

**The Guilty Influence:**

**Philip Larkin among the poets**

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## **Signed Declaration**

I hereby declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

Where other sources of information have been used, they have been acknowledged.

This thesis has not been submitted to any other institution.

Mark Patrick Davidson Roberts

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## **Abstract**

### **The Guilty Influence: Philip Larkin among the poets**

Scholarship on Philip Larkin tends to limit him as a poet, through accusations of narrowness both of subject-matter, and of received influence. The paradox between Larkin's undoubted place as an important, beloved poet, and the supposedly limited nature of his verse, has served to isolate him – unlike other poets (e.g. Ted Hughes) – Larkin's recognised influences are few. It is commonly accepted that he was influenced perhaps only by W. H. Auden, W. B. Yeats, and Thomas Hardy. He is seen as an opponent of modernism, specifically of the poetry of T. S. Eliot, and his accepted modernist heirs; Robert Lowell, Hughes, Sylvia Plath and others.

My project sets out to prove that this view of Larkin is simplistically limited. Sufficient (indeed, *much*) evidence exists of Larkin as having been a keen reader and assimilator of a wide range of influences, from Eliot through Dylan Thomas, Lowell and Plath. Much of this evidence (e.g. 2010's *Letters to Monica*) has come to light only recently, and is yet to be fully acknowledged for the effect that it has had on our reading of Larkin. Added to this is a body of older evidence (1992's *Selected Letters*) arguing for Larkin's 'English' influences to be rooted in the 'studied impersonality' of Edward Thomas and Wilfred Owen. When compared to Hughes and Thom Gunn, similar poetic and thematic concerns unite these three poets, so often thought to be at odds.

These 'guilty' influences, show Larkin to be a far more culturally receptive poet than he is often thought of as being. Why such evidence has gone unused or under-appreciated is considered here, as is an assessment of both Larkin's defenders and detractors. I argue for a more open, less limiting reading of Larkin, and note that, recently, this argument has been gaining ground in scholarship.

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## List of Abbreviations in footnotes

Full details appear in Bibliography.

### Works by Philip Larkin

*RW* *Required Writing*

*CP* *Collected Poems (1988)*

*SL* *Selected Letters*

*EPaJ* *Early Poems and Juvenilia*

*FR* *Further Requirements*

*LTM* *Letters to Monica*

### Secondary Works

*KotF* *Keepers of the Flame (Ian Hamilton, 1993)*

*TLoKA* *The Letters of Kingsley Amis*

*TEA* *The English Auden*

*DTCP* *Dylan Thomas: Collected Poems*

*TCPaP* *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot*

<i>LS</i>	<i>Life Studies (Robert Lowell)</i>
<i>PCP</i>	<i>Sylvia Plath: Collected Poems</i>
<i>THCP</i>	<i>Ted Hughes: Collected Poems</i>
<i>LoTH</i>	<i>Letters of Ted Hughes</i>
<i>TGCP</i>	<i>Thom Gunn: Collected Poems</i>

# The Guilty Influence: Philip Larkin among the poets

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 (i) 'Force' and the unanimity principle

Time that with this strange excuse  
Pardoned Kipling and his views,  
And will pardon Paul Claudel,  
Pardons him for writing well.<sup>1</sup>

W. H. Auden has been largely proved right – seventy-five years on from his elegy for W. B. Yeats – about the passing and forgiveness of time, certainly as far as Kipling is concerned (I am not the first to question Auden's mention of Claudel, and his inclusion in the poem seems more a matter of easy rhyme than genuine belief). By far the most pardoned group of writers of the twentieth century would seem to have been the modernists of the 1920s. Ezra Pound's fascism is not forgotten, but neither is his poetry unread or seen as unimportant. T. S. Eliot's anti-Semitism, the post-Auschwitz re-airing of which (with the publication of his 1963 *Collected Poems*) demonstrated a curiously disaffected attitude towards consequence, has not seriously affected his position as perhaps *the* poet of the last hundred years. Virginia Woolf's racism was recently made almost her defining character trait in William Boyd's *Any*

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<sup>1</sup> W. H. Auden, 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats', *The English Auden* ed. E. Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), pp. 242-3. Hereafter: *TEA*.

*Human Heart* (2002), but our awareness of it does not remove her title as a crucially important feminist writer.

With all of the above writers, their literary importance and position effectively pardon them their views; pardon them for writing well, as Auden puts it. Such is the change seen to be wrought by these figures, such is the achievement, that not only are their individual reputations of great importance, their roles as the leaders and proponents of the modernist sea-change in literature seem more crucial, year by year. They are exciting writers, still, of an exciting time, doing exciting things.

In a way, in fact, their more extreme or brutal views are almost seen as bound up with the force of their writing. The fact that modernism was seen to bring such a substantial change to literature – with examples as dramatic as *The Waste Land* or Pound's *Cantos* – implies that at its heart, or inherent in that change, is a form of force or violence. 'Force is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one', as Marx put it, and something similar can be said about the changes that modernism brought about in literature, particularly in poetry, in the early part of the twentieth century. Philip Larkin remarked on the effect of Yeats and Eliot as being equal in literary effect to the killing off of British poets in the First World War, and whether or not *The Waste Land's* stark horror could have been written without the loss of so many in that war, the difference in poetry between pre-war and post-war is startling.

What occurs, then, with this concentrated force, is a requirement of the artist to maintain the force of action in both life and work. From Eliot and Pound to Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath, the presence of at times extreme emotion, pain, anger and hurt in their poetry seems to allow its presence in their personal lives an odd acceptability. Ted Hughes was shocked both before and after Plath's suicide at her use of personal torments (both his, hers, and theirs) in her poetry, yet did not

suppress or censor the publication of such work – though this fact is disputed to this day by many feminist supporters of Plath, who accuse Hughes of having destroyed or edited certain of her manuscripts. Lowell's friends, lovers and wives were aghast at the use, in his work, of his and their personal letters and yet, though criticised, the understanding was that this was all the price of honest poetry.<sup>2</sup>

When a 1982 biography of Lowell<sup>3</sup> levelled some criticism at his behaviour, at this blurring of the domestic and poetic drama, the backlash at the author (Ian Hamilton) was intense, with an entire volume of essays<sup>4</sup> published dedicated to defending Lowell and attacking Hamilton. Clearly, as long as there is unanimity between the pain of the life and that of the poems, then the poetry is more important than the poet, and to a certain extent grants them cover.

However, this unanimity is seemingly difficult to define. Ted Hughes never lacked for violence in his work, but its seemingly non-human or non-realist settings often jarred with readers and critics<sup>5</sup>, perhaps because it was not until his final collection *Birthday Letters* (1998) that he faced full-on what Philip Larkin termed (for himself) 'violence, a long way back' – Plath's suicide. His silence being as deafening as it was could itself be seen as violent, but that elusive 'pardon' allowed certain of the modernists seems to be contingent on the violence being clearly laid

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<sup>2</sup> Clive James has recently observed that 'Lowell wanted her [Elizabeth Bishop]'s endorsement for his bizarre temerity in stealing his wife Elizabeth Hardwick's letters to use unchanged in his poetry. Bishop refused to approve; and surely she was right. Students in the future who are set the task of writing an essay about the limits of art could start right there, at the moment when one great poet told another to quit fooling himself.' 'Loves in a life', *Times Literary Supplement*, May 16<sup>th</sup> 2014, p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> Ian Hamilton, *Robert Lowell: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1982; London: Faber and Faber, 1983). Hereafter: Hamilton 1982.

