sociability of all human virtues cannot decide between the relative claims of self and society and thus stands confounded. It is with a concatenation of harsh consonantal sounds, 'viciously then I lock my door' that the persona ushers in a temporal shift in the fourth stanza. Reflection on past consciousness gives way to the immediate present where the reigning deity is that of a self-reflective consciousness registering its existence among all other existents: Viciously, then, I lock my door.

43 The gas-fire breathes. The wind outside Ushers in evening rain. Once more Uncontradicting solitude Supports me on its giant palm... (56) However, it is at this juncture that the reader is confronted with a problem of an epistemic kind. What is he to make of the three final lines that conclude the poem: "And like a sea anemone/Or simple snail, there cautiously/Unfolds,

emerges, what I am" (57). I would venture to propose that within the context of the poem, the emergence of the 'I' cloistered apparently like a 'sea anemone' or 'simple snail' unfolding itself only in solitude is very close to the Sartrean position that the self is never an antecedent structure but always an object of reflection. Larkin though, is too subtle a poet to be dumbly appropriative. The 'I' undoubtedly 'unfolds', but does it have an essence? In the absence of anything specific, the 'what I am' can turn out to be only a surface- a mirror for example lacking any depth whatsoever. Larkin is not quite the kind of poet who is naturally predisposed to structure poetic experience in essential terms. The two poems hitherto discussed are replications of a consciousness that prefers to lacerate in the flux of existence rather than remain secure within the ambit of conjured essence. "Wedding Wind", is most likely to be read as the confused expression of a bride who cannot quite come to terms with her altered state and therefore remains apprehensive: The wind blew all my wedding- day, And my wedding- night was the night of the high wind;

44 And a stable door was banging, again and again, That he must go and shut it, leaving me Stupid in candlelight, hearing rain, Seeing my face in the twisted candlestick, Yet seeing nothing. (CP 11) Close reading shall possibly reveal that within the space of the poem, it is not the experience of the speaker which assumes significance. Rather it is the wind as an existent, animating through its actions all other discrete existents, including the speaker and her apprehensions that are fore grounded: All is the wind Hunting through clouds and forests, thrashing My apron and the hanging cloths on the line. Can it be borne, this bodying-forth by wind Of joy my actions turn on, like a thread Carrying beads? (11) Existence here to quote a Sartrean term is in a state of repletion, a nagging sense of surfeit, a feeling that something is too much. Consciousness following upon the heels of consciousness strikes the poetic persona, primarily at a pre-reflective level and in an instinctive manner. There is also a categorical distinction made between the 'being for itself' (Sartre's *pour soi* and the

45 human persona in this case) and the 'being in itself' (Sartre's *en soi*) manifesting in and through the natural world. The point of contrast resides chiefly in the inherent dichotomy informing the two modes of 'being'; for while the latter happily reconciles to the mutations of 'being', only as existents; the '*pour soi*' in the embodiment of the speaker fails to come to terms with her limitless freedom and therefore stands confounded. The wind rages through the 'wedding night', the 'stable door' simply bangs. 'Hunting through clouds and forests', it 'thrashes' the 'apron and the hanging cloths on the line'. They presumably dance to its tunes. But what about the human speaker. Is she really happy as she claims? The apparent joy that impelled her thought soon gives way to a feeling of anguish that is the shared lot of the 'being for itself', confronted by unlimited freedom. What the '*pour soi*' aspires for is the uncontradictory solidness of being that informs the '*en soi*' and realization of the fact that it is unattainable only leads to anxiety. The poetic experience is not unlike what Antoine Roquetin went through in Sartre's *Nausea*: I haven't had any adventures. Things have happened to me, events, incidents, anything you like. But not adventures. It isn't a matter of words; I am beginning to understand. There is something I longed for more than all the rest without realizing it properly. It wasn't love, heaven forbid, nor glory, nor wealth. It was ... anyway, I had imagined that at certain moments my life could take on a rare and precious quality. There was no need for extraordinary circumstances: all I asked for was a little order (58). Likewise in the

context of "The Wedding Wind", though events and incidents happen to the speaker of the poem, they are unable to take on that 'rare and precious quality', with the result that order remains elusive.

46 It is common assumption that a philosophical tradition, soaked in the empiricism of Hobbes, Locke, Barkley and Hume, would have little room for the existential philosophy of Sartre. However literary history confirms that in the post-war period, the impact of Sartre on British literature and culture was too profound to be ignored. In *Literature, Politics and Culture in Post- War Britain* Alan Sinfield writes: "Sartre could not be ignored- because he was the most significant intellectual currently writing; because he wrote from Paris; and because it could not be denied that he had one answer to the persisting anxiety about the status and roles of intellectuals. All the main texts and novels were rapidly translated" (141). This is neither to conjecture nor insinuate the probability of an ideological appropriation of Sartrean ideas by Philip Larkin. Major poetry can hardly be a blind adherence to ideological precepts, but what are we to make of a poem wherein the articulation of experience is strictly in line with the Sartrean notion of subjectivity? A thorough engagement with a poem "Waiting for Breakfast While She Brushed Her Hair" should adequately substantiate the aptness of the question: Waiting for breakfast while she brushed her hair I looked down at the empty hotel yard Once meant for coaches. Cobble stones were wet, But sent no light back to the loaded sky, Sunk as it was with mist down to the roofs. Drain pipes and fire escape climbed up Past rooms still burning their electric light: I thought: Featureless morning, featureless night. (CP 20)

47 Things are catalogued as they appear to the pre-reflective consciousness with their matter of fact existence and if the 'I' intervenes in the last line that is only to assert the drabness of reality. It is with the first word of the second stanza-'misjudgment'- that the poem changes direction. Judgment and misjudgment alike, pre-suppose the operation of logic and reasoning and the reasoning in this poem is directed towards a specific end. The self in the form of the nominal 'I' had initially surfaced in the last line of the first stanza, though it had remained a somewhat passive reflector of consciousness. However in the second stanza a reflexive (turning back) movement of consciousness sets in, structuring the erstwhile reality into a narrative of human purport: Misjudgment: for the stones slept, and the mist Wandered absolvingly past all it touched, Yet hung like a strayed breath; the lights burnt on, Pin points of undisturbed excitement... (20) The use of verbs - 'slept', 'wandered', 'touched', 'hung' and 'strayed'- as human metaphors, point towards an anthropocentrism of the worst kind. Unable to face the disarray and randomness of existents encumbering him, the speaker goes on to accommodate them within the context of a human drama designed to render reality agreeable. Through an operation of the reflective consciousness, the 'wet' cobblestones of the first stanza now sleeps, the banal 'mist' wanders like an absolver, while, ...beyond the glass The colourless vial of day painlessly spilled

48 My world back after a year, my lost lost world Like a cropping deer strayed near my path again... (20) "Waiting for breakfast while she brushed her hair" is an immensely interesting poem in the sense that it replicates not the contemporaneous but rather the sequential evolution of all three modes of human existence as also the transitoriness of the so called

human self. In the third stanza an invocation to poetic inspiration made palpable through the deftly personified 'tender visiting' sets the tone and tenor for the self-reflective consciousness to operate and thereby transfix poetic experience within the bounds of causality: But, tender visiting, Follow as a deer or an unforced field, How would you have me? Towards your grace My promise meet and lock and race like rivers, But only when you choose. (20) The crude disenchanting lacklustre existents of the first stanza perceived through a pre-reflective consciousness undergo a change in the second due to the operation of the reflective. But unlike Sartre's Roquentin, human predicament is such that it is terrified to exist in the abstract and is naturally pre-disposed to view experience within a teleological framework. Thus the persona's anthropocentric reflections on reality in the second stanza compel him to believe that the experience he traverses through had been designed to get him confronted with his numinous poetic inspiration. Finally though there is an all-pervasive presence of the self in all the three stanzas, what is striking is that they are mutative and very different from one another.

49 As one approaches the mature Larkin, i.e poems written more or less after 1955, a significant change appears to set in: consciousness becomes considerably less disposed to be its own object. In other words, the operation of the self-reflective consciousness, whereby consciousness reflectively turns back on itself is notably reduced. Consequently therefore, there is less propensity on the part of the poetic persona to structure the randomness of experience into a coherent whole. Existence is predominantly regarded as gratuitous- a given condition, unwarranted and uncalled for, regarding which all that can be said is that 'it is'. This inchoate flux called existence is appreciated for what it is, and unlike the poems already discussed, little effort is made towards any imposition of order. The self is not obliterated; it only gets more subsumed within existence: Jan Van Hogspeuw staggers at the door And pisses at the dark. Outside, the rain Courses in cart ruts down the deep mud lane. Inside, Dirk Dogstoerd pours himself some more, And holds a cinder to his clay with tongs, Belching out smoke. (CP 177) These lines are from a poem called "The Card Players" written in 1970 and published in the anthology High Windows. It is a narrative of action with character names that are subtle amalgamation of the beast and the phallus. The narrator in this poem comes around as an objective onlooker pre-reflectively registering a human drama held under the rancor of a calamitous sky:

50 Dirk deals the cards. Wet century-wide trees Clash in surrounding starlessness above This lamplit cave, where Jan turns back and farts, Gobs at the grate, and hits the queen of hearts. (177) There is no reflective consciousness at work here, no attempt to structure the experience and correlate it with the speaker. However a rudimentary self is undoubtedly present since from a phenomenological perspective, a minimal form of self awareness is a constant structural feature of conscious experience. It is this sense of a self that exclaims: "Rain, wind and fire! The secret, bestial peace!" (177). Obviously, this is neither a reflective self nor one that is reflexively constituted by a self-reflective consciousness. This is merely a pre-reflective self awareness and not a self in the strictest sense of the term. Incipient would be a somewhat precise word to designate the form of the self under consideration. An inchoate, intangible, rudimentary presence that casts its aura throughout the poetic experience but typically eludes grasp. "Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel" for example is a poem wherein a pre-reflective

consciousness finds itself confronted by a world of inert beings, thronging the interior of a hotel, when, "...all the salesman have gone back to Leeds,/ Leaving full ashtrays in the conference room" (CP 163). The different coloured 'empty chairs', the desolate 'dining room' declaring 'a larger loneliness of knives and glass', the 'silence laid like a carpet', constitute the being-in-itself (en-soi) that though passive, are solid and self- identical in their fullness of being. Herein lies the facticity of the Royal Station Hotel as also the persona in whom the experience inhere.

51 However the being-for-itself (pour-soi) or the human speaker is caught up in a situation. And since it is in the nature of the for-itself to transcend its facticity, the headed paper which simply should have been an inert being, provides him with a means to do so and he muses eloquently: "The headed paper, made for writing home/ (If home existed) letters of exile: Now/ Night comes on. Waves fold behind villages" (163). The entire poetic experience hangs in mid-air, being unstructured by a self, or conversely facilitating no genesis of a self barring the unsubstantial pre-reflective consciousness. Larkin's superiority as a craftsman not only in this poem but also in the previous one lies in the fact that by abjuring the first person narrator, he considerably rarifies the role of the 'self' in poetry and transmutes the same to the level of the generic human being. The 'headed paper' does not only invite the incipient narrator of the poem to write the italicized message. It presumably invites the reader or for that matter, anyone. Even when the 'I' appears in poetry as in a 1968 piece titled "Sad Steps", it is used in the limited and nominal sense, of a being among many other beings that throng the scene. It does not act, does not organize the conundrum of experiences it is circumscribed within, but merely like a passive register responds to external stimuli: Groping back to bed after a piss I part thick curtains, and am startled by The rapid clouds, the moon's cleanliness. Four o' clock: wedge-shadowed gardens lie Under a cavernous, a wind-picked sky.

52 There's something laughable about this... (CP 169) Larkin's foregrounding of sensation rather than thought as a constituent pre-condition for poetry may be evinced from the word 'groping' which occurs in the very first line of the poem. Rather than any concerted thought on the subject, it is an urgency on the part of the speaker to relieve himself that occasions the poem. Instinctively thereafter, the speaker parts 'thick curtains' only to discover existence in its varied forms resplendent in the fullness of being: "High and preposterous and separate-/ Lozenge of love! Medallion of art! / O wolves of memory! Immensements! ..." (169). The moon is 'High', 'preposterous', and 'separate' but more importantly it is solid and self-identical, a being-in-itself, essentially self-contained. This constitutes the facticity of the moon but not necessarily the facticity of the speaker. As a being for- itself he can only aspire for the solidity of the in-itself, but since that is an impossibility the only recourse available is transcendence: One shivers slightly, looking up there. The hardness and the brightness and the plain Far-reaching singleness of that wide stare Is a reminder of the strength and pain Of being young; that it can't come again, But is for others undiminished somewhere. (169)

53 The 'singleness of that wide stare' facilitates an understanding, but the understanding does not anymore alight upon the nominal pre-reflective consciousness that registered the experience. The 'I' fritters away and analogous to the previous poems, once again the incipient poetic self paves the way for the rarified generic human to take over. Do we therefore find a

regimented sense of self in the poetry of Philip Larkin? The much talked of Larkinesque poetic self as we find it is a no-self, a no-thing, constituted with felicity and perpetually moving towards hedonistic abandonment. The problem with erstwhile scholarship when they chose to dub him as “minor registrar of disappointment” (James wood), “foul mouthed bigot” (Peter Ackroyd), “provincial grotesque” (Bryan Appleyard) and the like stemmed from a misconception that the self of a poet is the aggregate of the contents of his poetic works taken as a whole. However poetry is not a bolus and is far too nuanced a medium for such broad generalizations. Each poem by a particular poet is shaped by a distinct series of consciousness and it is only within the experiential parameters of such consciousness that the self of a poet ought to be discerned. This holds true for every poet and Philip Larkin cannot be a possible exception.

54 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

55 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,

56 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"

57 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 20th 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.

58 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

59 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

60 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

61 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

62 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)

63 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

64 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

65 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

66 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 quarries for some

67 '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 th November 1940, and continued into the morning of 15 th 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 squinned for a sign That this was still the town that had been 'mine'

68 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

69 '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

70 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

71 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

72 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

73 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

74 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

75 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 fittings 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

76 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 foregrounded 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

77 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 spying 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

78 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

79 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. Maybe 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.

80 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,

81 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

82 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,

83 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 meaning 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

84 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

85 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)

86 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?

87 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

88 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

89 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)

90 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,

91 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

92 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.

93 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

94 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

95 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

96 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:

97 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

98 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.

99 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

100 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

101 '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 Colridgian '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

102 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.

103 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

104 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

105 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).

106 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

107 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

108 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;

109 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

110 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

111 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.

112 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 23<sup>rd</sup> 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 Gaugain-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

113 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)

114 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:

115 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,

116 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

117 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)

118 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).

119 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 a priori, 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

120 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

121 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)

122 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

123 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.

124 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

125 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

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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:

126 ... 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

127 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.

128 Chapter Five Re-locating Larkin beyond the Lurking Canon This dissertation was undertaken with the specific intention to revisit Larkin's poetry from perspectives not hitherto employed as pervasively as it ought to have been. I use the word 'pervasive' consciously, intending to allude to the already observed fact that though thematic existential engagement with Larkin's poetry has preoccupied a handful of critics, it has remained so puerile as to merit little attention. John Osborne, as has been catalogued in the third chapter, did engage literally with a couple of Larkin's poems from the vantage point of Sartrean existential concepts; yet it is only a chapter-length work forming part of a book. In attempting a first-hand existentialist engagement, principally with reference to a selection of Larkin's Collected Poems, this dissertation can presumably claim to be radical in its approach. Engagement with poetry in contemporary times has been reduced to a subculture, instituted predominantly within the confines of the academia or else in certain poetry journals. In the absence of new ideas to enliven poetry through literary criticism, it becomes difficult to conjecture, how long the natural demise of the genre may be thwarted. This is particularly true of the poetry of Philip Larkin. For how else can one justify the fact that even among the scant literary criticism being rolled out today on Larkin, the great majority still situate the poet either within the postwar context or else within the context of his so-called Englishness. This also explains why I consistently failed to find a single critical work that engages with Larkin's poetry from the perspective of the Camusean absurd. Tempting as it may be to employ postmodern theoretical approaches to the reading of poetry, nothing explains the indifference meted out

129 towards philosophical habitations that were not only contemporaneous but pertinent to the genesis and growth of Larkin's poetry. The title of this dissertation, 'Larkin Lost, Larkin Found' can therefore claim adequate aptness, with its curious blend of desire and aspiration, despite the fact that desire in this case is negatively construed. It is a desire to lose the man Larkin, with his self-ego bloated by contemporary literary criticism in predilection for the self-

effacing poet that Larkin ought to have been. At the same time it is a desire to subsume prevalent critical practices with their penchant for autobiographical modes of engagement, in favour of a mode of criticism that can lend fresh lease of life to the critics' debate about Larkin's poetry. No wonder then that this project aspires to move 'Towards a new poetics of reading'. However, what exactly is implied by the phrase 'poetics of reading'? Historically, the word poetics first surfaced around 350B.C in Aristotle's work of the same name and has since been seen as an attempt to define the structural and functional principles of works of art, predominantly in the verbal medium. Traditionally though, as Rad Borislavov in an article titled 'poetics' published by The Chicago School of Media Theory holds: "The term poetics has been interpreted as an inquiry into the laws and principles that underlie a verbal work of art and has often carried normative and prescriptive connotations" ("Poetics"). It is in this broader sense that the title of the present project needs to be understood. Reading strategies are like 'prescriptive' working principles that a researcher employs and a logical handling of such principles alone can widen the ontological limits of poetry. Judged from this perspective, one can only hope that the reading strategies employed in this dissertation shall prove to be a viable hermeneutic that is 'productive of meaning' and 'responsive to communication'.