<sup>4</sup> *Robert Lowell: Essays on the Poetry* ed. S. G. Axelrod and H. Deese (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> 'As for Hughes, it's as though the Nazis killed everybody and only the animals were left.' Clive James, 'Big Medicine'. Originally appeared in *the Review*, No. 27-28, Autumn/Winter 1972, pp. 22-38. Reprinted in *The Metropolitan Critic* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), p. 44. Hereafter: James 1972.

out in the work, so Hughes was never able to shield his personal angst with that of his poems.

Philip Larkin's posthumous reputation was dealt a severe blow in the 1990s, with the publication of his *Collected Poems* (1988), *Selected Letters* (1992) and official biography; Andrew Motion's *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* (1993). The *Collected Poems* were said to show a far less costive and consistently refined writer than had been thought. The letters had examples of racism, misogyny and misanthropy that, in Tom Paulin's phrasing, 'imperfectly reveals and conceals the sewer under the national monument Larkin became'<sup>6</sup>.

Surely this is the moment when the unanimity principle kicks in and, after a few condemnations and dismissals of the less attractive personal comments or aspects of the writer, we turn back to the work and consider the reputation and quality largely unchanged? After all, nothing in Larkin's actual poetry even approached Eliot's poetic comment that 'The rats are underneath the piles. / The Jew is underneath the lot'<sup>7</sup>. Yet, as Paulin himself observed in a personal letter, a few months after his comment in the *TLS*, such was the outrage about the letters that it became 'impossible to get an argument going – politically correct fools pushed in on the act, others flew the transcendental kite'<sup>8</sup>. Indeed, far from the heat dying down, it reached unpredictable heights, with one review commenting that

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<sup>6</sup> Tom Paulin, Letter, *Times Literary Supplement*, November 6<sup>th</sup> 1992, p. 15. Hereafter: Paulin 1992.

<sup>7</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar', *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), pp. 40-1. Hereafter: *TCPaP*.

<sup>8</sup> Tom Paulin, quoted in 'Something About The Poems' by Christopher Hitchens, originally published in *New Left Review*, no. 200, July/August 1993. *Unacknowledged Legislation* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 206. Hereafter: Hitchens 1993.

His [Larkin's] was a minor talent which exhausted itself too soon,  
[...]Of course, you do not have to be a master of political correctness to realise that, by the end of his life, he had become a foul-mouthed bigot: that does not necessarily prevent anyone from being a great poet as well, but in Larkin's case no such consolation was ever available.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, Eliot, Pound and Woolf have all had their share of reviews and criticisms like the above. What is different about Larkin's treatment is summed up by the following statement made in response to the letters' comments:

We don't teach Larkin much now in my Department of English. The little Englandism he celebrates sits uneasily with our revised curriculum.<sup>10</sup>

This symbolised, in John Osborne's words, 'the ultimate Bowdler's transition from condemnation of the private correspondence to suppression of the public art'<sup>11</sup>.

I do not intend, in this project, to mount a full-scale counter to the kind of attacks that I have listed above; such a defence is not in my view necessary, and Osborne's 2008 book has already made the case well. It is my belief, however, that one of the key reasons that the unanimity principle failed to help Larkin – either during or since the storm over his personal life – was a perceived failure of his to

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<sup>9</sup> Peter Ackroyd, 'Poet Hands on Misery to Man', originally in *The Sunday Times* 1<sup>st</sup> April 1993. Reprinted in *The Collection* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2001), p. 255. Hereafter: Ackroyd 1993.

<sup>10</sup> Lisa Jardine, 'Saxon Violence', the *Guardian*, 8<sup>th</sup> December 1992, section 2, p. 4. Hereafter, Jardine 1992.

<sup>11</sup> John Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 16. Hereafter: Osborne 2008.

match the force of his private extremes with a comparable force in his poetry. This force is what I would term the key defining aspect of modernist poetry; from Arthur Rimbaud's 'thinking / Violent thoughts of getting under sail'<sup>12</sup>, through *The Waste Land*'s 'heap of broken images', Hughes's hawk killing 'where I please because it is all mine' and Geoffrey Hill's 'Genesis' with its opening line of 'Against the burly air I strode'. This perceived lack of a violent force was commented on by Colin Falck, in his 1964 review of *The Whitsun Weddings* (see page 12 of this project).

Jardine's 'little Englandism' comment is revealing in why such force as I've described above is often said to be lacking in Larkin's poetry. Reduction is the usual mode of attack against Larkin; Ackroyd's 'minor talent', the 'little England' concept that both Jardine and Paulin have used, these all act in a reductive way to minimise Larkin.

In fairness, Larkin did this to himself from time to time, once referring to himself (in a 1964 BBC *Monitor* interview) as 'writing a sort of Welfare State sub-poetry and doing it well perhaps, but it isn't really what poetry is and it isn't really the poetry that people want'. He combined a shy modesty with critical insecurity about his own work, until he stopped writing altogether. It was certainly not in him to champion his own work, or to argue its corner in terms of force, innovation or achievement. He was not hugely concerned with being thought of as 'new' – often a useful identifier for anyone considering themselves a Modernist. The writers that he admitted to or publicly said that he liked were safely 'traditional', inoffensive 'little Englanders'; John Betjeman, Barbara Pym, Gavin Ewart, Kingsley Amis, Thomas Hardy. It was accepted that any interest he might have had in slightly less 'safe'

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<sup>12</sup> Arthur Rimbaud, 'Seven-year-old poets', *Collected Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 101.

writers – such as W. H. Auden, Dylan Thomas or W. B. Yeats – was a youthful one, long gone by the time he produced his mature work.

Throughout his career Larkin made sure that he was seen to dismiss and denounce the modernism of Eliot and Pound (his famous alliterative dismissal of modernism in painting, jazz and poetry, was of ‘Picasso, [Charlie] Parker and Pound’). He decried poetry having got ‘into the hands of a critical industry, and this I do rather lay at the feet of Eliot and Pound’. His detractors – such as Al Alvarez and Ackroyd – attacked him for ‘gentility’, ‘narrowness’ and ‘restricted concerns’ in his poetry. Those who saw themselves as his defenders – Donald Davie, Kingsley and Martin Amis – reconfirmed his rejection of Eliot and modernism, happily appointed him Hardy’s heir, and spoke of his ‘wilful philistinism’ (in the best possible way). Even critics who viewed Larkin as a great poet – Ian Hamilton, Clive James – felt that a practised and refined minimalism was at the root of that greatness; the ‘slim volumes’ he produced, the limited concerns that he addressed were akin to a kind of stripped-back purity in their eyes. Colin Falck, in a review of Larkin’s 1964 collection *The Whitsun Weddings*, clearly saw there as being a modernist force missing when he wrote ‘In rejecting Larkin’s particular brand of “Humanism” I may seem to be asking for the kind of “right wing” violence to which D. H. Lawrence was sometimes led. I think perhaps I am.’<sup>13</sup>

When, in 1988, the *Collected Poems* were published, it posed difficult questions for both detractors and defenders. It arranged Larkin’s poetry – published and unpublished – in chronological order, from 1946 to 1985, as well as showing a large amount of earlier juvenilia. Larkin’s ‘working’, essentially, was shown for the

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<sup>13</sup> Colin Falck, ‘Essential Beauty’, originally appeared in *the Review*, no. 14, December 1964. Reprinted as ‘Philip Larkin’ in *The Modern Poet* ed. I. Hamilton (London: Macdonald, 1968), p. 102. Hereafter: Falck 1964.

first time to the world, and there was evidence of not only development (something that neither his detractors nor defenders had seen as present in his work), but of a far wider range of influences and experimentations than had previously been suspected. There was also *force*.