130 A research work, in order to be a responsible scholarly endeavour, should pave the way for further research. Assuming that the critical orientations employed in this dissertation does evolve as alternative reading paradigms of Larkin's poetry, it is now time to point out a couple of areas, where the existential tool may be profitably implemented. This shall considerably widen the horizon of Larkin scholarship and, as I have repeatedly stressed, redeem the poetry from the clutches of biographical and linear historical criticism. One such area that readily offers itself to engagement is the 'Other', which is not only a domineering presence in Larkin's poetry, but more often than not provides the very ground of poetic tension. Strangely though, it is not the generic 'Other' that has commanded much attention in existing Larkin criticism, but a diluted and gendered form of the 'Other' made palpable in such work as Philip Larkin: His Life's Work. Summarizing the contents of that text Regan writes: Janice Rossen's Philip Larkin: His Life's Work provides a good introduction to some of the principal concerns of feminist criticism, concentrating on the different 'kinds' of women and the 'different versions' of femininity that Larkin's poems depict. Rossen shows how women are habitually presented in terms that are either negative and hostile or romanticised and idealistic. She argues that this polarity of viewpoints typifies the dilemma of a generation of men who were educated apart from 'the girls' and who consequently viewed the opposite sex as 'mysterious and inaccessible'. ("New Casebooks" 13) As a specimen of an alternative reading paradigm, this work definitely has an optimal critical value and Regan is probably justified in endorsing it. However, if we only revisit the much talked of 'women' question and are ready to contest the same, from the perspective of the Sartrean 'Other', a whole new reading pattern might evolve, shedding new light upon Larkin's

131 poetry. In a chapter titled "Difficulties with Girls", included in the New Casebooks on Larkin, Rossen writes: "The difficulties which Larkin lays bare exist in a complicated tangle of cause and effect; it is difficult to know whom to blame" (136). This is an obvious reference to the much propagated problem with women in Larkin's poetry and to substantiate her claim Rossen alludes to a letter which Larkin wrote to Sutton from Oxford: "I am of the opinion that I

shall never know anything about the woman I marry, really. What do I know of you? Nothing at all. Preserve me from interesting personalities" (136). A claim that an epistolary document, forming part of the poet's personal reflection at an impressionable age, can constitute the basis for critical observation is rather naive. Furthermore what disquiets a sensitive reader of Rossen's book is the inference she draws from the letter. According to her, "it typifies the dilemma of his [Larkin] generation of men, who were educated apart from the 'girls' who came to seem mysterious and inaccessible. It assumes that women are 'other' and distanced". (136) To say that this inference is a flawed one on a number of grounds would be an understatement. In the first place, one wonders how a coeducational system can be regarded as the sole repository for disseminating a better understanding between the sexes. What about the role of family and civil society in that regard? Granting too much agency to the education system alone is a little farfetched to say the least. Secondly how does Rossen absolve herself from the countercharge of reinforcing stereotypes when she claims that 'it typifies the dilemma' of 'Larkin's generation of men?' Finally if we go by her claim that 'women are other', how can Rossen be indifferent to a fundamental question in Larkin's letter that she herself cites? For Larkin in the letter does not talk of women alone. He posits his problem in a typically gender-neutral context when he asks Sutton, 'What do I know of you?' while at the same time confirms

132 his ignorance: 'Nothing at all'. One therefore discerns that Larkin's problem is not only with women but with the generic question about how the 'Other' is to be comprehended. In his book *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre introduces the concept of the 'Other' in part 3 under the section "Being-for-others". In this part of the book, he does not only examine the existence of others but also theorizes on the possible means of engagement with the Other which necessarily leads to conflict. Summing up the Sartrean position regarding the Other, Daigle writes: It is as an object that I appear to the other; my encounter with the other is that of my body with his. When I meet someone, there is first the physical presence of bodies in a certain spatio-temporal frame. I am a consciousness in my body, and I meet a human body. This human body greets me, or not, looks at me, or not; it is a body inhabited by a consciousness: the consciousness of the Other. Sartre says that there is an unbridgeable distance between the for-itself and the Other: the body is that through which I meet the other, at the same time it is an obstacle as it prevents me from attaining the Other's consciousness. The relationship between me and the Other is one of exteriority. I am an object for the Other and the Other is an object for me. (73) Is this not precisely the manner in which the Other in Larkin's poetry impress themselves upon us? Consider for instance the poem "Deep Analysis" composed as early as 1946. The poem conjures up a desirable woman: 'Comely at all points', bewailing her unrequited love in the mode of a monologue: Through your one youth, whatever you pursued

133 So singly, that I would be, Desiring to kiss your arms and your straight side -Why would you not let me? (CP 4) It is desire that has propelled the youth in whatever he 'pursued' and desire in itself is not found to be wanting in the woman either. Yet confrontation with the Other only brings forth conflict: Your body sharpened against me, vigilant, Watchful, when all I meant Was to make it bright, that it might stand Burnished before my tent? (4) The body, therefore, has evolved as a principal impediment to any meaningful interaction between the lover and the Other, with the result that the gulf between them remains insurmountable: I

could not follow your wishes, but I know If they assuaged you It would not be crying in this dark, your sorrow, It would not be crying so (4) Larkin's poetry reconciles with the abjectness of the human situation by accepting that the Other cannot be comprehended. It is this realization that informs the primary conflict in such

134 poems as "Marriages" (CP 63), "Love" (CP 150), "This be the Verse" (CP 180), and probably finds its most explicit utterance in "Counting": Thinking in terms of one Is easily done – One room, one bed, one chair, One person there, Makes perfect sense; one set Of wishes can be met, One coffin filled. But counting up to two Is harder to do; For one must be denied Before it's tried. (CP 108) The luxury of love as a saving grace has ordinarily been denied in Larkin's poetry. On the operational front, his poetry reflects and weighs the possibilities and consequences of human relationship, only to shirk at its prospects. Even when the body as an obstacle towards meaningful engagement is somehow circumvented, due to situational proximity, the otherness of the Other remain intact. "Talking in Bed", a poem written in 1960 and published in *The Whitsun*

135 Weddings should bear testimony to that: "Talking in bed ought to be easiest / Lying together there goes back so far / An emblem of two people being honest" (CP 129). There can be no doubt that the bed with its pre-defined spatial limits actually proffers a possibility of communication. However the possibility remains inexhausted with the result that "...more and more time passes silently" (129). Indifferent to human concerns, the world outside the room enacts the perpetual drama of existence even as the speaker languishes within the cloister of his self imposed isolation: Outside the wind's incomplete unrest Builds and disperses clouds about the sky, And dark towns heap up on the horizon. None of this cares for us. (129) But why do words elude the speaker? That too within the periphery of a 'bed' supposed to conjoin privacy and intimacy. Is it because of the Sartrean 'look' that transfixes the Other as an object and is reciprocated likewise? In absence of the possibility of love which alone, according to Sartre, could have either transcended the Other's freedom or else captured it, that seems to be the only probability: Nothing shows why At this unique distance from isolation

136 It becomes still more difficult to find Words at once true and kind Or not untrue and not unkind. (129) We therefore find that the body as an obstacle, complicated by the objectifying look of the 'Other', is the fundamental stumbling block in the way of establishing a meaningful converse in Larkin's poetry. At the same time, we do not find enough reason to agree with Rossen when she says that 'it is difficult to know whom to blame'. The malaise having been identified, it rests upon future scholarship to unravel the cause. Another area of research which can be a direct corollary of this project is existential psychoanalysis of the poetry of Philip Larkin. Regan's complaint (already alluded to in the introductory chapter of this dissertation) that the poetry of Larkin has remained 'curiously impervious' to newer 'critical methodology' such as psychoanalysis can thereby find adequate redress, though from an altered perspective. I insist upon the word 'altered' in order to signal my departure from the beaten track of Freudian psychoanalysis in predilection for a methodology that would stand out by dint of being non-essential and, therefore, in keeping with my fundamental project. As a deterministic theory, Freudian psychoanalysis is characterised by a belief in a structured psyche- id, ego and superego- and actually posits the idea of a psycho-biological residue called

the 'libido' as an explanation of human motivation. Apart from these, Freud's mechanical-biological explanations, and his belief that nature and nurture explain human behaviour rather than choice, impute to his theory an essence, which was devised in order to secure for psychoanalysis a ground that would ensure its scientific credibility. However, Betty Cannon in

137 her book *Sartre and Psychoanalysis* has offered a challenge to 'Freudian determinism and Freudian metatheory' by taking recourse to existential psychoanalysis. This explains why the book is subtitled: "An Existential Challenge to Clinical Metatheory". It is her contention that the ontological metatheory of Sartre can better address certain critical contemporary issues in psychoanalysis than the psychobiological metatheory of Freud. Following Sartre, Cannon writes: ... the objective of existential psychoanalysis would be to reveal in all its concrete richness an individual's original choice of being, which though grounded in the concrete world, is not reducible to it. Such a choice is constantly changing and capable of radical transformation. Hence existential psychoanalysis must maintain a flexibility in interpreting symbols and symptoms not simply between individuals but with a particular individual at different times in therapy (Cannon 20) This 'original choice' (also known as the 'fundamental project' in existential psychology) is, according to Cannon, not much unlike the Freudian 'complex'. And "just as the Freudian psychoanalyst attempts to discover the childhood events which led to the ...complex, so the existential psychoanalyst attempts to discover the 'original choice of being', whereby a client has adopted this or that particular worldview"(19) . In his introduction to *A Writer's Life*, Andrew Motion observes: "During his adolescence Larkin had decided he was 'a genius'. At the same time, judging by his secretive but thorough self preservation, he accepted that he would be written about" (xvii-xviii). This affirmation of the 'original choice', in possibly the most celebrated biography of the poet, warrants an existential psychoanalysis that can significantly widen the scope of Larkin scholarship. Undoubtedly this presupposes a high degree of dependence on epistolary documents- both sent and received by

138 Larkin- but in this case the labour of the researcher will be far more meaningfully employed. This is because letters and other correspondences are to be studied as relevant documents, not only in the context of locating the 'original choice' of Larkin the man, but also in so far as they foreshadow the 'original choice' of Larkin the poet. For there is a profound schism that informs the personality of Larkin: "The soul of shy modesty was also a self-promoter; the man admired for avoiding bright lights was continually tempted to step into them; the 'Hermit of Hull' was his readers' friend winning their trust and warm affection by telling them a good deal about himself" (xix). Thus, there is a possibility that the 'original choice' of Larkin the man might either have been abrogated, or else radically transformed in Larkin the poet. It is also possible, that the choice may have been re-instated in a new garb and problematized to such an extent, as to defy recognition. But one thing is certain: in consonance with Sartrean metapsychology, the surface psychic symptoms would manifest themselves through concrete choices and not discovered in the, "instinctual life and the unconscious" (Cannon18) as in Freud. The task of the prospective researcher therefore promises to be a challenging one. Unlike the empirical sciences, a literary research of this kind may find it difficult to claim, to have discovered something new. What it can of course claim is a novelty of approach, by dint of which a supposedly mediocre poetry would time and again,

open up new horizons of expectation and fulfillment. The pleasure certainly will be in the journey, for that alone will define the search.

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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)

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the distinction: A poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence; because he has no identity- he is continually in for- and filling some other body- The Sun, the Moon, the sea and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute- the poet has none; no identity- he is certainly the most unpoetical of all God's creatures....

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itself- it has no self- it is everything and nothing- it has no character- it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated-

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itself — it has no defi- nition — is everything and nothing — It has no character — it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusts, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated ...

## **LIST OF APPENDICES**

### **APPENDIX A: *THE INDETERMINATE PHILIP LARKIN AND HIS HAPLESS POETIC***

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## List of Abbreviations

<i>CP</i>	<i>Collected Poems</i>
<i>FR</i>	<i>Further Requirements</i>
<i>RW</i>	<i>Required Writing</i>
<i>BN</i>	<i>Being and Nothingness</i>
<i>MS</i>	<i>Myth of Sisyphus</i>
<i>SL</i>	<i>Selected Letters</i>

## Chapter One

### Introduction: Quest for a New Poetics of Reading

My acquaintance with the poetry of Philip Arthur Larkin (1922-1985) began as a purist reader in a vein somewhat analogous to what Larkin wrote to his publishers Faber & Faber when they allowed the novels of Barbara Pym to go out of print: “I feel it is a great shame if ordinary sane novels about ordinary sane people doing ordinary sane things can’t find a publisher these days” (SL 375). In fact it was a delight in this Larkinesque sanity which attracted me to it in the first place. Little did I realize that the epithets Larkin chose to characterize the work of his liking, actually dogged the critical reception of his own poetic oeuvre to such an extent as to leave little room for posterity to transcend their confines.

Until the last decade of the 20th century Larkin, arguably the most renowned of the so called ‘Movement’ poets, was known in the Anglophone world, chiefly for the wrong reasons. Widely acknowledged as the unofficial Poet Laureate of England, his popularity and credibility as a major poet was severely undermined after the publication of the *Selected Letters* (1992) and an authorized biography *Philip Larkin: A Writer’s Life* (1993) by Andrew Motion. Epistolary evidences were cited to project the man as anti-intellectual, sexist, parochial etc. and the much necessary Eliotic disjunct between the man and the poet needed for objective aesthetic appreciation was comfortably consigned to oblivion. The result was a scholarship of limited insight dominated either by thematic concerns or else an ideologically charged political vituperation. It is only after the publication of *The New Case Book* in 1997 edited by Stephen Regan that serious engagement has begun with his poetry. There is of course no gainsaying that Regan’s introductory survey of the trajectory of Larkin criticism is so succinctly documented

that a brief summary of the same becomes indispensable for any discourse to commence. And any work on Larkin's poetry must take into account Regan's overview.

Critical enquiry into the poetry of Philip Larkin immediately followed the publication of *The Less Deceived* in 1955. As the most popular and widely read poet of the post war era, his poetry was conventionally read in consonance with a national character, and the popularity he enjoyed was interpreted as an outcome of his sentimental Englishness. The now much debated existence of 'The Movement' was taken as a focal point to cushion the poetry of Larkin along with other poets of the 1950s and it was predominantly through the abstracted prism of that paradigmatic exteriority that critical consensus was catered to. In a review of the *New Lines* anthology titled 'The Middlebrow Muse' (1957) Charles Tomlinson vituperatively attacked the second hand responses which characterized the work of the so called 'New Line Poets': "They show a singular want of vital awareness of the continuum outside themselves, of the mystery bodied over against them in the created universe, which they fail to experience with any degree of sharpness or to embody with any in stress or sensual depth ... They seldom for a moment escape beyond the suburban mental ratio which they impose on experience". This mode of engagement congealed itself into a system, when at about the same time Al Alvarez in his introduction of *The New Poetry* anthology berated Larkin for evincing a 'politeness' and 'decency' typically conforming to perceived English virtues. Donald Davie waxed eloquent but it was only to situate Larkin in the line of the "thoroughly English souls" as "a very Hardy-esque poet" who stoically accepted the way things were. It did not quite appear to him that a stoical acceptance of the eventualities of life may as well be a necessary adjunct to something more primeval than the socialization quotient he tried to circumscribe Larkin within.

The 1970s saw the appropriation of another form of reading paradigm onto that of the one already alluded to. Owing largely to the influence of newer critical practices grouped together under the umbrella term ‘literary theory’, the idea of a transcendental element as well as a symbolist one began to be aligned with the poetry of Philip Larkin. J.R. Watson for instance wrote an article “The Other Larkin” in 1976, which discerned “moments of epiphany” and “deeply felt longings, for sacred time and sacred space” in the poetry of Philip Larkin. No wonder this change was conditioned by the changing horizon of expectations among readers of Larkin’s poetry, but the effect it registered was a vicious one. The axis of Larkin’s critical reception seemed to traverse along the familiar spaces of thematic studies.

However, all this changed with the publication of *The Selected Letters* in 1992 and the authorized biography *Philip Larkin: A Writers Life* in 1993. Surprising it is how a poet’s reputation can undergo dramatic changes in just a decade after his death. The same poet, who by common consent was regarded as the greatest after Eliot, became a site evincing the derogation of poetic possibilities, which merited abuse critical scorn or at best indifference. *The Selected Letters* enabled reigning critics to establish a direct correlation between the man and the poet and since the former was regarded as despicable, the latter couldn’t have been an exception. Germaine Greer reviewing the *Collected Poems* in the “Guardian” equated the expression of the poems with the poet’s negativity when she said of Larkin: “His verse is deceptively simple, demotic, and colloquial: the attitudes it expresses are also anti-intellectual, racist, sexist and rotten with class consciousness”. Then followed the clichés that were to dominate so much of Larkin criticism: “sewer under the national monument” (Paulin 1992), “foul-mouthed bigot” (Ackroyd 1993), “dreary laureate of our provincialism” (Appleyard 1993) and the like. The

result was that the limits of discourse thus structured, once again compartmentalized the poetry of Larkin within the ambit of pseudo-ethical pedagogy. (1-7)

How does one carve out a critical space from within a critical canon that has been so prejudiced, watertight and regimented? Conforming to the confines of the already established modes of discourse and at the same time attempting to alter its balance- if ever so slightly- would appear to be the most preferred option. However to arrive at a new poetics of reading, far removed from the beaten track of doctrination alluded to earlier, a critique of the existing canon becomes imperative, to which we now turn in the following section.

## II

What appears interesting is that these concatenations of metaphors seem to be strictly in line with the Nietzschean concernment with ‘perspective’ as a means of structuring reality. In order to lend authority to a particular form of thought or rather style of living, Larkin scholarship sought to perspectivize reading in terms that are overtly connotative of the historical materiality of the epoch, structuring the limits of discourse in the first place. Alan Sinfield in his brilliant book *Literature, politics and culture in post-war Britain* has substantially elaborated how Fascism, Capitalism and Welfare-Capitalism were the prime ideological options available to European politics in the 1930’s. Western Europe appropriated a Welfare-Capitalist economic model which strictly followed a Keynesian line of smoothing out the Capitalist cycle of boom and slump. This consensus however broke down in the mid 1970’s “when capitalism went into a slump allowing a return to Pre-Keynesian economic theories and authoritarian social attitudes” (32). Also Stuart Hall et al. in their major work *Policing the Crisis* (1978) have dealt extensively with the dissolution of consent in post-war British society leading to what they term the ‘Exceptional State’. Their work specifically highlights how Britain’s post-war recovery being incomplete, led

to the falsification of the myths of 'affluence' around which organization of consent was primarily facilitated in Britain throughout the '50s and '60s. It was the intervention of the Right wing politician Enoch Powell, who through his 1968 'Rivers of Blood' speech, shifted the debate towards 'Authoritarianism'. The conservative party which subsequently came to power in 1970 adopted authoritarian solutions, thereby legitimizing rule of law as the only means to defend hegemony in conditions of severe crisis. Thus, there evolved a general tendency, to regard all threats to social order as a transgression equivalent to violence.

However this 'New Right' (Barker 235) ideology, popularly termed 'Thatcherism' was countered by what is called 'Urban Leftism' (269) - a defensive ploy against right wing ideologies. Ultimately when Tony Blair in 1995 spoke of 'community' (278) the first post-socialist response to the new right was registered as a political discourse. There was a heightened "desire to discover a foundation for national life in working class or popular culture" and also "a belief that politics should start listening to the mundane desires of common people" (279). The revival of the ideology of community therefore stemmed from the abandonment of fraternity based on class and solidarity based on nationalism.

What bearing does this foray into British politics have in our understanding the trajectory of Larkin criticism? I believe that in view of the pervasiveness of critical unanimity among Larkin scholars, most of whom happened to be academics and intellectual elite, a limited consent could have initially been forged around the discourse of 'authoritarianism' leading subsequently to a general acquiescence of the ideology of 'community'. Viewed from this perspective, the general dismissive stance against Larkin's poetry would undoubtedly proffer the concept of Althusser's 'interpellation' as a factor which probably conditioned the generation of the critical canon. For nowhere is the complicity of the subject in the process of his own domination more pronounced

than in the majority of critical work centered on the reading of Larkin's poetry. The interpellated subject in the form of the reader having been structured and subjected by the aforesaid ideologies I referred to earlier, disseminated or rather replicated the same in writing; creating reading paradigms and stereotypes in the process. The circulation of terms like 'racist', 'sexist', 'suburban', 'parochial', etc within the central canon of Larkin scholarship should substantiate my claim.

In fact the class belonging nature of English culture can seldom be disputed. What the English called 'High Culture' was predominantly the culture of the leisured upper middle class. Even T.S. Eliot in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* upheld the same class-fixation in so far as culture was concerned (Sinfield 95). Philip Larkin, it is true, did not belong to the leisured middle class but Alan Pryce-Jones editor of the *Times literary supplement* found in 1956 that most writers irrespective of their class affiliations were co-opted within leisured middle class value structures (89). The central problem of dealing with the canon of Larkin criticism is that since the publication of *Selected Letters* it appears obsessed with epistolary evidences in way of levelling charges, despite the fact that the poetic oeuvre of Larkin provides little vindication of such claims. This is particularly true of the charge of 'racism'. Critics such as Germaine Greer, Tom Paulin, Peter Ackroyd and Bryan Appleyard, oblivious of their own ideological appropriation sought to stigmatize a poet without granting him similar leverage in return. I however submit that even if this charge is partially tenable it has got to do with the 'New Right' ideology which as John Gray has pointed out "brought into conservative discourse a sectarian spirit that belongs properly not with conservatism, which is skeptical of all ideology but with the rationalist doctrines of the Enlightenment" (qtd. in Barker:243). "Homage To A Government", a

poem by Larkin highly commented upon for championing a cause ironically dubbed as ‘the white man’s burden’, is specifically worthy of note:

Next year we are to bring the soldiers home  
 For lack of money and that is all right.  
 Places they guarded or kept orderly,  
 Must guard themselves, or keep themselves orderly. (CP 171)

If there is racism here it is comfortably couched under the garb of colonialism. However, the connotation of the word ‘orderly’ being essentially culture-specific point towards the intensification of cultural orthodoxy and sectarian spirit which was a defining characteristic of new right ideology in and around the 1970s. Composed in May 1960, Larkin’s “MCMXIV”, chews the cud of by-gone days by reminiscing about what was once traditional England:

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)

Almost the same angst informs the following lines in “Going Going”:

And that will be England gone  
 The shadows, the meadows, the lakes,  
 The guild halls, the carved choirs

There'll be books, it will linger on

In galleries: but all that remains

For us will be concrete and tyres. (CP 190)

That the aforesaid passages are steeped in class-consciousness can hardly be debated and my own subject position as a post-colonial reader of Larkin's poetry is equally indisposed to salvage the English poet from the charges brought against him, when I know that much of the class-consciousness appropriated by the English was at my own peril. However, notwithstanding Larkin's ideological appropriation, an empathetic understanding of a twentieth century alienated poetic persona striving frantically to resist the incessant spate of change in and around him also needs to be registered. Furthermore this charge is also mitigated if we care to consider the subversion effected in such a poem as "The Large Cool Store" where the divide between the working class and the leisured class is not only brought to the fore, but brought out with utmost compassion:

To suppose

They share that world, to think their sort is

Matched by something in it, shows

How separate and unearthly love is,

Or women are, or what they do,

Or in our young unreal wishes

Seem to be: synthetic, new,

And nature less in ecstasies. (CP 135)

Incidentally this poem was written in June, 1961 exactly a year after Larkin wrote "MCMXIV".

This trajectory of Larkin scholarship, truncated and fractured as it was, merited immediate redress and *The New Case Book* on Philip Larkin edited by Stephen Regan in 1997 sought to do precisely the same. For the first time, after decades of essentialist reading, this book proffered the idea that the poetry of Larkin merited newer modes of critical engagement far beyond the certitudes established by erstwhile critical practices. Starting with the symbolist dimension in Larkin's poetry ( Andrew Motion's "Philip Larkin and Symbolism"), this book went on to accommodate not only David Lodge's Structuralist engagement ("Philip Larkin: The Metonymic Muse"), but at the same time anticipated that much talked of post modern openness in approach through Graham Holderness' brilliant article entitled "Reading Deceptions- A Dramatic Conversation". Four critics of different theoretical orientations are made to stage an imaginary debate around Larkin's "Deceptions" to show how "Critical theory can 'open up' Larkin's writing to a variety of illuminating, if not always reconcilable viewpoints"(11). Apart from these, certain other approaches( Feminist, as in Janice Rossen's "Difficulties with Girls" and Historicist, as in Stan Smith's "Margins of Tolerance") had been incorporated probably to foreground the Barthesian 'Readerly' text openness as opposed to the 'Writerly' text paradigm Larkin had long been circumscribed within.

What however appeared to be so novel though, was not an unmixed blessing. The sequence of essays Regan selected was absolutely in keeping with the avowed publication policy of New Casebooks which in its own way sought to rarefy the subject of discourse. In the general editors' preface, John Peck and Martin Coyle of the University of Wales, Cardiff wrote: "Central to the series is a concern with modern critical theory and its effect on current approaches to the study of literature" (X1). Voicing the same sentiment was Stephen Regan, who in the introduction to the

title claimed: “Modern literary theory ought to find much of interest in Larkin’s work, and yet the poems have remained curiously impervious to some of the newer critical methodologies such as feminism, psychoanalysis and deconstruction” (11). The present project however takes issues with such attestations on the ground that it prioritizes certain reading practices even at the cost of abrogating the demands of the text. Had Regan’s project been motivated solely by the demands posited by Larkin’s poetry rather than a somewhat stilted wish to secure for Larkin a pan-theoretical praxis, he would have seen that the poetic oeuvre of Larkin proffered broad overtures which clearly pointed towards a crisis of ‘being’. A dissipated sense of self, overridden by negation and anxiety; a perennial preoccupation with the privation called ‘death’ unassuaged by any flicker of hope, points unequivocally towards a philosophy of existence, thereby necessitating the search for different sets of methodological apparatuses.

Andrew Motion in his introduction to *Philip Larkin: A Writer’s Life* talks of the contradictions in Larkin’s will, which I believe shall go a long way towards connoting the parameters of my argument. In relation to Larkin’s published and unpublished work, he has pointed out how in three different clauses of the same will Larkin had “entrusted his trustees, the power to publish his unpublished work; instructed them to destroy it; and told them to discuss the matter with the literary executors” (xvi). Is this only the caprice of an author intent upon posthumous fame, or should it be construed as the ontological anxiety of a man in the face of irreconcilable choices – choices which he had not been able to come to terms with, even in his ‘Writer’s Life’. Again Richard Bradford in his biography of the poet, *First Boredom, Then Fear: The Life of Philip Larkin* has called attention to how Larkin’s self marginalization was effected not only at the cost of the world, but at its own peril. Larkin’s inability not just to act but even to conceive acting is exemplified by Bradford through allusion to a lecture incident where Larkin

urinated in his clothes, because he couldn't summon the will to go to the restroom and relieve himself (66). The question is: shall we see in this incident, the contours of a fundamental pattern of existence, or should the same be consigned to the domain of behavioral psychology? The decision I am tempted to infer would be a matter of perspective.

Parallel to such external evidences, here is the existential Philip Larkin in a 1949 poem called "Sinking like Sediment through the Day":

Huge awareness, elbowing vacancy,  
 Empty inside and out, replaces day,  
 (Like a fuse an impulse busily disintegrates  
     Right back to its root.)

Out of the afternoon leans the indescribable woman:

'Embrace me, and I shall be beautiful'-  
 'Be beautiful and I will embrace you'-

We argue for hours. (CP 27)

Twenty five years later the same sense of vacuity, the same problem of choice giving way to anxiety can be seen to inform his poetry, and I allude to the first stanza of a poem entitled "The Life With a Hole in it" to substantiate my point:

Life is an immobile, locked  
 Three-handed struggle between  
 Your wants, the world's for you, and (worse)  
 The unbeatable slow machine  
 That brings what you'll get. Blocked,

They strain round a hollow stasis

Of havings-to, fear, faces.

Days sift down it constantly. Years. (CP 202)

Existential concerns therefore do not merely colour Larkin's poetry. It might seem that he had been an existentialist throughout.

On the face of such compelling evidences, one would have expected Larkin scholarship to pick up the existential axis as a tool for further engagement, but here too contemporary criticism seems predominantly obsessed with thematic studies. Prominent issues such as loneliness, death, old age, conflict between desire and reality and the illusory nature of choice do find a place in article length work and sometimes monograph as well. However such thematic concerns have seldom been dealt with from the vantage point of an existential crisis besetting the poet in his historical and contextual totality. In fact the problem of choice and a pervasive sense of emptiness did find a place in Larkin criticism from the early '70s, whether that be in Calvin Bedient's 1974 monograph entitled *Eight Contemporary Poets; Philip Larkin : Writers and their Work* by Alan Brownjohn (1975) or John Wain's journal article "The Poetry of Philip Larkin" published in *The Malahat Review* (1976). This is also particularly true of such later journal articles as Martin Stannard's "The Men Running up to Bowl: Aspect of Stasis in the work of Larkin and Amis" (1989) and "The Theme of Death in the poetry of Philip Larkin and Charles Tomlinson" (1991) by Eckhard Auberleben which looks at images of entrapment stasis, hesitation and enforced silence in the writings of Philip Larkin and Kingsley Amis. It is these aspects that have been merely touched upon by a handful of critics but never dealt with extensively which shall form the crux of this enquiry.

In a monograph entitled *Double Lyric: Divisiveness and Communal Creativity in Recent English Poetry* (1980), Merle Brown contends that recent British poetry is neither marked by the presence of a distinctive world view nor an existential stance but rather a hesitancy to adopt one. Philip Larkin's poetry is seen to occupy a special place, by adopting a habitually dismissive attitude. The present project however intends to contest this gross generalization because the so called 'habitual' is not as pervasive a presence as it is made out to be. On the other hand the poetic oeuvre of Larkin will show beyond doubt that the existential stance is probably a habitual stance with Larkin undercut only at times by a posture of dismissiveness which, as Richard Palmer had convincingly argued in his book *Such Deliberate Disguises: The art of Philip Larkin*, was only a mask.

Eulogizing Larkin's poetic aspirations, James Booth in a recent biography of the poet published in 2014 and titled *Philip Larkin- Life, Art and Love* observes: "At the age of thirty in 1953 Larkin set out his aim in a tone of jokey presumptuousness: 'I should like to write about 75-100 new poems, all rather better than anything I've ever done before, and dealing with such subjects as Life, Death, Time, Love and scenery in such a manner as would render further attention to them by other poets superfluous'" (10). What for Booth is simply a matter of 'tone' and that too of 'jokey presumptuousness' merits critical engagement not only because the majority of Larkin's chosen subjects are dominant existential themes but also because the phrase "further attention to them by other poets superfluous", construed from an altered perspective, hinges on the word 'manner'. It is the manner which according to Larkin "would render further attention [...] superfluous". The question however is whether the word manner be understood in terms of stylistic ingenuity of composition, or whether it pre-supposes and insinuates an approach (presumably philosophical) which Larkin intended to appropriate in order to fulfill his

cherished aim. Again, by way of accounting for Larkin's deep seated anguish of failure, Booth in the penultimate paragraph of his introduction asserts: "From the beginning he [Larkin] was horrified that our precious existence, here, now, must inevitably falter and be extinguished in death. Larkin's biological clock ticked more loudly than those of other people. Unalloyed happiness was, he felt, unattainable, if only 'because you know that you are going to die'" (18). Undoubtedly Booth talks of 'existence', but then he comfortably situates it within the confines of romantic 'reflection'. It does not occur to him that the sense of failure which haunted Larkin could be inextricably bound to a crisis of an existential sort and consequently turn out to be complex and personal than he thinks it to be.