One of the main complaints raised against Larkin's literary executors and their actions in the publishing of the *Collected Poems*, letters and the biography is that of too much information. Clive James:

But to know him [Larkin] is getting harder all the time. Too much information is piling up between the public and the essential man.

[...] Still, it is always good to know more, as long as we don't end up knowing less.<sup>14</sup>

This is a common complaint; there were too many poems in the *Collected Poems*, too many letters in the *Selected Letters*, and too much of Larkin's life in *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*. Hadn't Larkin kept his books short in his lifetime? Hadn't he avoided publicity in most cases? Hadn't he, more specifically, published certain poems and not published others? People did not need, let alone want, to see the emperor without his clothes.

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<sup>14</sup> Clive James, 'Getting Larkin's Number', originally appeared in *the Independent*, April 4<sup>th</sup> 1993. Reprinted in *Even As We Speak* (London: Picador, 2001), pp. 110-1. Hereafter: James 1993.

Ian Hamilton, both in his book on literary estates<sup>15</sup> and in his three essays responding to the *CP*, letters and life, while citing the same annoyance as James in not wanting to know or see so much, was shrewd enough to point out that Larkin's appointing of two literary friends in Anthony Thwaite and Andrew Motion as his literary executors was probably done in the full knowledge that they would not conceal or suppress much. Drafted but unpublished poems would be published, controversial correspondence would be aired; the life would be examined and gone over. Only Larkin's diaries were destroyed, under his express instructions – though Motion admits that, had he been able to, he would have saved and perhaps published these too.

It is my belief that Larkin left, undestroyed, the poetry that he did not publish in his lifetime in the hope that he might be seen as a fuller poet, a poet of greater range and influence than previously suspected, and a poet of a force comparable to that of Eliot. In a letter of 1982, Larkin remarked to Motion that the small critical study of Larkin that the latter had recently published was to his liking partly because Motion argued for Larkin being (in Larkin's words in the letter) 'more of a 'poet' than you thought'<sup>16</sup>. Larkin's leaving of the drafts and more to Motion and Thwaite would do more of the same.

Of course, the publication of unpublished yet completed poems that Larkin chose not to publish can always be attacked for precisely that – he chose not to publish them. However, it is no coincidence, to my mind, that these poems are those that speak with often alarming force, and with frequently violent overtones. Added to this, there is the fact that certain of these pieces may have been unpublished, but that

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<sup>15</sup> Ian Hamilton, *Keepers of the Flame* (London: Hutchinson, 1992). Hereafter: Hamilton *KotF*.

<sup>16</sup> Larkin to Andrew Motion, 16<sup>th</sup> September 1981, *Selected Letters* ed. A. Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), p. 656. Hereafter: *SL*.

did not mean they were unread by all but Larkin. The two key unpublished poems of Larkin's more forceful work; 'Letter to a Friend about Girls' and 'Love Again', were posted in various stages of composition to friends and fellow-writers, and discussed in the accompanying correspondence. Like a Henrician court poet, Larkin passed certain poems to a select few with all the seriousness and literary importance with which he prepared full collections for international publication.

Both 'Letter...' and 'Love Again' are central to my re-examination and re-assessment of Larkin's debts of influence, engagement with literature and Modernism in particular, and the reasons why he worked so hard to conceal this side of his writing and reading life. Yet, conceal as he did, Larkin's published essays, letters and interviews all contain the evidence necessary to pursue such a re-assessment. How much of a project Larkin considered this to be we will never know, but it is impossible to think that a man of whom Kingsley Amis said 'He didn't half keep his life in compartments'<sup>17</sup> was not aware of what he did, as he left a trail of unexpected influence and intent throughout his life, which far too few studies and scholars of Larkin have engaged with.

### **1.1 (ii) Four schools and two poles**

As I will explore in a later section of this introduction, criticism of Larkin has a chronological structure, but falls largely into four camps. The first are his detractors, who have always (since Al Alvarez's attacks in the 1960s) held that he was a restricted poet of timidity and gentility. Several of these detractors leapt on the more

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<sup>17</sup> Kingsley Amis to Robert Conquest, 17<sup>th</sup> October 1986, *The Letters of Kingsley Amis* ed. Z. Leader (London: HarperCollins, 2000), p. 1036. Hereafter: *TLoKA*.

controversial posthumous discoveries about him, but many did not, pointing out as Ackroyd did that such revelations made little difference.

The second group consists of defenders of Larkin, whose defence is dependent on Larkin fitting into a poetic and critical agenda or schema that is in many ways similar to that attacked by Larkin's detractors. Donald Davie, for example, published a study of Thomas Hardy's poetry which argued vehemently throughout for Larkin's position as Hardy's heir and little more. This group mounted what can often be seen as a wilfully perverted 'defence' of Larkin in the midst and wake of the poems/letters/life controversy; with half defending the rights of a middle-class introvert to be as bigoted as he liked (one defence went so far as to claim that to 'speak truthfully, while that's all right, everybody is racist, or has racist prejudices'<sup>18</sup>), while the other half – in Tom Paulin's words, 'flew the transcendental kite'<sup>19</sup> – i.e. insisted that the poems and not the life be looked at.

An aspect of this second group, which recurs several times in this project's consideration of Larkin's influences, outlook and work, is the presence and behaviour of Kingsley Amis, and after him that of his son, Martin Amis. Both Amis Sr., because of his friendship and correspondence with Larkin, and Amis Jr., through a sense of filial entitlement (or so it seems), have jealously exerted their influence onto Larkin's reputation, often with unhelpful and at times wilfully disingenuous effects. Repeatedly, in the Larkin-Amis Sr. correspondence, Larkin either was attacked (bullied is sometimes a better word) for admiration of writers whom Kingsley didn't like, and this undeniably had an effect on which of Larkin's poems he showed first Amis and then the world. The 'philistine' tag so often attached

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<sup>18</sup> Martin Amis, 'The Ending: Don Juan in Hull', originally appeared in the *New Yorker*, July 1993. Reprinted in *The War Against Cliché* (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 164. Hereafter: Amis 1993.

<sup>19</sup> Hitchens 1993, p. 206.

to Larkin is, often, a result of either misrepresentation of him by Amis, or a submissive technique employed by Larkin in order, it seems, to get a quiet life. Despite having said – often in reference to Kingsley’s dislike of his own work – that ‘he doesn’t like *anyone*’, Martin Amis has made repeated efforts to continue his father’s belittling and de-intellectualising project as far as Larkin is concerned, which he refers to in several essays as him ‘protecting Larkin’ from others. It is not an overestimation to say that the effect of first Kingsley and then Martin Amis has been a (however unhelpfully) shaping one on Larkin’s reputation.