Anglo- American literary criticism therefore appears to be somewhat reticent in even acknowledging the feasibility of an existential engagement with Larkin's poetry. By and large there is a hush-hush silence around the word existential, which in turn calls for some degree of socio-political deliberations. The cold-war ideology which developed from 1947 onwards saw Britain collaborating in the US ideology of the defense of freedom of those which it felt were subjugated. This Truman ideology appropriated from Monroe posited communism as the primary antagonist and a perception evolved that communist gains in whatever part of the world was threatening to British interests. Again since this much propagated freedom was conceived in opposition to communism, the defense of 'high culture' became identified with anti-Stalinism. Antipathy for communism inevitably led to an antipathy towards its practitioners, with the result that a deliberate attempt was made by the Western Alliance to consign the foremost existentialist of the time, Jean Paul Sartre and his brand of existentialism to the dustbins of history. (Sinfield 148, 159). Nevertheless history testifies to the fact that through into the '60s, Sartre with his principles of commitment was a dominant intellectual influence in British culture. Though

Sinfield discerns the impact of Sartre in a very limited area- in so far as the latter's ideas about commitment was used to constitute the 'other' (141), it would be my endeavour to trace the discursive relationship that the poetry of Larkin transacts with certain primary existential constructs as enunciated by Jean-Paul Sartre.

Furthermore, using Sartre alone as a scaffold to engage with the existential concerns in Larkin's poetry would prove inappropriate precisely because in the 1960s the choice of the British intellectual which predominantly wavered between Sartre and Camus got congealed with the latter. In opposition to Sartre's idea of artistic freedom through an insistence on commitment, British intellectuals clung to the belief that it was possible to preserve 'freedom' by avoiding political attachment (Sinfield 143-145). In *Myth of Sisyphus* (1942, Trans 1955) Camus had expounded absurd freedom: "There is no future, henceforth this is the reason for my inner freedom" (57). The move, it ought to be admitted, was a quietist one. Nevertheless it enabled British writers to position themselves as the comfortable other in relation to those discredited French bourgeoisie who were being coaxed by Sartre to venture into the domain of committed literature. Camus the high priest of British culture, prescribed: "When all is collapse and nothingness, one can accept such a universe and draw from it his strength, his refusal to hope, and the unyielding evidence of a life without consolation" (58-59). It would therefore be obvious to discern in this overarching quietist mood the germ, not only of 'Movement poetry' in general but a major part of the poetry of Philip Larkin as well:

Hours giving evidence  
 Or birth, advance  
 On death equally slowly.  
 And saying so to some

Means nothing; others it leaves

Nothing to be said. (CP 138)

Quietist freedom however can be slavish and may as well be identified with the freedom of the condemned if it is not aligned with rebellion. And it is here that I fall back on Hartley's description of the 'Movement' being 'dissenting'. What exactly then is the nature of Larkin's revolt or dissent? The nature of rebellion in Sartre as the British intellectuals read it was predominantly material. With Camus however dissent was interpreted to be metaphysical. Introducing *The Rebel* (Trans1933) Herbert Read asserted: "The nature of revolt has changed in our times. It is no longer the revolt of the poor against the rich. Camus displays our metaphysical revolt, the revolt of man against the conditions of life, against creation itself" (qtd. in Sinfield: 146). Is this not the vein in which the major part of Larkin's poetry impress themselves upon the reader? And if it is so, would it be unfounded to trace the exact nature of dissent in Larkin's poetry- to try and understand the various sociopolitical nuances which might have led to such appropriation.

It will be seen that I have been consistently pleading the case of existentialism as an epistemic tool to engage with the poetry of Philip Larkin. A couple of pertinent questions therefore crop up: what exactly is existentialism and why do I proffer it as a viable orientation for this project. To answer the first it ought to be pointed out that there is a certain amount of elusiveness about this term, and also that there are as many types of existentialism as there are existentialists. In the absence of a common body of doctrine to which all existentialists subscribe, John Macquarrie describes existentialism "not as a philosophy but rather as a style of philosophizing" (14). In a brilliantly lucid book entitled *Existentialism* he strives to demarcate the basic characteristics of

this style of philosophizing. I quote him at some length since the spirit of that exposition will constitute the crux of this project:

It is a philosophy of the subject rather than of the object. But one might say that idealism too took its starting point in the subject. Thus one must further qualify the existentialist position by saying that for the existentialist the subject is the existent in the whole range of his existing. He is not only a thinking subject but an initiator of action and a centre of feeling. It is this whole spectrum of existence, known directly and concretely in the very act of existing, that existentialism tries to express. (14-15)

In answer to the second question raised, I maintain that the choice of existentialism as a theoretical framework is dictated by the fact that it is typically suited to unravel the emotional life of man caught in crisis. This, as the survey of relevant literature had already shown is something that Larkin scholarship has summarily ignored. In its search for objective knowledge, western philosophy has for a long time been dominated by a restricted form of rationalism, whereby changing feelings and moods of the human mind have been considered irrelevant to philosophy's task and at times even a hindrance. However as Macquarrie states, "It is precisely through these that we are involved in our world and can learn some things about it that are inaccessible to a merely objective beholding. From Kierkegaard to Heidegger and Sartre, the existentialists have provided brilliant analyses of such feeling states as anxiety, boredom, nausea, and have sought to show that these are not without their significance for philosophy" (17-18). Existentialism therefore doesn't merely concern itself with the man but man in relation to his world. It is this historical contextuality, this situatedness in time that one feels can open up Larkin's poetry to a host of untraversed nuances.

It will be further remembered that I had sought to locate the operational domain of existentialism within the emotional life of man caught in crisis. A relevant question once again stares us at the face: How does this crisis manifest itself? In this context, it ought to be understood that though 'Existentialism' as a philosophical orientation is a recent phenomenon, existential thought is as old as human civilization itself. Karl Jaspers' conception of the 'axial age' corroborates this fact by locating it at a point in time, around 500 BC, when "there took place an extraordinary and worldwide stirring of the human spirit" (Macquarrie 38). The phenomenon was pan-cultural, commencing with the Hebrew prophets (Amos, Hosea, Isaiah), running through the pre-Socratic Greek philosophers (Thales, Heraclitus, Parmenides), and encompassing the likes of Confucius, and Lao-Tse in China, Zarathrustra in Iran, and Buddha in India (38). Summarizing the central characteristics of the period Jaspers writes: "What is new about this age...is that man becomes conscious of being as a whole, of himself and his limitations....By consciously recognizing his limits, he sets himself the highest goals. He experiences absoluteness in the depths of selfhood and in the lucidity of transcendence" (qtd. in Macquarrie 39). Acknowledging that the 'axial age' was prompted by a crisis, Macquarrie traces the origin of the same in the preponderance of what he calls the 'mythical mentality' in so far as "this was a timeless mentality in which the sequence of events repeats itself in a never ending series of cycles". Consequently the turning envisaged was not merely a turning away but a turning which would make man "face the radically temporal and historical character of human existence" (40).

The advent of Christianity with its insistence on 'end-time' as a time of decision continued the aforesaid existential search and "although Jesus talked of rewards and punishments, he saw the chief motive for obedience in the desire to gain one's authentic being" (44). However, as

Christianity moved into the middle ages, it tended to become “rationalistic, propositional and metaphysical” (48). This crisis was further aggravated by recurrent plagues, wars, political and ecclesiastical ferments, which subsumed rational thoughts as being able to tie things up in too neat a package. Confronted with this crisis a new form of mysticism evolved in the personage of Meister Eckhart whose influence on German philosophy can be traced even in Heidegger. It was Eckhart who claimed that “It is God’s nature to be without a nature”. By analogy therefore, “man being made in the divine image affords a clue to the mystery of God” (49).

In fifteenth century Europe Renaissance science and the Reformation once again generated crises within the emotional life of man, though obviously from diverse vantage points. First there was a diminution of human status whereby he was displaced from the centre of the cosmos to the circumference due to the subversion of a geo-centric universe in favour of a helio-centric one. Secondly, a crisis also took place in the religious order of things whereby it was perceived that religion had become too much of a matter of giving assent to dogmas. It was here that an existentialist understanding of life came as a refuge to man, organizing and giving direction to the manifold ambivalences he was circumscribed within. In this regard, Macquarrie astutely reminds us of both Desiderius Erasmus and Pico della Mirandola but it was the latter who by hitting out at the “essentialist idea that man has a fixed and inalterable nature...anticipates Sartre’s claim that man must define himself” (51). Mirandola writes:

“A limited nature in other creatures is confined within the laws written down by us. In conformity with thy free judgement, in whose hands I have placed thee, thou art confined by no bounds and thou wilt fix limits of nature for thyself....Thou like a judge appointed for being honourable, art the moulder and

maker of thyself; thou mayest sculpt thyself into whatsoever shape thou dost prefer". (qtd. in Macquarrie 51)

It is therefore a specific historical crisis that inevitably breeds an existential cognition of life. A survey of the geo-political specifics of the 1950s will probably enable us to ascertain the crisis of the period, so that the applicability of the framework chosen may be convincingly argued.

As has been already observed, the cold war rhetoric was structured around the U.S manipulated definition of freedom which throughout the western alliance and particularly in Britain was interpreted in opposition to communism, or to be more precise anti-Stalinism. This in turn generated political quietism, since "literature is most itself in the Free World, both because of the shared attachment to freedom and because the free activity of literature will eschew political commitment" (Sinfield 158). North American New Critics aspired to engage with literary texts through a complete avoidance of external evidences, and as Sinfield reminds us, "the Abstract Expressionist's more or less random assault on the canvas seemed a graphic illustration of freedom" (159).

The English literary scenario was not much different from what has just been enumerated. In his introduction to *Interpretations*, a collection of essays on individual poems, John Wain, an eminent poet of the 1950s and a contemporary of Larkin claimed that the poems were engaged with as separate artifacts because "analysis can only concern itself with one object at a time". Herein lay the crisis as Sinfield quoting Christopher Lasch brings out: "The more intellectual purity identifies itself with 'value-free' investigations, the more it empties itself of political content and the easier it is for public officials to tolerate it: thus the state gains the cooperation of writers, teachers and artists not as paid propagandists or state censored time-servers but as free intellectuals capable of policing their own jurisdictions" (161). We understand that the aforesaid

crisis took place because reigning political ideology sought to subsume and annihilate subjectivity by way of hegemonizing the intellectual elite. The result is that the Foucauldian Panoptic with its all encompassing gaze operates but operates so pervasively that the much talked of freedom itself is undermined. It can therefore be logically anticipated that an existential approach will do justice not only to the emotional life of the poet but to his poetry as well.

It shall be seen that my objective in this introductory chapter was not simply a conventional exercise, devised to catalogue the predominant tendencies of Larkin criticism. On the other hand, the primary impulse was to question the dominant strands of the critical canon on the basis of their ideological moorings, so that the gaps and silences could be sufficiently recovered. Since the central problem that concerns me, is the quest for a new poetics of reading, such gaps and silences, shall probably yield fresh insights into the existing corpus of Larkin criticism.

In the second chapter, I examine the question of 'self' in Larkin's poetry. Dismantling the spate of biographical criticism that saw Larkin's poetic work as the direct offshoot of his lived experience, this chapter engages in a brief assessment of the reigning approaches by way of explaining the notion of the self. 'Subjectivist', 'social-relational', and 'narrativist' accounts of the self are weighed against one another, and in predilecting to opt for the 'existential' account, I have in accordance with my stated position, merely foregrounded the dictates of the genre under consideration. Barring the 'existentialist', almost all other approaches to the self posit or presume an apriori, which, I believe, is untenable with the self of poetry in general.

The third chapter of this dissertation is titled, 'Larkin and the Problem of Choice, Negation and Anguish'. The reason for aligning these three existential concepts is that they are intrinsically related to each other. Any exercise of choice brings in its wake the phenomenon of negation, while at the same time it is riddled with anxiety. Since the operation of choice

presupposes a man-world relationship, I have deliberately cushioned the problem of choice in Larkin's poetry, within the historical specificity of postwar England.

Larkin's perpetual torment, both as a man and as a poet by what he understood to be the meaninglessness of life is in essence the seat of the absurd and it is a direct consequence of the same man-world relationship alluded to earlier. In the fourth chapter, I therefore engage with a cross-section of Larkin's poems from a Camusean perspective, to show Larkin's appropriation of the same, as well as to locate any scope of agency that might lie embedded within them. The concluding chapter is in fact a brief expose, whereby I attempt to re-locate Larkin beyond the lurking critical canon. Quite in keeping with the general spirit of research, this dissertation will also demarcate probable areas through which the proliferation of the existential and absurdist discourse on Larkin's poetry may be successfully articulated.

## Chapter Two

### The Question of Self in Larkin's Poetry

In a non-fictional prose piece compiled by Anthony Thwaite in 2001 under the title "Further Requirements" Larkin had claimed that "novels are about other people and poetry is about yourself" (FR 24). A statement apparently as innocuous as that made presumably either to sound aphoristic or else to pander to the herd mentality of ordinary readers pertaining to literary genres, should ordinarily have merited little attention. For neither are all novels about other people (Joyce, Woolf and Lawrence being predominant examples), nor is poetry merely about the self (Auden and Spender summarily proving that). The comment however assumes significance within the ironic context of an interpretative obsession which has afflicted Larkin's poetry for too long a time- an obsession with his self.

To assume Larkin's naiveté with relation to his craft would tantamount to being oblivious of the flip flops and double entendres he frequently indulged in while talking about them. One is instantaneously reminded of his celebrated quips: denying any knowledge of foreign poetry and claiming to have nothing to do with Modernism. This in spite of the fact, that John Osborne in his monograph, *Larkin- Ideology and Critical Violence* has amply unveiled his more than usual knowledge of both the aforesaid phenomenon.

There is no denying the fact that the self is a dominant and pervasive presence in the poetry of Philip Larkin. Poetry for him was a way of preserving experience: "It seems as if you have seen this sight, felt this feeling, had this vision and have got to find a combination of words that will preserve it by setting it off in other people" (R.W 58). In a book entitled *Philip Larkin*, forming part of a series called "Writers And Their Work" Laurence Lerner has pointed out how "Larkin

disliked the view that poems are born from other poems, insisting that they must come from ‘personal non-literary experience’”( 44). It is in this prioritization of the “personal”- locating the source of a poem in the poet’s own experience- that Lerner discerns a “strikingly Romantic statement” and also goes on to equate the same with Larkin’s hostility to T.S.Eliot and Dylan Thomas: the first being the “most celebrated modern defender of Tradition” while the second, a poet whose poems were “resonant with hints of myth” (44). The question is whether this can constitute a sufficient ground for Larkin scholarship to evaluate his poetry from the vantage point of autobiography.

However, if interpretation of poetry predominantly hinges on the autobiographical on account of the poet’s own admission why cannot the obverse become a viable basis of evaluation as well. In response to the question: “why do you write and for whom?” posed by the interviewer of *Paris Review* Larkin had said: “... the duty is to the original experience. It doesn’t feel like self expression, though it may look like it. As for whom you write for, well, you write for everybody. Or anybody who will listen” (Larkin “The Art of”). It therefore becomes obvious that the personality cult quotient of Lerner stands quite definitely on insecure grounds.