The third group has a lot in common with the second. They also view themselves as Larkin-defenders, though of a more measured persuasion. Ian Hamilton, Clive James and others also – to a certain extent – ‘flew the transcendental kite’ when the controversy broke, but rather than misguidedly defending the prejudice or ignoring it, they sought to press home the sheer importance of Larkin’s work; reminding the world that he was a ‘great’ poet. However, this group did struggle, critically, with the *Collected Poems*, as the previously ‘pure’ Larkin of three slim volumes was all of a sudden shown to be less the fully-formed, instant genius that Hamilton, James and others had venerated and admired. James for one had repeatedly stated, during Larkin’s life, that the poet had not developed, but merely reiterated several key poetic expressions; making misery beautiful being chief among these. With the *Collected Poems* showing how much development and variety of influences actually had impacted Larkin, the third group sought to limit what they saw as intertextual damage being done to their icon. They did this in two ways. Hamilton sought to replace (or modify) the over-simple succession of accepted influences on Larkin; where once his poetry had been seen to be formed by W. B. Yeats and then Thomas Hardy, now Hamilton viewed Hardy as

having ‘rescued him [Larkin] from Yeats, just as Yeats – three years earlier – had captured him from Auden’<sup>20</sup>. James, on the other hand, expressed sadness at the amount now known about Larkin, stating that this was becoming a barrier to greater understanding and appreciation of the work. With both Hamilton and James there is the sense of sadness and a little disillusion that their once-pristine hero was not quite so flawless as he had seemed. Hamilton’s terminology (‘rescued’, ‘captured’) demonstrates a willingness to see Larkin as passive, and James’s bemoaning of knowing ‘too much’ expresses the third group’s chief weakness: they are uncomfortable with Larkin seeming too actively open to influence and differing approaches. They do not want him ‘among’ the poets, but set apart. This, while not being as damaging as either the straight-out detractors or the odder damage caused by the second group, has cut off Larkin from other poets, other influences and the possibility of wider discussion as to his reading, developing and writing. They have neutered, if not completely removed, the *force* attendant in his writing<sup>21</sup>.

The fourth and final group of Larkin criticism is most often the quietest, but also the most persevering. It consists of writers such as Andrew Motion (most notably in his 1982 *Philip Larkin* study, but later in his biography of Larkin as well), Blake Morrison, Stephen Regan, Seamus Heaney and John Osborne. All of these writers, over the past thirty years and more (I take Blake Morrison’s 1980 *The Movement* as the first published work of this unofficial group), have put forward arguments that demand a fuller consideration of Larkin ‘amongst’ the poets. Motion’s work on Larkin’s engagement with Symbolist influences, Morrison’s

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<sup>20</sup>Ian Hamilton, ‘Phil the Lark’, originally appeared in *The London Review of Books*, 13/10/88. Reprinted in *The Trouble with Money and other essays* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998), p.310. Hereafter: Hamilton 1988.

<sup>21</sup> Hamilton in particular, in his three essays on the *Collected Poems*, letters and life, returns again and again with horrified fascination to ‘Love Again’, openly shocked that Larkin could have produced a poem so forceful.

insistence on Larkin's technical innovations, Regan's 1997 editing of a Larkin *New Casebook* with a far wider selection of influences discussed therein (including Heaney's consideration of Larkin) and Osborne's 2008 book *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence: A Case of Wrongful Conviction* all seek to reconcile Larkin's undeniable 'great' calibre with an accompanying willingness to break him free from (1) 'the transcendental kite', (2) biographical criticism, (3) the Auden-Yeats-Hardy oversimplification and (4) Larkin's isolation from his contemporary and preceding poets.

It is to this last school of thought that this project most adheres. I strongly believe that any reading of Larkin's work must consider his relation to the Modernist changes in poetry that were effected in the first half of the twentieth century, particularly his reading and assimilation of Eliot. Further, the commonly-held view that Larkin did not engage with contemporary poetry, or poetry from outside of the United Kingdom, must be challenged and seen to be challenged. Larkin's unpublished poetry, when he felt it important enough to circulate privately and hear other people's opinion on, must be seen as equal in relevance to his poetic process as the published work on which his reputation largely rests.

As with much of the work of the fourth group of Larkin criticism, new ground must be broken. However, both Larkin himself and his executors left the tools to do so. There is nothing in my project drawn from unpublished or publically-unavailable sources. To read through Larkin's poetry, to read his interviews and essays is to see a man of many parts, interests and literary endeavours. This same man has suffered at the hands of his enemies, but also through the smothering effect of many of those who would seek to be his friends. Misreading and misinterpretations – often to a wilful degree – have hindered understanding of Larkin the Poet as much as private

revelations and public denunciations have tarred Larkin the Man. Where in my research I have found consistent and prolonged efforts by individuals either to remake Larkin in their own image or to limit the range of his poetry's achievement, I have sought to present those efforts as clearly as possible, but also to highlight their damaging effect on Larkin criticism and scholarship.

It is not the intention of this project to argue for Larkin as a closeted Modernist. Nor am I merely adding Modernist trappings to the heir of Hardy. If Larkin scholarship is to progress beyond the simplistic frameworks of the past fifty years, then literary effect – whether that of influence or of literary movements such as Modernism – cannot be seen as mutually exclusive to other effects. Andrew Motion said in 2008 that

In British poetry, the two great trees in the forest for the latter part of the twentieth century were Larkin and Ted Hughes, very interestingly unlike; complementary in some ways, adversarial in others.<sup>22</sup>

Motion is here alluding to the largely-accepted polarity of Hughes and Larkin from one another. There has been more than a tendency – at times, it would seem, a *project* – post-1960, to place Larkin at one end of the spectrum of English poetry, post-Eliot, and Hughes at the other, with many of both their contemporary, and subsequent poets in-between them; largely defined by how much of one or the other's influence on these other poets can be measured. This was a simplistic dynamic

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<sup>22</sup> Andrew Motion on Larkin, at the Philoctetes centre, 9<sup>th</sup> April 2008. Archived at [http://philoctetes.org/past\\_programs](http://philoctetes.org/past_programs). Hereafter: Motion 2008.

established by Al Alvarez in the 1960s, and maintained even in a benevolent form by statements such as Motion's, above.

It is not difficult to spot problems in this polar approach. For one thing, it isolates both poets, and indeed they have (though perhaps not equally) now long been viewed as very isolated voices, with a small group of (usually) lesser poets immediately around them (Kingsley Amis and Gavin Ewart with Larkin, Peter Redgrove predominantly with Hughes), who are seen more as imitators or reactors to the poles than contemporary poets in their own right. There are conceptions of class, where the two poets' influences are concerned; Simon Armitage has over the past decade been seen as Hughes's heir as much because of a shared locality (Yorkshire) and working-class background, and Alan Jenkins suffers, to a lesser extent, a similar background-check when considered by reviewers and attached to Larkin.