Further Requirements (2001), Anthony Thwaite’s collection of previously unpublished non-fiction prose of Larkin contain comments which furthermore appear to subsume the biographical claim. Speaking in connection to his poem “An Arundel Tomb”, Larkin in an interview observed: “I was delighted when a friend asked me if I knew a poem ending ‘what will survive of us is love’. It suggests the poem was making its way in the world without me. I like them to do that” (FR 58). This detachment of the poet from his poetry, of the artificer from his artifact, speaks volumes of the approach that Larkin fostered for his poetry. However if this doesn’t suffice, here is Philip Larkin opening a reading session of “The Explosion” on a BBC Radio

Three programme with the following words : “What I should like to do is to write different kinds of poems that might be by different people. Someone once said that the great thing is not to be different from other people but to be different from yourself. That’s why I have chosen to read now a poem that isn’t especially like me, or like what I fancy I’m supposed to be like” (FR 92).

Notwithstanding all these, the fact remains that the major bulk of Larkin scholarship post the poet’s death has traversed a hermeneutic trajectory wherein the self of the poet and the self of poetry have been crassly equated. Detractors like Germaine Greer, Bryan Appleyard, Tom Paulin, Lisa Jardine and the like latched upon the secondary evidences provided by Anthony Thwaite’s *The Selected Letters* of Philip Larkin , and Andrew Motion’s biography *Philip Larkin: A Writer’s Life* with a cannibalistic abandonment. The duality existing between life and art was dumbly repressed in predilection for a mode of scholarship that verged only on the autobiographical. However, to assume that this penchant for biography as an interpretative tool is predominantly conditional would be naïve and erroneous. This is because reading poetry through the limited and abstracted prism of the poet’s life had traditionally been the most sought-after methodology even among Larkin admirers – a facet exquisitely elaborated by John Osborne. Surveying the phenomena Osborne points out how David Timms in a 1973 monograph, *Philip Larkin* had already set in place “many of the exegetical vices that would be used much less responsibly by Larkin’s detractors” (17). “Larkin”, according to Timms, “writes his poetry not from a preconceived set of principles but as a direct and personal response to particular experiences” (qtd.in Osborne 17).

*Larkin: Ideology and Critical Violence* is a path breaking work in the sense that it unleashes a concerted reaction against the most dominant mode of critical engagement that had plagued Larkin’s poetry. Acknowledging Timms’ work as both ‘diligent’ and ‘perceptive’, Osborne none

the less goes on to catalogue how Timms rolled all the narrators of Larkin's poetry into one and conflated the same with the author. I quote him at some length:

The analysis of poem 'xx' begins: 'Out walking in winter, Larkin sees a young girl'. A little later we are told, 'The poet in poem 'xxxii' has spent the night with a girl and he stands looking out of the hotel window while she brushes her hair'. Moving on to *The Less Deceived*, Timms describes 'Dockery and Son' as 'the reminiscence of the poet on his journey home, having visited his old college'; while the plot of 'Church Going' is summarized as follows: 'Out for a bicycle ride, the poet stops at a church and goes in to look around'. Not only are the differences between the various protagonists minimized on the assumption that they are all Larkin but, conversely, and yet more damagingly, these narrators are repeatedly referred to as 'the poet' when in not a single case is it vouchsafed that they pursue that singular vocation....Worse follows. Of 'Reference Back', Timms says, 'the speaker is a man in his thirties visiting his parents' home. Mother and son have little in common.... (17-18)

It would have been absolutely logical for a contemporary researcher to forgo Timms' interpretative lacunae and analytical complacency on grounds of puerility, had not Osborne pointed out the recurrence of the same critical mode in recent scholarship on Larkin as well. Regarding the interpretation of "Reference Back", he says:

Since Timms this has become the *don née* for all interpretations of this poem: approximately twenty years later, Professor Trevor Tolley asserts that 'In "Reference Back" ...Larkin recalls an attempt by his mother to reach out to him

emotionally in the “time at home” that she “looked so much forward to”; a further six years on, Warren Hope’s *Student Guide to Philip Larkin* unequivocally asserts that ‘ “Love Songs in Age” and “Reference Back” deal with Larkin’s loyal but strained relationship with his mother’. (18)

Fortunately though, the identity of the poetic self is seldom structured through biography. With major poets, it is a presence which almost always remains elusive, somewhat beyond grasp. To read biography into poetry is to confine the joy of its openness within a closed system of certainties and certitudes- something that 20<sup>th</sup> century critical theory had vociferously reacted against. Eliot brought about a clear- cut dissociation between the self of the poet and that of poetry, when alluding to the “significant emotion” he held that it “has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet” (53). “Poetry” for him “is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality but an escape from personality” (52-53). Wimsatt and Beardsley deplored the reductivity underlying the biographical approach when in *The Intentional Fallacy* (1946) they held that “the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art”(Lodge 334). However, it was Roland Barthes who in “The Death of the Author” came out with the most categorical denunciation of biographical criticism, when he rightly observed:

The image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his life, his passions, while criticism still consists for the most part in saying that Baudelaire’s work is the failure of Baudelaire the man, Van Gogh’s his madness, Tchaikovsky’s his vice. The explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the

end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the author confiding in us. (143)

Furthermore it appears that there had been an unintended complicity on the part of Larkin, in generating a notion of the kind of poetry he was writing and the interpretative modality that they presupposed. Poetic creation according to him commences with an “emotional concept” which compels the poet “to do something about it”. The poem for Larkin is a product of his “second stage”, “a verbal device” intended to reproduce the emotional concept in anyone who reads it, “anywhere, at any time”. This is followed by the “third stage” that becomes a “recurrent situation” of people “setting off the device” and thereby recreating for themselves “in different times and places” what the poet felt when he wrote it (RW 83). This apparent congruity projected by Larkin as existing between the self of the poet and that of his poetry, has tempted critics not only to conflate the two, but in certain cases to identify the process with the romantic theory of poetry. However, we understand that an insistence on ‘emotion’ alone cannot be regarded as the hermeneutic touchstone to align the poetry of Philip Larkin with those of Romantic proper. A poetic architectonic almost similar to that of Larkin is what T.S.Eliot too pleads for, when in “Hamlet and His Problems”, he explicates the way by which emotion in art is expressed. Eliot writes: The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative’; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked (92). Unprejudiced reading will show that the Larkinesque ‘verbal device’ is a linguistic equivalent to the Eliotic ‘objective correlative’. The very fact that a poem for Larkin is a ‘device’ is proof of its fictionality. Consequently therefore, the “emotional concept” that he intends to recreate with

such device would always be a transmuted one—something in which the self of the poet happily resigns its part in predilection of the self of poetry.

The biographical approach as a means to unravel the poetic self of Larkin is further undermined if only scholarship cares to remind itself that even within the Romantic tradition the stated theoretical position has always been one of transcendence. The Wordsworthian poetic theory undoubtedly talks of ‘emotion recollected in tranquillity’ (251) but also reminds us that in poetic creation it is not the original emotion of the poet that finds expression; rather one that is “similar to that which was before the subject of contemplation” (252), which finds utterance. There is thus a distinction of kind between the two emotions analogous to the two selves. And if that is not enough, here is John Keats categorically stating the distinction:

A poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence; because he has no identity- he is continually in for- and filling some other body- The Sun, the Moon, the sea and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute- the poet has none; no identity- he is certainly the most unpoetical of all God’s creatures....When I am in a room with people if I ever am free from speculating on creatures of my own brain, then not myself goes home to myself, but the identity of everyone in the room begins to press upon me that, I am in a very little time annihilated—not only among Men; it would be the same in a nursery of children.... (Keats, “Selected Letters” 195)

Osborne’s reading of the majority of criticism on Larkin’s poetry tempts him to situate them within the context of Bowdlerism. Extending the purview of deletions to encompass not merely the textual but the interpretative as well, Osborne unleashes a scathing attack on the phenomenon

of biographical criticism which afflicted Larkin's poetry in the second half of the twentieth century. In stark opposition to Dr. Bowdler who in expurgating the indecent and blasphemous passages believed that he was "conferring a benefit not only on the reader but on Shakespeare as well", the "late millennial Bowdler" as Osborne dubs them operated to "diminish rather than enhance the reputation of the chosen author". The pervasiveness of such critical endeavor may be gauged from the fact that "of the twenty to thirty critical books and sixty or so worthwhile essays on Larkin, well over ninety percent employ the biographical approach" (24-25). No wonder therefore that in the dissemination of such hegemonic methodology, Osborne rightly discerns the operation of a dominant ideological pattern.

In contemporary times the self as a philosophical construct is enmeshed within a field of discursivity. Michael Kuhler and Nadja Jelinek in an edited book *Autonomy and the Self* forming part of the philosophical studies series (vol :118) enumerates three distinct approaches for explaining the nature of the self. In the first place there is the 'subjectivist account' prioritizing "subjective or individual traits of the person in question". Secondly we have what is called the 'social-relational account' "pointing to a person's social involvement and social interdependencies"; while the 'narrative account' highlights "a constructivist approach by way of viewing the self as nothing other than what is created anew each time a story is told about who a person is".

Evolving from the seminal works of the American social behaviorist George Herbert Mead, the social- relational accounts of the self "emphasizes the dependence of the self's genesis and continued existence upon social and cultural context". For Charles Taylor who presupposes certain psychological states like desires, motivation, feelings, inclinations as 'a-priori', the self is always a product of 'articulation'. These vague and inchoate attitudes and states await

interpretation (articulation) and since interpretation necessitates language, the role of culture specific society assumes paramount importance. Thus crops up the significance of socially conveyed concepts in way of definition of the self. Proponents of the Narrative Accounts of the self on the other hand, subvert the claim that it is possible to have direct access to the self, be they subjective or social-relational. They construe the self as a linguistic construction formulated in the form of narratives. Paul Ricoeur for example holds that it is the identity of the narrated story which forms the very basis of a person's self. Kuhler and Jelinek therefore rightly observe: "The crucial point is that single aspects of a story gain their meaning only in relation to each other and to the story as a whole. Hence in order to make sense of individual aspects in one's life, we need to tell a story, in which these aspects are put in some form of meaningful order, i.e., in which different aspects are construed as relevant for one another and for the story as a whole" (x-xvii).

The problem with these approaches is that some sort of a self as an already existing phenomenon is regarded as *apriori*, even at the outset of any discourse on the same. While most social-relational accounts presuppose certain psychological states as innate and therefore constitutive of the essence of the self; the Narrativist accounts too, tacitly presuppose the presence of a rudimentary self, which at best is susceptible to mutation but nevertheless existent.

This hypothetical assumption of 'presence' becomes a major hindrance for any meaningful engagement with the self of poetry. For unlike the self of the poet which may be regarded as a monolith (in the nominal sense), the self of poetry is always provisional in essence. Consequently the much talked of poetic persona is not something that the poet assumes at the outset of poetic creation but rather a resultant of poetic experience. Had the assumption of a self been *apriori* to poetic experience, poetry would at best be a posturing- a masquerade that the poet

staged in order to befool his audience. In saying that he intended “to write different kinds of poems that may be by different people”, Larkin probably missed out on a very important point. He couldn’t possibly have written poetry that might have been by different people. But his poetry undoubtedly could proffer different people to whom the poetic experience inhaled.

Unfortunately the provisionality of the poetic self I alluded to earlier is something that is bound to be subverted by a dominant proponent of the subjectivist theory of the self. The theory in question which Kuhler and Jelinek terms the Essential Nature account “claims that the essential nature of a person is not chosen by the person herself but given”. Harry J. Frankfurt the most prominent advocate of the essential nature account floated the concepts of ‘caring’ and ‘volitional necessities’ wherein the former term is defined “as an essentially volitional attitude which can, but does not have to be accompanied by feelings, emotions and value judgments”. The Essential Nature account therefore as Kuhler and Jelinek maintain “claims that a person is confronted with the fact that she cannot help but care about certain things, which means that she can merely discover her already given essential nature- but cannot alter it at will” (xiv).

Explicating the nature of the poetic self, way back in 1818, John Keats in a personal letter addressed to Richard Woodhouse said: “... As to the poetical character itself- it has no self- it is everything and nothing- it has no character- it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated- It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the chameleon poet” (194-195). If this description of the poetic self is anything valid, the only subjective account that can do justice to Larkin’s poetry is the existential account or to be more precise the existential account as was enunciated by Jean Paul Sartre.

Western philosophy from Plato onwards had projected a self that with its coherence and unity can sift through the amorphous chaos of experience and arrive at a structured notion of itself and the world which it inhabits. With Descartes this self got congealed into a nomenclature, an institution, the 'Cogito'- I think therefore I am- which was disseminated through subsequent philosophical phases. The British empiricists structured reality differently but the essentiality of the structuring self remained unchallenged. The same can be said of Hegelian idealism and Kantian metaphysics. Intent upon converting metaphysics into a scientific discipline, Kant systematized it but did not move away from the concept of the self as a structuring unity. Kant regarded the phenomenal world as the only object of cognition, but it was primarily due to the 'analytic unity of apperception' and the 'synthetic unity of apperception' that (according to Kant) cognition was made possible.

From the view of life as pure essence, the focus shifts to existence for the first time and in a concerted manner in the Phenomenological philosophy of Edmund Husserl. Husserl defined phenomenology as the science of the essence of consciousness (Ideas 1) and in a way prioritized the first person point of view of consciousness, by making it an intentional act always directed towards an object. However Husserl made a categorical distinction between the object of an experience and its content. For Husserl the content which he preferred to call 'Noema' was aligned to the generation of a concept or percept which was eternal and could exist irrespective of the object. However the question still remained: who appropriated the concept? And it is here that Husserl provides an answer which by no means is different from any other Idealist philosophers. The self is once again proffered but in a new garb, a new nomenclature- 'The Transcendental Ego'.

With Martin Heidegger's anti-foundational philosophy, totalitarian and essential narratives received a tremendous jolt. In his theory, the notion of the self even if not displaced is at least placed on infirm ground. 'Dasein' as conceived by Heidegger being inherently temporal, it becomes difficult to define the 'who' of 'Dasein' in terms of a self. The implication is that the self for Heidegger is neither a subject nor a substance, but something which is open to transformation. A significant advancement no doubt, but does that in any way imply that the self is dead?

This essential, debilitated 'self' however dies paving way for a contingency that is perennially in a state of flux and change, realizable but never fully realized; and it is Jean Paul Sartre whose philosophy puts the final nail in the coffin. While Descartes discovered his primary truth through the experience of the 'cogito', Sartre probes vertically into the depths of subjectivity, thereby uncovering a multilayered consciousness. In his essay *The Transcendence of the Ego* Sartre enumerates the three stages to one's self-discovery: 1. Consciousness (as consciousness of something); 2. The non-conscious (the world, that consciousness is conscious of, corresponding to the en-soi); 3. The self (corresponding to the pour-soi and that which is not the world).

The topology of consciousness that Sartre devised speaks of three levels of consciousness: the pre-reflective which is merely consciousness of something; the reflective; and the self-reflective where consciousness becomes its own object. The distinction among these three levels has been deftly brought about by Sartre himself through an analogy of the act of reading. Christine Daigle summarizes it as follows:

When you are engaged in the act of reading, you are also conscious of the room you are in, the temperature of the room, the chair on which you sit, etc, all on a

pre-reflective level. But you are also actively engaged in the reading, which is a reflective activity that requires the second level of consciousness. As a reflective consciousness, you are using reflection to be conscious of something in a different way...at the same time you can also think of yourself as reading, i.e. actively thinking about your reading, you are conscious of yourself as a reading- self. (22)

Of course it needs to be understood that though Sartre presents the levels of consciousness in a sequence, ultimately they are contemporaneous moments of consciousness.

Apparently Sartre's philosophy moves by means of a revision of the Cartesian 'ego' and Husserl's 'intentionality', but the resolution he achieves is of a radical kind. Whereas both Descartes and Husserl posit the 'ego' as the unifier of conscious experiences, for Sartre this role resides typically with consciousness. The ego for him is a reflective by-product of conscious activity. Sartre writes:

The world has not created the 'me' the 'me' has not created the world. These are two objects for absolute impersonal consciousness, and it is by virtue of this consciousness that they are connected. This absolute consciousness, when it is purified of the 'I' no longer has anything of the subject. It is quite simply a first condition and an absolute source of existence. (Sartre, "Transcendence" 105-6)

As has been already mentioned, the phenomenological approach that Sartre employs has been adapted from Husserl and in keeping with the latter, Sartre too believes in the intentional structure of the consciousness. However where he primarily differs is in the way Husserl distorts the reflective nature of consciousness by making it reflexive (turning back) and in the way generates a subject in the form of a transcendental ego. Sartre on the other hand argues as Robert

Denoon Cumming explicates: “When I become self conscious, I am reflecting upon my pre-reflective consciousness of something else, and the self (the ego) of which I become conscious is not the subject performing this act of reflection, but its intentional object, which has emerged in retrospect from the pre-reflective consciousness I am reflecting upon” (12). Self consciousness therefore in the philosophy of Sartre cannot secure for the self that privileged role of transcending experience as it does in Descartes and Husserl. The result is that the self has finally become a transitory object, delusive and mutable and thereby ceased to be the anchor of experience that it had been since the inception of philosophy.

An engagement with the poetry of Philip Larkin from the perspective outlined above can open up new avenues of interpretation and effectively counter interpretative stereotypes, which his detractors have chosen to, embellish him with. One of his early poems ‘Two Guitar Pieces’ composed in 1946 and included in the anthology *In the Grip of Light* may be a case in point. The poem opens with a cluster of photographic images as in a montage with obvious associations of a post-war landscape, just subtle enough to touch upon the impending vacuity of the scene:

The tin-roofed shack by the railroad  
 Casts a shadow. Wheat straws in the white dust  
 And a wagon standing. Stretched out into the sun  
 A dozen legs are idle in dungarees... (CP 8)

What is obvious is that the consciousness of the speaker is in the Sartrean pre-reflective mode, whereby the world, manifesting itself through beings of discrete kind is simply registered as

exists. The experience as it gathers up and presents itself before consciousness is predominantly eidetic whereby the speaker merely catalogues whatsoever it is that surrounds him:

One frowns above a guitar: the notes, random  
 From tuning, wander into the heat  
 Like a new insect chirping in the scrub,  
 Untired at noon. A chord gathers up and spills,  
 And a southern voice tails out around one note  
 Contentedly discontent. (8)

The mode of consciousness however changes from the pre-reflective to the reflective in the penultimate and ultimate lines of the first stanza whereby the 'southern voice' is perceived by the speaker as 'contentedly discontent'. The oxymoron is not intended to be decorative but rather connotative of acceptance of 'discontent' of the inmates of a no-where, no-when provincial town, of which the 'southern voice' is an emblematic representative.

The reflective mode of the speaker already alluded to persists in the second stanza as well when he despairingly informs: "Though the tracks/ Burn to steel cities, they are taking/ No one from these parts." A telling comment no doubt, on the imbalance of economic opportunities existing between provincial towns and cities, but what are we to make of the self of the speaker? It is a specific poetic experience that proffers the semblance of a self, and though not nominally projected, it is a self that is anguished and 'discontent', one that has contentedly embraced the stasis that the material conditions of life had thrust it into.

It would be interesting to note that “Two Guitar Pieces” is comprised of two sections written with a gap of three days between 15<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> September 1946. However it may be construed that they were not intended to be separate poems, since a thread of thematic unity in the form of the ‘guitar’ binds the two parts. Neither has the landscape changed nor the mood and once again at the outset of the second section, the speaker is back to the pre-reflective mode: “I roll a cigarette, and light/ A spill at the stove. With a lungful of smoke/ I join you at the window that has no curtain”... (8). Experience is randomly catalogued as the existent brushes shoulder with all other existents surrounding him:

A man is walking along

A path between the wreckage. And we stare at the dusk,

Sharing the cigarette.

Behind us, our friend

Yawns, and collects the cards. The pack is short,

And dealing from now till morning would not bring

The highest hands. Besides, it’s too dark to see.

So he kicks the stove, and lifts the guitar to his lap,

Strikes this note, that note. (8-9)

That the modes of consciousness are contemporaneous and not sequential, is attested by the fact that the speaker, while unreflectively registers the presence of his yawning friend collecting the cards also becomes reflectively apprehensive of whether countless deals would bring unto him 'the highest hands'. Again a self proffers but on this occasion it is not the erstwhile self submerged in anguish but a self that is apprehensive of the prospects of life and chooses to remain resigned.

For the first time in the poem, the third stanza of the second section, confronts a diligent reader with a consciousness that is self-reflective. In other words, a consciousness that is conscious of a previous experience inhering to it surfaces, creating in its wake an ego-the 'I'- which is not merely nominal but real, in the limited sense, that it can now structure the very experience which had constituted it. Interestingly however, the stimulus to that end had been of a kinesthetic sort- 'I am trembling'- and is significantly experienced as 'sudden'. The impersonal notes of the guitar project a self only when the nominal persona of the poem becomes kinesthetically aware of it as a human construct-'language'- and reflexively turns back upon experience:

I am trembling:

I am suddenly charged with their language, these six strings,

Suddenly made to see they can declare

Nothing but harmony, and may not move

Without a happy stirring of the air

That builds within this room a second room;

And the accustomed harnessing of grief

Tightens... (9)

What follows is a brief interjection of a self, vainly striving to organize and structure experience only to dissipate itself into nothingness:

And so I watch the square,

Empty again like hunger after a meal.

You offer the cigarette and I say, keep it,

Liking to see the glimmer come and go

Upon your face. What poor hands we hold,

When we face each other honestly! And now the guitar again,

Spreading me over the evening like a cloud,

Drifting, darkening: unable to bring rain. (9)

Holding ‘poor hands’ while facing ‘each other honestly’ is a relational perception dependent upon self-reflective consciousness. But does the consciousness abide? The concluding image of the guitar spreading the speaker ‘over the evening like a cloud’ is so numinous and abstract, that any such possibility is summarily precluded.

In 1938, Jean Paul Sartre citing a description of the death of the American Joe in a French café from the novel *U.S.A* went on to claim that “Dos Passos is the greatest novelist of our time”: “Joe laid out a couple of frogs and was backing off towards the door, when he saw in the mirror

that a big guy in a blouse was bringing down a bottle on his head held with both hands. He tried to swing around but he didn't have time. The bottle crashed his skull and he was out". (qtd. in Cumming 3)

The passage held special importance for Sartre in the light of the fact that it operated as an exquisite analogy, enacting as it were in fictional form the workings of consciousness and the consequent evolution of the self. The analogy as Robert Denoon Cumming rightly pointed out in his introduction to *The Philosophy of Jean Paul Sartre* "appeals to him (Sartre) because a mirror is a surface. It lacks depth" (7). What Dos Passos' description reveals are successions of random images, and that is also precisely how human consciousness behaves. Furthermore, Sartre's intention is not to abjure reflection as an explanation of human action in the traditional sense of the term. What he simply asserts regarding reflection may be adequately summarized in the language of Cumming. I quote him at some length:

... that the self or character of which we then become conscious, is an outcome of this process of reflection; it is not an antecedent structure which, when disclosed by reflection, will provide a causal explanation of why I am doing what I am doing. He is further asserting that to the extent that I construe as an explanatory principle the self or character of which I become conscious through reflection, my self-consciousness is self- deception. (8)

An exquisite poetic equivalent of the thesis that the self is an object of reflection and not an antecedent structure finds expression in a poem entitled "Best Society" (1951). The speaker in the poem while deploring the abrupt loss of solitude which marked his transition from childhood

to maturity reflects on the comparative merits of socialization as against his self imposed isolation:

Then after twenty, it became

At once more difficult to get.

And more desired- though all the same

More undesirable; for what

You are alone has, to achieve

The rank of fact, to be expressed

In terms of others, or it's just

A compensating make believe. (CP 56)

What is quite obvious is that a reflective consciousness is at work here, directed specifically to a cluster of consciousnesses lived in the past. The semblance of a self is also projected in retrospect, that being appreciative of the sociability of all human virtues cannot decide between the relative claims of self and society and thus stands confounded.

It is with a concatenation of harsh consonantal sounds, 'viciously then I lock my door' that the persona ushers in a temporal shift in the fourth stanza. Reflection on past consciousness gives way to the immediate present where the reigning deity is that of a self-reflective consciousness registering its existence among all other existents:

Viciously, then, I lock my door.

The gas-fire breathes. The wind outside

Ushers in evening rain. Once more

Uncontradicting solitude

Supports me on its giant palm... (56)

However, it is at this juncture that the reader is confronted with a problem of an epistemic kind. What is he to make of the three final lines that conclude the poem: “And like a sea anemone/Or simple snail, there cautiously/Unfolds, emerges, what I am” (57). I would venture to propose that within the context of the poem, the emergence of the ‘I’ cloistered apparently like a ‘sea anemone’ or ‘simple snail’ unfolding itself only in solitude is very close to the Sartrean position that the self is never an antecedent structure but always an object of reflection. Larkin though, is too subtle a poet to be dumbly appropriative. The ‘I’ undoubtedly ‘unfolds’, but does it have an essence? In the absence of anything specific, the ‘what I am’ can turn out to be only a surface- a mirror for example lacking any depth whatsoever.

Larkin is not quite the kind of poet who is naturally pre-disposed to structure poetic experience in essential terms. The two poems hitherto discussed are replications of a consciousness that prefers to lacerate in the flux of existence rather than remain secure within the ambit of conjured essence. “Wedding Wind”, is most likely to be read as the confused expression of a bride who cannot quite come to terms with her altered state and therefore remains apprehensive:

The wind blew all my wedding- day,

And my wedding-night was the night of the high wind;

And a stable door was banging, again and again,

That he must go and shut it, leaving me

Stupid in candlelight, hearing rain,

Seeing my face in the twisted candlestick,

Yet seeing nothing. (CP 11)

Close reading shall possibly reveal that within the space of the poem, it is not the experience of the speaker which assumes significance. Rather it is the wind as an existent, animating through its actions all other discrete existents, including the speaker and her apprehensions that are foregrounded:

All is the wind

Hunting through clouds and forests, thrashing

My apron and the hanging cloths on the line.

Can it be borne, this bodying-forth by wind

Of joy my actions turn on, like a thread

Carrying beads? (11)

Existence here to quote a Sartrean term is in a state of repletion, a nagging sense of surfeit, a feeling that something is too much. Consciousness following upon the heels of consciousness strikes the poetic persona, primarily at a pre-reflective level and in an instinctive manner. There is also a categorical distinction made between the 'being for itself' (Sartre's *pour soi* and the

human persona in this case) and the ‘being in itself’ (Sartre’s *en soi*) manifesting in and through the natural world. The point of contrast resides chiefly in the inherent dichotomy informing the two modes of ‘being’; for while the latter happily reconciles to the mutations of ‘being’, only as existents; the ‘pour soi’ in the embodiment of the speaker fails to come to terms with her limitless freedom and therefore stands confounded. The wind rages through the ‘wedding night’, the ‘stable door’ simply bangs. ‘Hunting through clouds and forests’, it ‘thrashes’ the ‘apron and the hanging cloths on the line’. They presumably dance to its tunes. But what about the human speaker. Is she really happy as she claims? The apparent joy that impelled her thought soon gives way to a feeling of anguish that is the shared lot of the ‘being for itself’, confronted by unlimited freedom. What the ‘pour soi’ aspires for is the uncontradictory solidness of being that informs the ‘en soi’ and realization of the fact that it is unattainable only leads to anxiety. The poetic experience is not unlike what Antoine Roquetin went through in Sartre’s *Nausea*:

I haven’t had any adventures. Things have happened to me, events, incidents, anything you like. But not adventures. It isn’t a matter of words; I am beginning to understand. There is something I longed for more than all the rest without realizing it properly. It wasn’t love, heaven forbid, nor glory, nor wealth. It was ... anyway, I had imagined that at certain moments my life could take on a rare and precious quality. There was no need for extraordinary circumstances: all I asked for was a little order (58).

Likewise in the context of “The Wedding Wind”, though events and incidents happen to the speaker of the poem, they are unable to take on that ‘rare and precious quality’, with the result that order remains elusive.

It is common assumption that a philosophical tradition, soaked in the empiricism of Hobbes, Locke, Barkley and Hume, would have little room for the existential philosophy of Sartre. However literary history confirms that in the post-war period, the impact of Sartre on British literature and culture was too profound to be ignored. In *Literature, Politics and Culture in Post-War Britain* Alan Sinfield writes: “Sartre could not be ignored- because he was the most significant intellectual currently writing; because he wrote from Paris; and because it could not be denied that he had one answer to the persisting anxiety about the status and roles of intellectuals. All the main texts and novels were rapidly translated” (141). This is neither to conjecture nor insinuate the probability of an ideological appropriation of Sartrean ideas by Philip Larkin. Major poetry can hardly be a blind adherence to ideological precepts, but what are we to make of a poem wherein the articulation of experience is strictly in line with the Sartrean notion of subjectivity? A thorough engagement with a poem “Waiting for Breakfast While She Brushed Her Hair” should adequately substantiate the aptness of the question:

Waiting for breakfast while she brushed her hair

I looked down at the empty hotel yard

Once meant for coaches. Cobble stones were wet,

But sent no light back to the loaded sky,

Sunk as it was with mist down to the roofs.

Drain pipes and fire escape climbed up

Past rooms still burning their electric light:

I thought: Featureless morning, featureless night. (CP 20)

Things are catalogued as they appear to the pre-reflective consciousness with their matter of fact existence and if the 'I' intervenes in the last line that is only to assert the drabness of reality.

It is with the first word of the second stanza-'misjudgment'- that the poem changes direction. Judgment and misjudgment alike, pre-suppose the operation of logic and reasoning and the reasoning in this poem is directed towards a specific end. The self in the form of the nominal 'I' had initially surfaced in the last line of the first stanza, though it had remained a somewhat passive reflector of consciousness. However in the second stanza a reflexive (turning back) movement of consciousness sets in, structuring the erstwhile reality into a narrative of human purport:

Misjudgment: for the stones slept, and the mist

Wandered absolvingly past all it touched,

Yet hung like a strayed breath; the lights burnt on,

Pin points of undisturbed excitement... (20)

The use of verbs - 'slept', 'wandered', 'touched', 'hung' and 'strayed'- as human metaphors, point towards an anthropocentrism of the worst kind. Unable to face the disarray and randomness of existents encumbering him, the speaker goes on to accommodate them within the context of a human drama designed to render reality agreeable. Through an operation of the reflective consciousness, the 'wet' cobblestones of the first stanza now sleeps, the banal 'mist' wanders like an absolver, while,

...beyond the glass

The colourless vial of day painlessly spilled

My world back after a year, my lost lost world

Like a cropping deer strayed near my path again... (20)

“Waiting for breakfast while she brushed her hair” is an immensely interesting poem in the sense that it replicates not the contemporaneous but rather the sequential evolution of all three modes of human existence as also the transitoriness of the so called human self. In the third stanza an invocation to poetic inspiration made palpable through the deftly personified ‘tender visiting’ sets the tone and tenor for the self-reflective consciousness to operate and thereby transfix poetic experience within the bounds of causality:

But, tender visiting,

Fallow as a deer or an unforced field,

How would you have me? Towards your grace

My promise meet and lock and race like rivers,

But only when you choose. (20)

The crude disenchanting lacklustre existents of the first stanza perceived through a pre-reflective consciousness undergo a change in the second due to the operation of the reflective. But unlike Sartre’s *Roquentin*, human predicament is such that it is terrified to exist in the abstract and is naturally pre-disposed to view experience within a teleological framework. Thus the persona’s anthropocentric reflections on reality in the second stanza compel him to believe that the experience he traverses through had been designed to get him confronted with his numinous poetic inspiration. Finally though there is an all-pervasive presence of the self in all the three stanzas, what is striking is that they are mutative and very different from one another.