A far greater disservice is being done by the polarity, however, and not only to the two poets, but also to an understanding of English poetry over the past century as well. Alvarez, Thom Gunn, Donald Davie and even Larkin himself, at times, have proposed that all poetry post-1922 is defined by its stance on the Modernism specific to Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, and how it either genuflects to or reacts against that Modernism. As resilient as this concept has been, it is a vastly unhelpful proposition. It leaves aside the influence of the French Symbolist poets of the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as the death of Georgianism in England, and how the poetry of the First World War came to be seen as important in its own right – rather than simply 'war poetry' of the type offered in the recent (for then) past by Tennyson and Henry Newbolt.

### 1.1 (iii) The English reshapers

It is undoubtedly true that Pound and Eliot's work (what Larkin called their 'tightening-up the language' after the Georgians), particularly the publication of *The Waste Land* in 1922 (the year, incidentally, of Larkin's birth), had a profound, transformative effect on poetry both in England and around the world. Yet Larkin himself, when viewing twentieth-century English poetry, viewed that effect as coterminous with that of the poetry of the First World War. Put plainly, there was an important Modernist project that Pound, Eliot and *The Waste Land* brought about, but there was also a contemporaneous reshaping of English poetry being done by poets not usually considered Modernist; specifically, for this project, Edward Thomas and Wilfred Owen.

Thomas and Owen, in their poetry, were seeking to render the cosy English topics of the pastoral and the martial (after all the odes and barrack-ballads/valedictory epics of the previous century) in different or new ways to those that had been done before. Their common achievement was to bring a new coldness – what Larkin referred to in them as 'impersonality' – to their work. This detached, chillier tone had comparable characteristics to the terser moments in Eliot and Pound, and both would prove important influences on W. H. Auden, referred to by one critic (in terms of his influence on Larkin) as 'the icy master'. The influence of the two effects – Thomas and Owen's studied impersonality, and that of Auden's cold bathos – were profoundly important shaping influences on Larkin, which a Choose-Your-Side reading of 1922-onwards poetry claims impossible.

However, it would be another simplistic reading were a consideration of Larkin's influences to ignore his enthusiasm for Dylan Thomas. At the same time as

he was striving to capture the cool detachment of the effects listed above, Larkin was also deeply interested in the more metaphysical, rhetorical leanings of Thomas, particularly his engagements with the countryside and religion. It is a long-established – but actually, as I will show, tenuous – literary ‘fact’ that Larkin is representative of a group of writers (‘the Movement’) who were almost entirely defined by their rejection of Dylan Thomas, but this claim ignores Larkin’s correspondence’s regular praise and mention of Thomas, and several crucial appearances of Thomas’s influence in his work.

In chapter 1’s consideration of the British influences on Larkin in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I will argue that the focus has for too long been on Yeats, occasionally Auden, and Thomas Hardy. What a reading of Larkin should more properly consider is the range – from Edward Thomas and Owen, through Auden, to Dylan Thomas – of Larkin’s reading, appreciation and assimilation of poets, regardless of their credentials or place in the ‘Modernist versus English Tradition’ cock-fight of previous studies.

### **1.1 (iv) From America**

Eliot and Larkin met only once, in 1959, and to the casual eye Larkin’s main engagement with the older poet was either to ruefully thank him (and Pound) for ‘tightening up the language’ after the Georgians, or to ‘lay at his door’ the fact (as he saw it) of poetry having ‘got itself into the hands of a critical industry’. Eliot (along with Pound) has become emblematic, in many studies of Larkin, of Larkin’s rejection of Modernism as embodied by *The Waste Land*. This is not taking into account all of the facts.

As I will focus on in Chapter 2 of this project, Eliot's poetic influence on Larkin was not restricted to its effect via the conduit of Auden. John Berryman said that with the opening lines of 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' 'modern poetry begins'<sup>23</sup>, and for Larkin, Eliot's dithering antihero, racked with uncertainty and morose reflection would be the talisman but also the starting-point for so many of Larkin's protagonists and personae. Mr Bleaney, the contemporary of Dockery, the 'Self' of 'Self's the Man' (either the poet or reader), and Larkin himself (or his voice in the poems) built on, updated and anglicised Prufrock into the classic, semi-invertebrate Larkinian antihero. As well as this vital character, the Eliot of *Four Quartets* gave to Larkin a more sober consideration of a dissipating England in decline, which would come to inform his later, most serious work.

Larkin famously termed Eliot (and his influence on poetry) 'American' (just as he termed Yeats and his influence 'Celtic'), and indeed '...Prufrock' was written while Eliot was still living and working in America, as an American citizen. It can be easy to assume that Larkin's comfort with Eliot is partly a product of how much Eliot anglicised himself during his time in England – marrying two English women, acquiring an English accent, becoming a UK citizen and staunch Anglo-Catholic Anglican – and the 'American' label was a negative definition that faded. Yet Larkin's interest in American poetry undoubtedly influenced his writing. He admitted in interviews to greatly enjoying the Beat poets (particularly Allen Ginsberg), and read contemporary American poetry enough to have a consistent set of strong opinions about it; even when, as they often were, those opinions were negative.

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<sup>23</sup> John Berryman, 'Prufrock's Dilemma', originally appeared in *The Freedom of the Poet* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1976). Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism* ed. D. Bryfonski and L. Harris, Vol. 13 (Detroit: Gale, 1982), pp. 197-8.

One poet who effected an influence on Larkin was his opposite-number, so to speak, Robert Lowell. Larkin was in agreement with many of his critics in praising Lowell's *Life Studies* when it appeared in 1959<sup>24</sup>, though he (along with many others, including those same critics) would admit disappointment and dissatisfaction with much of Lowell's subsequent work. The influence of *Life Studies* on Larkin, particularly its closing poems' use of moonlight and nocturnal reflection and revelation, however, would be a strong one, with many of Larkin's poems of the 1960s and '70s finding their resolution and culmination in a similar setting. If Eliot gave Larkin a protagonist to mould, then Lowell gave him a sense of lunar lighting and stage in order to present that protagonist (it is while eating his 'awful pie' and noticing the moon reflected on the tracks – not in the blinding sun of the earlier verses – that Dockery's contemporary comes to his bleak personal conclusions).

Sylvia Plath, too, is rarely mentioned in considerations of Larkin; largely because of being younger than him, and also because of her apparently insuperable connection to Ted Hughes. Yet Plath is a surprising example of Larkin's very rare fascination with a particular poet (Dylan Thomas, to whom Larkin often compared Plath, is another). Throughout his letters – often in those to his companion Monica Jones – Larkin demonstrates an awareness of and interest in Plath, both while alive and after her death. This interest culminates in 1981 when he reviewed Plath's *Collected Poems* and chose that book as his book of the year for the *Observer* newspaper. Larkin's review is mournful, but nonetheless fascinated and positive (though never at the expense of his horror at her depression and death), and when viewed in the context of his last poems, seems to strike a chord with a frustrated impulse in himself to face his own demons. 'Aubade' aside, he kept the more extreme

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<sup>24</sup> In a review for the *Manchester Guardian*, 15<sup>th</sup> May 1959. See footnote 285, page 216 of this project.

of these personal confrontations unpublished, but such is the force of those unpublished pieces – ‘Love Again’, ‘The Winter Palace’ – that Plath’s role as enabler for Larkin to write of these things seems to have been crucial, though secret. Larkin’s defensive letters concerning his admiration of Plath (in the face of some of the more concerted attacks that Kingsley Amis levels at him in their correspondence) often read as the frantic concealments of a man who has revealed too much.

It is with his three American influences – Eliot, Lowell and Plath – that Larkin the poet seems most ill-at-ease, but they are important factors in his assimilation of Modernism’s force, and in the changing of certain ‘English’ tropes of his (shyness and awkwardness, insomnia and the ‘morning song’, anxiety and gloom) into far darker and more disturbing poetry than is often appreciated. Not for nothing did Clive James’s review of Larkin’s last published collection (in his lifetime) refer to him as ‘the poet of the void’<sup>25</sup>.

### **1.1 (v) Among the poets**

When I said earlier that to divide poets post-*The Waste Land*, into pro- and anti-Modernists, was to do a disservice not just to Larkin and others but to an understanding of English poetry of the last century, I was arguing for a more assimilatory and evolutionary understanding of poetry. To that end, the third chapter of this project will take into account the poetry of Larkin, and how its assimilation of the Modernist and other influences explored in the first two chapters, led to an

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<sup>25</sup> Clive James, ‘The Wolves of Memory’, originally appeared in *Encounter*, June 1974. Reprinted in *At the Pillars of Hercules* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 61. Hereafter: James 1974.

evolution in his poetry dependent on varied influences, unrestricted by literary movements of national boundaries.

However, I will conduct this consideration of Larkin's poetry alongside the poetry of two of his contemporaries: Ted Hughes and Thom Gunn, in order to challenge the polarising approaches of other studies, that often place these figures far apart as poets. In an essay, these three poets were once termed 'a triple-headed creature called the Larkin-Hughes-Gunn'<sup>26</sup>, which was producing 'all the poetry written in England [around 1960]'<sup>27</sup>, but were also viewed as three very different, often adversarial poets. Critics commandeered them in order to fight a certain corner (of the poetry wars created by themselves and other critics); most notably Alvarez's placing of Hughes and Larkin in opposition in *The New Poetry* (1962), and Donald Davie's use of Larkin-as-Hardy-heir in *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (1973).

It is more the case, however, that Larkin, Hughes and Gunn were pursuing similar aims, though with differing modes of poetic execution, both in terms of narrative and tone. Larkin and Hughes shared a strong admiration for D. H. Lawrence, Eliot and Lowell – a common strand of influence that seems unhelpful for particularly vociferous critics of both to acknowledge – but it is in something more focussed, that the three later poets find themselves most similar. Thom Gunn, while rejecting 'the Movement' that he and Larkin had been conscripted into, noted that they (and others) were

deliberately eschewing Modernism and turning back, though not very thoroughgoingly to traditional resources in structure and method. But this

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<sup>26</sup> Edward Lucie-Smith, *British Poetry since 1945* (ed.), (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p. 136. Hereafter: Lucie-Smith 1970.

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

was what most of the other poets of our age (even many Americans) were doing in the early fifties<sup>28</sup>

The exploration of Larkin, Hughes and Gunn in chapter 3 will take Gunn's point here – that there was more to unite Larkin, Hughes and his poetry between 1950-1980 – than there were 'negative feedbacks' (in Al Alvarez's phrase) to divide them. Common concerns recur in the contemporary writing of all three: war, an unease with autobiography, divergent psychogeographies, bodily metamorphosis and decay, and the impersonal or 'disinterested' 'I' that leads on – in each poet – from the studied impersonality of earlier poets discussed in this project.

The third chapter of the project aims to explore the methods, differences and similarities found between Larkin, Hughes and Gunn as they each strove not to forward one school or reactionary poetic against or over another, but instead to – as Gunn points out – learn from but also move forward from Modernism, in order to write differently. It will show that the three poets' effect – particularly Larkin's – on English poetry was not to polarise and divide, but to assimilate and evolve; rejecting nothing, but honing the best aspects of poetry in their own work.

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<sup>28</sup> Thom Gunn, 'My Life Up To Now', originally appeared in *Thom Gunn: A Bibliography, 1940-1978* ed. J. Hagstrom and G. Bixby (London: Bertram Rota, 1979). Reprinted in: Thom Gunn, *The Occasions of Poetry* ed. C. Wilmer (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), p. 184. Hereafter: Gunn 1979.

### 1.1 (vi) 'The growth of a major poet'

The purpose of this project is to remove certain misconceptions about Philip Larkin and his poetry, but also to argue for a more homogeneous view of the English poetry of the twentieth century and since than that which is often found. For many readers, the trauma of the First World War, the Modernism of the 1920s, or the Second World War (with its 'No Poetry After Auschwitz' epitaph) might seem to have shattered poetry as a practice – in terms of what is written and read. It can often seem that the one moment of cohesion was *The Waste Land*, and after that there are as many 'schools' and 'reactions' as there are poets (or poems).

The extent to which Larkin has been made (and sometimes was guilty of making himself) an isolated figure – whether viewed as 'the characteristic voice of a whole generation'<sup>29</sup> or 'a pariah, an untouchable'<sup>30</sup> – kept, it seems, behind glass and from other poets has been one manifestation of this fragmented view. Hughes suffered from it in a similar way, Heaney also (though he at least was grouped with other Irish poets); and Geoffrey Hill seems to be the present holder of this isolated post. This isolation damages our understanding of poets, savagely divides loyalties, influences and readership, and renders arguments and viewpoints not in line with the fragmentary view, 'controversial', 'radical' (neither of them in themselves bad characteristics), but also, as my title points out, 'guilty'.

There are many examples in his correspondence and life of Larkin feeling shy or bizarrely guilty about admitting affection for or being indebted to certain writers, and he often preferred to limit the perception of his own poetic skills and range of

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<sup>29</sup> Lucie-Smith 1970.

<sup>30</sup> Amis 1993.

styles, subject matter and form, rather than engage in a more open debate. However, it is my belief that in his poetry – published and unpublished – his trademark perfectionism and the dedication of his craftsmanship were never to allow such anxieties to limit his writing. He may have seen certain writers as being ‘Guilty pleasures’, even guilty *influences*, but their shaping and evolutionary effects on him were no cause for guilt, even in their darkest directions, but instead for joy and excitement; if not to Larkin, then certainly to his readers.

In the introduction to his first, controversial, *Collected Poems* of Larkin, Anthony Thwaite wrote of how the startling range of the collected poems

[shows] the growth of a major poet, testing, filtering, rejecting, modulating, achieving, before the dryness of his last years which he so regretted.

It is my hope that this project will, as several others have before, remind us of the limitations of the fragmentary view of poetry, and the richness of the alternative. Rather than a dramatically distant and isolated poet, Larkin – like so many poets of his time and now – tested, filtered, rejected, modulated and achieved, not through one arid school of particular influences, prejudices and approaches, but through a wide-ranging reader’s eye, an unrestricted poet’s pen, and an eye on the advancement of poetry through the assimilation of the best of what’s gone before.

## Literature Review

### 1.2 (i) The fact of the watershed

Criticism concerning Philip Larkin's work is almost equally distributed on either side of a watershed: the period between 1988 and 1993 when Larkin's first *Collected Poems*, *Selected Letters* and official biography were published.

Before this time, Larkin's published output consisted of three 'mature' collections – *The Less Deceived* (1955), *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964) and *High Windows* (1974) – an earlier collection, *The North Ship* (1945), and a handful of uncollected poems that had been published in magazines or privately printed and circulated. There were also two novels – *Jill* (1946) and *A Girl in Winter* (1947), and a small selection of criticism, *Required Writing* (1983).