As one approaches the mature Larkin, i.e poems written more or less after 1955, a significant change appears to set in: consciousness becomes considerably less disposed to be its own object. In other words, the operation of the self-reflective consciousness, whereby consciousness reflectively turns back on itself is notably reduced. Consequently therefore, there is less propensity on the part of the poetic persona to structure the randomness of experience into a coherent whole. Existence is predominantly regarded as gratuitous- a given condition, unwarranted and uncalled for, regarding which all that can be said is that 'it is'. This inchoate flux called existence is appreciated for what it is, and unlike the poems already discussed, little effort is made towards any imposition of order. The self is not obliterated; it only gets more subsumed within existence:

Jan Van Hogspeuw staggers at the door  
 And pisses at the dark. Outside, the rain  
 Courses in cart ruts down the deep mud lane.  
 Inside, Dirk Dogstoerd pours himself some more,  
 And holds a cinder to his clay with tongs,  
 Belching out smoke. (CP 177)

These lines are from a poem called "The Card Players" written in 1970 and published in the anthology *High Windows*. It is a narrative of action with character names that are subtle amalgamation of the beast and the phallus. The narrator in this poem comes around as an objective onlooker pre-reflectively registering a human drama held under the rancor of a calamitous sky:

Dirk deals the cards. Wet century-wide trees

Clash in surrounding starlessness above

This lamplit cave, where Jan turns back and farts,

Gobs at the grate, and hits the queen of hearts. (177)

There is no reflective consciousness at work here, no attempt to structure the experience and correlate it with the speaker. However a rudimentary self is undoubtedly present since from a phenomenological perspective, a minimal form of self awareness is a constant structural feature of conscious experience. It is this sense of a self that exclaims: “Rain, wind and fire! The secret, bestial peace!” (177). Obviously, this is neither a reflective self nor one that is reflexively constituted by a self-reflective consciousness. This is merely a pre-reflective self awareness and not a self in the strictest sense of the term.

Incipient would be a somewhat precise word to designate the form of the self under consideration. An inchoate, intangible, rudimentary presence that casts its aura throughout the poetic experience but typically eludes grasp. “Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel” for example is a poem wherein a pre-reflective consciousness finds itself confronted by a world of inert beings, thronging the interior of a hotel, when, “...all the salesman have gone back to Leeds,/ Leaving full ashtrays in the conference room” (CP 163). The different coloured ‘empty chairs’, the desolate ‘dining room’ declaring ‘a larger loneliness of knives and glass’, the ‘silence laid like a carpet’, constitute the being-in-itself (en-soi) that though passive, are solid and self-identical in their fullness of being. Herein lies the facticity of the Royal Station Hotel as also the persona in whom the experience inhere.

However the being-for-itself (pour-soi) or the human speaker is caught up in a situation. And since it is in the nature of the for-itself to transcend its facticity, the headed paper which simply should have been an inert being, provides him with a means to do so and he muses eloquently: “The headed paper, made for writing home/ (If home existed) letters of exile: *Now/ Night comes on. Waves fold behind villages*” (163). The entire poetic experience hangs in mid-air, being unstructured by a self, or conversely facilitating no genesis of a self barring the unsubstantial pre-reflective consciousness. Larkin’s superiority as a craftsman not only in this poem but also in the previous one lies in the fact that by abjuring the first person narrator, he considerably rarifies the role of the ‘self’ in poetry and transmutes the same to the level of the generic human being. The ‘headed paper’ does not only invite the incipient narrator of the poem to write the italicized message. It presumably invites the reader or for that matter, anyone.

Even when the ‘I’ appears in poetry as in a 1968 piece titled “Sad Steps”, it is used in the limited and nominal sense, of a being among many other beings that throng the scene. It does not act, does not organize the conundrum of experiences it is circumscribed within, but merely like a passive register responds to external stimuli:

Groping back to bed after a piss

I part thick curtains, and am startled by

The rapid clouds, the moon’s cleanliness.

Four o’ clock: wedge-shadowed gardens lie

Under a cavernous, a wind-picked sky.

There's something laughable about this... (CP 169)

Larkin's foregrounding of sensation rather than thought as a constituent pre-condition for poetry may be evinced from the word 'groping' which occurs in the very first line of the poem. Rather than any concerted thought on the subject, it is an urgency on the part of the speaker to relieve himself that occasions the poem. Instinctively thereafter, the speaker parts 'thick curtains' only to discover existence in its varied forms resplendent in the fullness of being: "High and preposterous and separate-/ Lozenge of love! Medallion of art! / O wolves of memory! Immensements! ..." (169). The moon is 'High', 'preposterous', and 'separate' but more importantly it is solid and self-identical, a being-in-itself, essentially self-contained. This constitutes the facticity of the moon but not necessarily the facticity of the speaker. As a being for-itself he can only aspire for the solidity of the in-itself, but since that is an impossibility the only recourse available is transcendence:

One shivers slightly, looking up there.

The hardness and the brightness and the plain

Far-reaching singleness of that wide stare

Is a reminder of the strength and pain

Of being young; that it can't come again,

But is for others undiminished somewhere. (169)

The 'singleness of that wide stare' facilitates an understanding, but the understanding does not anymore alight upon the nominal pre-reflective consciousness that registered the experience. The 'I' fritters away and analogous to the previous poems, once again the incipient poetic self paves the way for the rarified generic human to take over.

Do we therefore find a regimented sense of self in the poetry of Philip Larkin? The much talked of Larkinesque poetic self as we find it is a no-self, a no-thing, constituted with felicity and perpetually moving towards hedonistic abandonment. The problem with erstwhile scholarship when they chose to dub him as "minor registrar of disappointment" (James wood), "foul mouthed bigot" (Peter Ackroyd), "provincial grotesque" (Bryan Appleyard) and the like stemmed from a misconception that the self of a poet is the aggregate of the contents of his poetic works taken as a whole. However poetry is not a bolus and is far too nuanced a medium for such broad generalizations. Each poem by a particular poet is shaped by a distinct series of consciousness and it is only within the experiential parameters of such consciousness that the self of a poet ought to be discerned. This holds true for every poet and Philip Larkin cannot be a possible exception.

## 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.

## 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 23<sup>rd</sup> 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.

## Chapter Five

### Re-locating Larkin beyond the Lurking Canon

This dissertation was undertaken with the specific intention to revisit Larkin's poetry from perspectives not hitherto employed as pervasively as it ought to have been. I use the word 'pervasive' consciously, intending to allude to the already observed fact that though thematic existential engagement with Larkin's poetry has preoccupied a handful of critics, it has remained so puerile as to merit little attention. John Osborne, as has been catalogued in the third chapter, did engage literally with a couple of Larkin's poems from the vantage point of Sartrean existential concepts; yet it is only a chapter-length work forming part of a book. In attempting a first-hand existentialist engagement, principally with reference to a selection of Larkin's *Collected Poems*, this dissertation can presumably claim to be radical in its approach.

Engagement with poetry in contemporary times has been reduced to a subculture, instituted predominantly within the confines of the academia or else in certain poetry journals. In the absence of new ideas to enliven poetry through literary criticism, it becomes difficult to conjecture, how long the natural demise of the genre may be thwarted. This is particularly true of the poetry of Philip Larkin. For how else can one justify the fact that even among the scant literary criticism being rolled out today on Larkin, the great majority still situate the poet either within the postwar context or else within the context of his so-called Englishness. This also explains why I consistently failed to find a single critical work that engages with Larkin's poetry from the perspective of the Camusean absurd. Tempting as it may be to employ postmodern theoretical approaches to the reading of poetry, nothing explains the indifference meted out

towards philosophical habitations that were not only contemporaneous but pertinent to the genesis and growth of Larkin's poetry.

The title of this dissertation, 'Larkin Lost, Larkin Found' can therefore claim adequate aptness, with its curious blend of desire and aspiration, despite the fact that desire in this case is negatively construed. It is a desire to lose the man Larkin, with his self-ego bloated by contemporary literary criticism in predilection for the self-effacing poet that Larkin ought to have been. At the same time it is a desire to subsume prevalent critical practices with their penchant for autobiographical modes of engagement, in favour of a mode of criticism that can lend fresh lease of life to the critics' debate about Larkin's poetry. No wonder then that this project aspires to move 'Towards a new poetics of reading'.

However, what exactly is implied by the phrase 'poetics of reading'? Historically, the word poetics first surfaced around 350B.C in Aristotle's work of the same name and has since been seen as an attempt to define the structural and functional principles of works of art, predominantly in the verbal medium. Traditionally though, as Rad Borislavov in an article titled 'poetics' published by The Chicago School of Media Theory holds: "The term poetics has been interpreted as an inquiry into the laws and principles that underlie a verbal work of art and has often carried normative and prescriptive connotations" ("Poetics"). It is in this broader sense that the title of the present project needs to be understood. Reading strategies are like 'prescriptive' working principles that a researcher employs and a logical handling of such principles alone can widen the ontological limits of poetry. Judged from this perspective, one can only hope that the reading strategies employed in this dissertation shall prove to be a viable hermeneutic that is 'productive of meaning' and 'responsive to communication'.

A research work, in order to be a responsible scholarly endeavour, should pave the way for further research. Assuming that the critical orientations employed in this dissertation does evolve as alternative reading paradigms of Larkin's poetry, it is now time to point out a couple of areas, where the existential tool may be profitably implemented. This shall considerably widen the horizon of Larkin scholarship and, as I have repeatedly stressed, redeem the poetry from the clutches of biographical and linear historical criticism. One such area that readily offers itself to engagement is the 'Other', which is not only a domineering presence in Larkin's poetry, but more often than not provides the very ground of poetic tension. Strangely though, it is not the generic 'Other' that has commanded much attention in existing Larkin criticism, but a diluted and gendered form of the 'Other' made palpable in such work as *Philip Larkin: His Life's Work*. Summarizing the contents of that text Regan writes:

Janice Rossen's *Philip Larkin: His Life's Work* provides a good introduction to some of the principal concerns of feminist criticism, concentrating on the different 'kinds' of women and the 'different versions' of femininity that Larkin's poems depict. Rossen shows how women are habitually presented in terms that are either negative and hostile or romanticised and idealistic. She argues that this polarity of viewpoints typifies the dilemma of a generation of men who were educated apart from 'the girls' and who consequently viewed the opposite sex as 'mysterious and inaccessible'. ("New Casebooks" 13)

As a specimen of an alternative reading paradigm, this work definitely has an optimal critical value and Regan is probably justified in endorsing it. However, if we only revisit the much talked of 'women' question and are ready to contest the same, from the perspective of the Sartrean 'Other', a whole new reading pattern might evolve, shedding new light upon Larkin's

poetry. In a chapter titled “Difficulties with Girls”, included in the *New Casebooks* on Larkin, Rossen writes: “The difficulties which Larkin lays bare exist in a complicated tangle of cause and effect; it is difficult to know whom to blame” (136). This is an obvious reference to the much propagated problem with women in Larkin’s poetry and to substantiate her claim Rossen alludes to a letter which Larkin wrote to Sutton from Oxford: “I am of the opinion that I shall never know anything about the woman I marry, really. What do I know of you? Nothing at all. Preserve me from interesting personalities” (136). A claim that an epistolary document, forming part of the poet’s personal reflection at an impressionable age, can constitute the basis for critical observation is rather naive. Furthermore what disquiets a sensitive reader of Rossen’s book is the inference she draws from the letter. According to her, “it typifies the dilemma of his [Larkin] generation of men, who were educated apart from the ‘girls’ who came to seem mysterious and inaccessible. It assumes that women are ‘other’ and distanced”. (136)

To say that this inference is a flawed one on a number of grounds would be an understatement. In the first place, one wonders how a coeducational system can be regarded as the sole repository for disseminating a better understanding between the sexes. What about the role of family and civil society in that regard? Granting too much agency to the education system alone is a little farfetched to say the least. Secondly how does Rossen absolve herself from the countercharge of reinforcing stereotypes when she claims that ‘it typifies the dilemma’ of ‘Larkin’s generation of men?’ Finally if we go by her claim that ‘women are other’, how can Rossen be indifferent to a fundamental question in Larkin’s letter that she herself cites? For Larkin in the letter does not talk of women alone. He posits his problem in a typically gender-neutral context when he asks Sutton, ‘What do I know of you?’ while at the same time confirms

his ignorance: ‘Nothing at all’. One therefore discerns that Larkin’s problem is not only with women but with the generic question about how the ‘Other’ is to be comprehended.

In his book *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre introduces the concept of the ‘Other’ in part 3 under the section “Being-for-others”. In this part of the book, he does not only examine the existence of others but also theorizes on the possible means of engagement with the Other which necessarily leads to conflict. Summing up the Sartrean position regarding the Other, Daigle writes:

It is as an object that I appear to the other; my encounter with the other is that of my body with his. When I meet someone, there is first the physical presence of bodies in a certain spatio-temporal frame. I am a consciousness in my body, and I meet a human body. This human body greets me, or not, looks at me, or not; it is a body inhabited by a consciousness: the consciousness of the Other. Sartre says that there is an unbridgeable distance between the for-itself and the Other: the body is that through which I meet the other, at the same time it is an obstacle as it prevents me from attaining the Other’s consciousness. The relationship between me and the Other is one of exteriority. I am an object for the Other and the Other is an object for me. (73)

Is this not precisely the manner in which the Other in Larkin’s poetry impress themselves upon us? Consider for instance the poem “Deep Analysis” composed as early as 1946. The poem conjures up a desirable woman: ‘Comely at all points’, bewailing her unrequited love in the mode of a monologue:

Through your one youth, whatever you pursued

So singly, that I would be,

Desiring to kiss your arms and your straight side

-Why would you not let me? (CP 4)

It is desire that has propelled the youth in whatever he 'pursued' and desire in itself is not found to be wanting in the woman either. Yet confrontation with the Other only brings forth conflict:

Your body sharpened against me, vigilant,

Watchful, when all I meant

Was to make it bright, that it might stand

Burnished before my tent? (4)

The body, therefore, has evolved as a principal impediment to any meaningful interaction between the lover and the Other, with the result that the gulf between them remains insurmountable:

I could not follow your wishes, but I know

If they assuaged you

It would not be crying in this dark, your sorrow,

It would not be crying so (4)

Larkin's poetry reconciles with the abjectness of the human situation by accepting that the Other cannot be comprehended. It is this realization that informs the primary conflict in such

poems as “Marriages” (CP 63), “Love” (CP 150), “This be the Verse” (CP 180), and probably finds its most explicit utterance in “Counting”:

Thinking in terms of one

Is easily done –

One room, one bed, one chair,

One person there,

Makes perfect sense; one set

Of wishes can be met,

One coffin filled.

But counting up to two

Is harder to do;

For one must be denied

Before it’s tried. (CP 108)

The luxury of love as a saving grace has ordinarily been denied in Larkin’s poetry. On the operational front, his poetry reflects and weighs the possibilities and consequences of human relationship, only to shirk at its prospects. Even when the body as an obstacle towards meaningful engagement is somehow circumvented, due to situational proximity, the otherness of the Other remain intact. “Talking in Bed”, a poem written in 1960 and published in *The Whitsun*

*Weddings* should bear testimony to that: “Talking in bed ought to be easiest / Lying together there goes back so far / An emblem of two people being honest” (CP 129). There can be no doubt that the bed with its pre-defined spatial limits actually proffers a possibility of communication. However the possibility remains inexhausted with the result that “...more and more time passes silently” (129). Indifferent to human concerns, the world outside the room enacts the perpetual drama of existence even as the speaker languishes within the cloister of his self imposed isolation:

Outside the wind’s incomplete unrest

Builds and disperses clouds about the sky,

And dark towns heap up on the horizon.

None of this cares for us. (129)

But why do words elude the speaker? That too within the periphery of a ‘bed’ supposed to conjoin privacy and intimacy. Is it because of the Sartrean ‘look’ that transfixes the Other as an object and is reciprocated likewise? In absence of the possibility of love which alone, according to Sartre, could have either transcended the Other’s freedom or else captured it, that seems to be the only probability:

Nothing shows why

At this unique distance from isolation

It becomes still more difficult to find

Words at once true and kind

Or not untrue and not unkind. (129)

We therefore find that the body as an obstacle, complicated by the objectifying look of the 'Other', is the fundamental stumbling block in the way of establishing a meaningful converse in Larkin's poetry. At the same time, we do not find enough reason to agree with Rossen when she says that 'it is difficult to know whom to blame'. The malaise having been identified, it rests upon future scholarship to unravel the cause.

Another area of research which can be a direct corollary of this project is existential psychoanalysis of the poetry of Philip Larkin. Regan's complaint (already alluded to in the introductory chapter of this dissertation) that the poetry of Larkin has remained 'curiously impervious' to newer 'critical methodology' such as psychoanalysis can thereby find adequate redress, though from an altered perspective. I insist upon the word 'altered' in order to signal my departure from the beaten track of Freudian psychoanalysis in predilection for a methodology that would stand out by dint of being non-essential and, therefore, in keeping with my fundamental project.