A by-product of this small body of work was the holding of a certain degree of control, by Larkin, over the critical consensus in which he was held. His initial reluctance to republish *The North Ship* was partly concerned with a too-public exposing of his own development as a writer:

Looking back, I find in the poems not one abandoned self but several – the ex-schoolboy, for whom Auden was the only alternative to 'old-fashioned' poetry; the undergraduate, whose work a friend affably characterised as 'Dylan Thomas, but you've a sentimentality that's all your own'; and the immediately post-Oxford self, isolated in Shropshire with a complete Yeats stolen from the

local girls' school. This search for a style was merely one aspect of a general immaturity.<sup>31</sup>

It is in this Introduction that Larkin formalised the popular view regarding his work: he had imitated Auden, then Yeats, before reading Hardy in 1946 and starting to write the poems that would make up *The Less Deceived* and be viewed as 'Larkinesque'.

So, at the time of his death in 1985 Larkin's published oeuvre consisted of the 117 poems that made up the four collections, the published but unread *XX Poems* (1951) and the rejected earlier manuscript *In The Grip Of Light* (1947). These last two collections add 45 poems to the total number of published poems, and there are fifteen further poems, uncollected, published in papers and magazines from Larkin's wartime Oxford days up until a few years before his death. This totting up is important as it places Larkin's collected poems – prior to the actual publication of the volume – at well over 150 poems, so some of the claims made upon the *Collected Poems*' publication can seem highly selective:

...[Larkin] must have envisaged a *Collected Poems* rather like the one we've now been given: a volume that adds something like eighty poems to his lifetime's known tally. This is a hefty addition, since the poems we already know him by and most admire total a mere eighty-five. I'm thinking here of the poems collected in *The Less Deceived*, *The Whitsun Weddings* and *High Windows*. ... What it all

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<sup>31</sup> Larkin, Introduction to *The North Ship*, originally in *The North Ship* 1965 ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1965) Hereafter: Larkin 1965. Reprinted in *Required Writing* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), pp. 27-30. Hereafter: *RW*.

boils down to is that Larkin the thrifty now has a *Collected Poems* of some bulk.<sup>32</sup>

‘Most admire’ is at least an honest way of saying that people *were* aware of the large size of Larkin’s output – the inevitability of this ‘bulk’ appearing – but that the high standard of the 85 poems listed here almost requires a quiet ignoring of all of the rest. Here, Hamilton is arguing for a *Selected Larkin* – which would not appear until 2011. That people complained about a *Collected Poems* being, well, a *collection*, demonstrates the irrational tone of much Larkin criticism.

The reason that this is important is because the watershed of the *Collected Poems*, the *Letters* and the *Life* marks a very clear split in Larkin criticism. This is between an admittedly self-aware idealisation of Larkin as ‘Larkin the thrifty’ with an indisputably great body of work which emerged, fully-formed, in *The Less Deceived*; and the other view, of the ‘real’ Larkin, who had to work to get to *The Less Deceived*, and whose life was never the stoical, wry calm that others saw and so loved in his poems. It is a conflict between the ‘fully-formed’ Larkin and another, of ‘workmanship’.

This dialogue or conflict between two views of Larkin has been at work since the 1950s, when he first started publishing poetry that would come to be termed ‘Larkinian’. Immediately after Larkin’s death, the ‘fully-formed’ school of thought held sway, with memorial volumes, obituaries and tributes heavily coloured by the romantic idea of the ‘fully-formed’ poet dramatically appearing, writing only the very best poems and standing as a reminder of what Larkin termed ‘old-fashioned’ poetry.

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<sup>32</sup> Hamilton 1988, pp. 307-313.

In the wake of the publications that I see as the watershed, the view swung very much the other way, with Larkin's life inseparable from his work, and the workmanship of his poems demystifying the apparent gift that had been previously so admired.

It is probable that Larkin enjoyed the contrasting responses that his work provoked. On the one hand, he did seem to wish to enshrine the more idealised version of himself – who wouldn't? – and was constantly over-modest or self-parodying about his output, once jokingly replying to a question, of how he came up with the image of a toad to represent work, with 'Sheer genius'<sup>33</sup>.

In his introduction to the republished *The North Ship*, he works hard to point out that the poems in the books are not really 'his', and in his letters to Charles Monteith (his editor at Faber) which discuss the republishing, Larkin is at first wary about the event – concerned about showing his working, it seems. However, the fact remains that the book *was* republished, so Larkin's temptation towards the presentation of himself as a 'fully-formed' genius was clearly tempered by a more pragmatic awareness of the dangers of self-mythologising.

The criticism of Larkin, then, is divided by the watershed of 1988-93, but on both sides of that separation is a further division; between Larkin the ideal, thrifty heir to Hardy, and Larkin the hardworking student of poetry, as Anthony Thwaite says, 'testing, filtering, rejecting, modulating, achieving'<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup> From 'An Interview with *Paris Review*', originally appeared in *Paris Review* XXIV, Summer 1982. Reprinted in *RW*, pp. 57-76. Hereafter: *PR* 1982.

<sup>34</sup> Anthony Thwaite, in the introduction to *Philip Larkin: Collected Poems* ed. A. Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. xxiii. Hereafter: *CP*.

## 1.2 (ii) Early battle lines

Larkin's *The Less Deceived* (his third collection of poetry and fifth book overall) was published, by the small Marvell Press, in October 1955. In the summer of that year, Larkin met Robert Conquest, a young historian and poet, who wished to include Larkin in a new anthology – titled *New Lines* – that he was editing for publication the following year.

The poems of Larkin's that Conquest chose for the anthology pleased the poet, as they 'illustrated his range as well as his main strengths.'<sup>35</sup> Larkin's inclusion in *New Lines* was not simply as part of a collection of poets and poems, however, as Conquest had selected his nine poets carefully, and written a manifesto-style introduction.

This introduction was part of an idea dreamed up by the literary editor of *The Spectator* in October 1954; the establishment of a group of writers referred to (from then on) as 'the Movement'. The Movement,

as well as being anti-phoney, is anti-wet, sceptical, robust, ironic, prepared to be as comfortable as possible in a wicked, commercial, threatened world which doesn't look, anyway, as if it's going to be changed much by a couple of handfuls of young English writers.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 265. Hereafter: Motion 1993.

<sup>36</sup> J. D. Scott, 'In the Movement', originally appeared in *The Spectator*, 1/10/54, pp. 39-40.

What this largely does is distance the chosen writers from the mythopoeics of Dylan Thomas – one of the defining poets of the previous decade – but also from the politically minded and motivated poetry of the 1930s. ‘Sceptical’, ‘robust’ and ‘ironic’ have remained popular words for defining Larkin.

Larkin, along with most other members of the new Movement (which included all of the poets of *New Lines*, as well as Iris Murdoch) was irked by being corralled into a literary holding-pen, but Conquest either didn’t know about this at the time of writing his introduction or didn’t care. His introduction is spread over eight pages, and is far more theoretical than Scott’s earlier article. Divided into seven sections, its purpose and effect are similar to those of the poems that follow; short phrasing, no overly academic language, and definite conclusions, easily understood. He complains about the seemingly uncontrolled poetry of the previous decade (Thomas is the unnamed, but hugely insinuated, main offender), before moving on to define the poetry in his anthology as submitting to

...no great systems of theoretical constructs nor agglomerations of unconscious demands.