As a deterministic theory, Freudian psychoanalysis is characterised by a belief in a structured psyche- id, ego and superego- and actually posits the idea of a psycho-biological residue called the 'libido' as an explanation of human motivation. Apart from these, Freud's mechanical-biological explanations, and his belief that nature and nurture explain human behaviour rather than choice, impute to his theory an essence, which was devised in order to secure for psychoanalysis a ground that would ensure its scientific credibility. However, Betty Cannon in

her book *Sartre and Psychoanalysis* has offered a challenge to ‘Freudian determinism and Freudian metatheory’ by taking recourse to existential psychoanalysis. This explains why the book is subtitled: “An Existential Challenge to Clinical Metatheory”. It is her contention that the ontological metatheory of Sartre can better address certain critical contemporary issues in psychoanalysis than the psychobiological metatheory of Freud. Following Sartre, Cannon writes:

... the objective of existential psychoanalysis would be to reveal in all its concrete richness an individual’s original choice of being, which though grounded in the concrete world, is not reducible to it. Such a choice is constantly changing and capable of radical transformation. Hence existential psychoanalysis must maintain a flexibility in interpreting symbols and symptoms not simply between individuals but with a particular individual at different times in therapy (Cannon 20)

This ‘original choice’ (also known as the ‘fundamental project’ in existential psychology) is, according to Cannon, not much unlike the Freudian ‘complex’. And “just as the Freudian psychoanalyst attempts to discover the childhood events which led to the ...complex, so the existential psychoanalyst attempts to discover the ‘original choice of being’, whereby a client has adopted this or that particular worldview”(19) .

In his introduction to *A Writer’s Life*, Andrew Motion observes: “During his adolescence Larkin had decided he was ‘a genius’. At the same time, judging by his secretive but thorough self preservation, he accepted that he would be written about” (xvii-xviii). This affirmation of the ‘original choice’, in possibly the most celebrated biography of the poet, warrants an existential psychoanalysis that can significantly widen the scope of Larkin scholarship. Undoubtedly this presupposes a high degree of dependence on epistolary documents- both sent and received by

Larkin- but in this case the labour of the researcher will be far more meaningfully employed. This is because letters and other correspondences are to be studied as relevant documents, not only in the context of locating the ‘original choice’ of Larkin the man, but also in so far as they foreshadow the ‘original choice’ of Larkin the poet. For there is a profound schism that informs the personality of Larkin: “The soul of shy modesty was also a self-promoter; the man admired for avoiding bright lights was continually tempted to step into them; the ‘Hermit of Hull’ was his readers’ friend winning their trust and warm affection by telling them a good deal about himself” (xix). Thus, there is a possibility that the ‘original choice’ of Larkin the man might either have been abrogated, or else radically transformed in Larkin the poet. It is also possible, that the choice may have been re-instated in a new garb and problematized to such an extent, as to defy recognition. But one thing is certain: in consonance with Sartrean metapsychology, the surface psychic symptoms would manifest themselves through concrete choices and not discovered in the, “instinctual life and the unconscious” (Cannon18) as in Freud. The task of the prospective researcher therefore promises to be a challenging one.

Unlike the empirical sciences, a literary research of this kind may find it difficult to claim to have discovered something new. What it can of course claim is a novelty of approach, by dint of which a supposedly mediocre poetry would time and again, open up new horizons of expectation and fulfillment. Larkin’s poetry certainly, it will be conceded, continues to invite such engagement.

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**THE INDETERMINATE PHILIP LARKIN AND HIS HAPLESS POETIC MUSE**

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**Abstract**

*Philip Larkin (1922-1985), arguably the most dominant poetic voice in English Poetry, in the post- Auden era had been traditionally read as a poet whose work merely reflects life in an uncomplicated way. This paper is therefore an attempt to re-read some of his poems against the grain of fixed ideas attendant upon them. Diligent reading will show that here is a poet, who, even before the onset of Postmodernism wrote poetry that is disturbingly close to postmodern indefiniteness or indeterminacy.*

The dehumanization of literature from the 1960s onwards, initiated by divergent critical orientations grouped together under the umbrella term post modernism, has sought to view 'indeterminacy' ---- an oft-quoted symptom of the aforesaid system of aesthetics ---- as a typically linguistic phenomenon. Criticism being dominated essentially by structural concerns, the poet became an author, and literary text a site marked by each signifier's relentless, but futile move towards a transcendental signified leading to indeterminacy. On the other hand the history and genealogy of post modernism confirms the presence of this indeterminacy on the humanistic level of the cognitive as well. Whereas modernism tried to capture reality through individual consciousness equivalent to life itself, for post modernism reality is just an incoherent and deluding notion. Against the modernist obsession with wholeness and unity, post modernism celebrates a radical indeterminacy.

Far from merely regarding it as a series of disjunctive symptoms which struck the philosophic/aesthetic realm in the late 1960s, the origin of post modern indeterminacy has to be sought in the specific historicity of the west. And once we try to effect that move, what primarily appears as the cause of post modern indeterminacy is an absolute lack of anchor, owing largely to the loss of essentialist certitudes in all capacities of life- social, political, spiritual and the like.

A sense of negation took over, and in philosophy--albeit French philosophy--this negation assumed the form of a skepticism which was directed, as Stuart Sim claims in his essay, 'Post Modernism and Philosophy', towards "authority, received wisdom, cultural and political norms etc, which puts it into a long running tradition in western thought that stretches back to classical Greek philosophy" (3)

In the socio-political realm, the question of indeterminacy was fundamentally a resultant of the subversion of 'meta-narratives' in favour of a comparatively disjointed and fragmented notion of reality, which coincided with the rejection of Marxism as an essentialist political discourse, at the hands of Jean Francois Lyotard in 1968. The Paris 'Evenements' is normally regarded as a signal event which compelled philosophers like Lyotard, Baudrillard, Deleuze and Guattari to veer away from the grand narratives of Marxism, and seek refuge in what Lyotard called 'petit recit' or micro narratives of life. Could it therefore be inferred that this predilection for the flux instead of the coherent whole was in a large measure responsible for ushering in the note of indeterminacy? Possibly it could, had not the criterion of indeterminacy been a necessary adjunct to an erstwhile hermeneutic practice.

It will be remembered that the subversion of essentialist discourses commenced with Soren Kierkegaard who initiated what is today called the philosophy of 'suspicion'. Nietzsche advanced the cause substantially as did thinkers like Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger and Gabriel Marcel. In fact it was Heidegger's blatant rejection of anthropocentrism, followed by Sartre's absolute negation of the essential cognitive self that debunked essence and paved the way for the intrusion of the variable as subjects of discourse. The determined self being lost, determination as a conscious activity was eschewed and pleasure sought in the celebration of indeterminacy.

The present paper is an attempt to re-read some of Philip Larkin's poems, against the grain of fixed ideas attendant upon the form and meaning of the text. It is my contention; that, if carefully read, Larkin's poetry will enable us to regard him as a contemporary master of indefiniteness, who, much before the onset of the postmodern rignarole, wrote poetry that is disturbingly close to post-modernist indeterminacy. In my reading I have primarily chosen poems written prior to 1968, the year historically accepted to be the starting point of post modernism.

I am however aware of a feasible objection that might be raised at this stage. Bearing in mind Larkin's much professed insularity towards anything foreign, how far can the events enumerated earlier be said to have conditioned his poetry? To which I answer by saying that the sheer magnitude of these events were such that it would practically have been impossible for Larkin to escape their impact. Moreover Richard Palmer in the very preface to his book length study on the poet entitled *Such Deliberate Disguises: The Art of Philip Larkin* had succinctly argued, how Larkin the man used numerous masks to carefully nurture and shape the poet he was to become (14), and judged from that perspective his public reaction can be

construed as a provocative posture. However, even if one were to eschew these facts as external evidences, I posit that the thread of indeterminacy hovering around Larkin's poetry can be viewed from the vantage point of what I have already referred to as the loss of an essential poetic self.

Mr. Andrew Motion in his introduction to *Philip Larkin- A writer's Life*, talks of the contradictions in Larkin's will, which I believe goes a long way in etching the parameters of my argument. In relation to Larkin's published and unpublished work, he has pointed out quoting Neil Lyndon, how in three different clauses of the same will Larkin had entrusted his trustees "the power to publish his unpublished work, instructed them to destroy it, and told them to discuss the matter with the literary executors" ( xvi ). Also Richard Bradford in his biography of the poet entitled *First Boredom, Then Fear. The Life of Philip Larkin* has called attention to how Larkin's self marginalization was effected not only at the cost of the world, but at its own peril. Larkin's inability not just to act, but even to conceive acting is exemplified by Bradford through allusion to a lecture incident where Larkin urinated in his clothes, because he could not summon the will to go to the restroom and relieve himself (Ward 623). What is however surprising is that instead of seeing in it a fundamental pattern of existence Bradford goes on to structure this apparent behavioral aberration through the paradigmatic construct of Larkin's cogito. Seldom does it occur to him that the poetic self – that much talked of beacon of coherence and unity- could in the case of this poet have been impaired to such an extent, as to make meaningful action impossible. One therefore wonders whether or not the much talked of indeterminacy was a constituent essence of Larkin's poetic temperament. Furthermore, if the problem of choice confronting Larkin the man remained unresolved, the same is probably true of Larkin the poet. The inevitable result is an anxiety of an existential kind from which there is no escape.

Post modernism being a predominantly Franco-American enterprise, little of what it entailed, affected England in a pervasive way. When it did, much of its effect became perceptible in the realm of drama and fiction where the now popular phrase 'anything goes' led to the incorporation of diverse architectonics of the craft. Poetry on the other hand, showed no overt symptoms of appropriation of those post modern principles. The loose poetry movement that took place in the 1960s and 70s, which was termed 'The British Poetry Revival', was a modernist – inspired reaction to what was felt to be the Movement's conservative approach to British poetry. Much of what was written by poets of the 60s and 70s are today regarded as minor poetry, so much so, that Philip Larkin who started writing in the 40s, and integrated in his own idiosyncratic manner the subtle nuances of subsequent decades, is unequivocally regarded as the most representative English poet since the Second World War. It would therefore be interesting to assess the way in which his poetry can be said to be aligned to the post modern ethos.

Embedded within the socio-political factuality of the 1950s, 'Mr Bleaney' (1955) is a poem pervaded by a nagging sense of the circularity of existence, and a consequent stasis which is worked out in metaphoric terms. A rented room with its scant material exigency is all that binds the poetic persona to Mr Bleaney, and gradually but steadily one finds the living of the speaker coalesce somewhat disturbingly with the living of Mr Bleaney:

**...So it happens that I lie**

where Mr Bleaney lay, and stub my fags  
on the same saucer – souvenir, and try  
Stuffing my ears with cotton-wool, to drown  
The jabbering set he egged her on to buy. (10-14)

The subject of the poem along with the year of its conception -1955- shall remind an informed reader of the economic slump that hit England in that decade, provoking such general indeterminism as is found in Osbourne's *Look back in Anger* or Kingsley Amis' *Lucky Jim*. Indeterminacy there as also in 'Mr Bleaney' are offshoots of social iniquity, and this becomes explicit in the final eight lines of the poem:

**But if he stood and watched the frigid wind**

Tousling the clouds, lay on the fusty bed  
Telling himself that this was home, and grinned  
And shivered, without shaking of the dread  
That how we live measures our own nature  
And at his age having no more to show  
Than one hired box should make him pretty sure  
He warranted no better, I don't know (21-28)

Mr. David Lodge in his essay entitled 'Philip Larkin: The metonymic muse' has commented upon Larkin's manipulation of language that creates this sense of futility terminating in incertitude. I quote him at some length:

The diction is plain and simple but the syntax, subordinate clauses burgeoning and negatives accumulating bewilderingly, is extremely complex and creates a sense of helplessness and entrapment. The main clause so long delayed – 'I don't know' – when it finally comes, seems to spread back dismally through the whole poem, through the whole life of the unhappy man who utters it. ( 80)

Indeterminacy with Philip Larkin is predominantly ontological, and is the confounding irresolution of the problem of choice confronting the self. 'Days', a ten-line poem from 'The Whitsun Wedding' starts with an attempt to define the subject, accompanied by a move towards stabilization in the line, "where can we live but day's?" (5) But the second stanza changes direction. And the determinacy toward which the poem had been moving soon gives way to chaos and confusion.

**Ah, solving that question**

Brings the priest and the doctor

In their long coats

Running over the fields. (7-10)

The anguished 'ah' undoubtedly goes on to register a pre-occupation with death but more than that, the words 'priest' and 'doctor' evolve as symbolic projections of theological certitudes vying with empirical science for dominion. The result is an ontological stasis opening up the fissure of discord and the problem of choice confronting contemporary humanity. Further note, that Stasis, confusion or indeterminacy – be that as it may -- is effected by Larkin in a peculiar way – namely by shifting the focus from the co-ordinates of 'Time' in the 1<sup>st</sup> stanza to the co-ordinates of infinite space in the 2<sup>nd</sup>. The reader is thrust head-long into the void of the empty fields, and such emptiness as Becket's plays have amply displayed may be intensely claustrophobic at times.

Precisely this mode of operation may be evinced in a poem entitled 'High Windows', of course, written much later in 1967. The first four stanzas create a persona afflicted with the disappointment of unfulfilled promises. However speculations about the new generation's chances of happiness assures him that he might once have been similarly envied. The stanzas vacillate ceaselessly between hope and frustration only to provoke a conclusion that is characteristically in-conclusive:

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.(17-20)

There is transcendence implied here, but this transcendence terminates in nihilism.

It should not be surmised; however, that indeterminacy was a temporary phase in Larkin's poetry. 'The Explosion', written as late as 1970, starts with innumerable snap shot like montages in the typical modernist rendition of the quiet preceding an explosion. The first four stanzas peculiarly Eliotic in tone is designed to capture visually, and of course colloquially, the mundaneness of provincial life, with overtones of existential stasis attending upon it. Incertitude however creeps into the poem, it seems to me, regarding the question of the Church services meant to pacify the bereaved families of the dead. Larkin writes:

**The dead go on before us, they**

Are Sitting in God's house in comfort,

We shall see them face to face –

**Plain as lettering in the chapels**

It was said, and for a second

Wives saw men of the explosion



consequent vacuity somewhat in line with Albert Camus' preoccupation with the absurd. In fact, Larkin's penchant for the much repeated Wildean dictum 'only mediocrities develop' can be construed in terms of the circularity and immutability of life that he perceived to be the general human condition. Yet hardly any western scholar has elaborately critiqued this facet of Larkin's poetry compelling us to suspect a politics of representation involved in the matter. For a philosophical system that has historically been empirical, an acceptance of the existentialist position seems highly improbable. Throughout this article, I have therefore deliberately used the generic term existentialist instead of the more systemic 'Existentialism' since that would inevitably resurrect the Sartrean ghost, who since the cold war had been consigned to oblivion on charges of being aligned with Stalinist orthodoxy. But does that mean that we should preclude the poetry of Philip Larkin from a critical intervention that it rightly deserves?

Unable to constitute the world as a unity, the German Existentialist philosopher Karl Jaspers once said: "This limitation leads me to myself, where I can no longer withdraw behind an objective point of view...where neither I myself nor the existence of others can any longer become an object for me" (O'Brien 8). Reflecting upon this Albert Camus approbatively concedes that "Jaspers was evoking after many others those waterless deserts..." (O'Brien 8), but immediately quips in by saying: "After many others, yes indeed, but how eager they were to get out of them...The real effort is to stay there...and to examine closely the odd vegetation of those distant regions" (O'Brien 8). Is this not something that Philip Larkin has attempted to do in poem after poem?

Virginia Woolf's cognition of life as a 'luminous halo', Eliot's 'objective correlative' and Joyce's 'Epiphany' offer glimpses of reality. Larkin's poetry on the other hand defamiliarizes the world, whereby it is merely seen rather than recognized as a structured unity. Needless to say, what obstructs that recognition is a vacuity confounding Larkin's ontological existence, something similar to what Yeats perceived, when he said in a poem entitled 'What Then?',

'The work is done', grown old he thought,  
'According to my boyish plan;  
Let the fools rage, I swerved in naught,  
Something to perfection brought';  
*But louder sang that ghost, 'what then?'*(16-20)

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