It is free from both mystical and logical compulsions and – like modern philosophy – is empirical in its attitude to all that comes. The reverence for the real person or event is, indeed, a part of the general intellectual ambience (in so far as that is not blind or retrogressive) of our time.

On the more technical side, though of course related to all this, we see refusal to abandon a rational structure and comprehensible language, even when the verse is most highly charged with sensuous or emotional intent.<sup>37</sup>

A large part of this (the lack of ‘theoretical frameworks’ and ‘mystical...compulsions particularly) is clearly a reference to and dismissal of Robert Graves’s *The White Goddess* (‘A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth’, first published in 1948). A frequent definition of the Movement is that it was, above all, anti-‘myth-kitty’. Conquest here stops just short of ‘stiff upper lip’, it seems, but there is also a suggestion in the ‘rational structure’ and ‘comprehensible language’ that the poetry in *New Lines* is arrived at in an almost automatic way. This, coupled with his rejections of the previous decades and their work, implies a certain automatic poetic arrival to the poets in *New Lines*, and is an early example of the first tendency of criticism towards Larkin: that of the uncluttered, effortlessly talented, *proper* poet.

Larkin’s own view of the Movement alternated between amusement and discomfort. He liked several of the 1930s poets (Auden, MacNeice, Day Lewis), never abandoned his early enthusiasm for Dylan Thomas, and in his own generation only felt any real literary kinship with Kingsley Amis. However, any distancing that Larkin might have hoped for from the *New Lines* poets was negated by another anthology that appeared less than a decade later.

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<sup>37</sup> Robert Conquest, *New Lines* ed. Conquest (London: Macmillan, 1956), p. xv. Hereafter: Conquest 1956.

Al Alvarez's *The New Poetry* is in many ways 'the other side' to Conquest's clearing away of the partisan and mythic untidiness (as he saw it) of the 1930s and '40s. Alvarez seizes on Larkin as a main offender against 'his' (Alvarez's) kind of poetry, in much the same way as Thomas had been for Conquest. Alvarez sees the poets of *New Lines* (Thom Gunn quietly excused) as a third wave of 'negative feedbacks' in poetry, against the advances of Eliot and Pound, and accuses them of stifling English poetry with 'gentility'. Drawing attention to many of the *New Lines* poets' careers (lecturers, librarians, Civil Servants), Alvarez surmises (or as close as sneering will come) that it was only inevitable that they should write

...academic, administrative verse, polite, knowledgeable, efficient, polished and, in its quiet way, even intelligent.<sup>38</sup>

(One wonders how a banker such as Eliot, and the sometime lecturers Lowell and Plath passed Alvarez's muster). Alvarez goes on, dismissing the *New Lines* poets as

...the third negative feedback: an attempt to show that the poet is not a strange creature inspired; on the contrary, he is just like the man next door – in fact, he probably *is* the man next door.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Al Alvarez, *The New Poetry* ed. Alvarez (London: Penguin, 1962), p. 23. Hereafter: Alvarez 1962.

<sup>39</sup> Alvarez 1962, p. 25.

While it is probably true that Larkin would have rejected the notion of the poet as ‘a strange creature inspired’, his writing is certainly concerned with the man next door. The accusation of that concern as being an overwhelmingly negative point, however, allowed the criticism to be levelled at Larkin over the years that his work was paltry, everyday and irrelevant.

Alvarez’s denunciations of Larkin were largely made in favour of Ted Hughes, and Alvarez directly compares two poems, both concerning horses, written by the two poets (‘Show Saturday’ and ‘The Horses’), to make the case for Hughes’s apparent debt to American poetry – Lowell in particular – and Larkin’s apparent unawareness of or lack of interest in the same. In fact, while Larkin would certainly have agreed with the stark difference between Hughes’s and his poetry, he himself had time for Lowell’s *Life Studies* (1959), but would obviously not have wanted to defend himself if the result was going to be his and Hughes’s work being viewed as similar.

*The New Poetry* then, somewhat paradoxically, agrees with the placing of Larkin in *New Lines*’s ‘robust’ common-sense school of poetry, where adherence to form and structure are identified, rather than writers’ reactions to certain influences. The difference, of course, being that what Alvarez sees as a weakness, Conquest views as a strength. What Alvarez terms ‘negative feedback’, Conquest refers to as a ‘negative determination to avoid bad principles’<sup>40</sup>.

Both Alvarez and Conquest are early manifestations of the first school of Larkin criticism – the view of him as being ‘fully-formed’, invulnerable to influence. Conquest termed it robust, while Alvarez thought it stiff and unbending. These two perspectives recur in Larkin criticism, and while Alvarez’s makes sense, as it is

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<sup>40</sup> Conquest 1956, p. xv.

primarily an attack on Larkin, Conquest's conservative airs would prove to prompt some truly odd defences of Larkin, simply for the sake of argument.

What's clear is that the later, alternative view of Larkin, that which acknowledges influence, development and changes in his work, would not emerge for another decade at least, and would be almost as intransigent as Alvarez's attacks, when it did.

### **1.2 (iii) The first studies**

The first full-length monograph on Larkin's work was *Philip Larkin* by David Timms – published, infuriatingly, after *High Windows* had been submitted to the publisher, but before it had been printed. Infuriating because Timms bases his assessment of Larkin as 'the best poet England now has'<sup>41</sup> entirely on *The Less Deceived* and *The Whitsun Weddings*, discounting *The North Ship* as 'perhaps more interesting as the early work of someone who became a very good poet indeed'<sup>42</sup>. Timms' work and view, therefore, is based on the 61 poems in the first two books of 'mature' Larkin and a few (fewer than 10, in the case of *High Windows*) already-published poems from the forthcoming collection.

This is an early example of Larkin's sudden, 'fully-formed', thrifty mature style not being ascribed to literary generational developments (as Conquest claimed for the Movement), nor reactive confrontation with literary influences (as Alvarez claimed in his introduction to *The New Poetry*), but instead to the poems themselves. Even if

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<sup>41</sup> David Timms, *Philip Larkin* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1973), p. 1. Hereafter: Timms 1973.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

Timms points out that – while many of the *New Lines* poets had lapsed (by 1973) into reactionary Tory complaining and anger – Larkin

...does not share these faults, partly because he is a man more able to sympathise with others, and partly because he writes his poetry not from a preconceived set of principles, but as a direct and personal response to particular experiences.<sup>43</sup>

This goes some way beyond simply discounting the possibility of Larkin being anything other than an instant talent, but it does leave a hint of mystery in that hold-all caveat ‘personal response’. In other words, Timms does not discuss influence or technical craft in Larkin, preferring to see the poems only as they are. Throughout his book, Timms compares Larkin to poets such as Hardy, Frost or Eliot, but never in terms of influence or effect.

There is a tone in the criticism of Larkin found between *The Whitsun Weddings* in 1964 and *High Windows* in 1974 of an almost reverential nature, certainly an unquestioning one. Ian Hamilton’s review of *The Whitsun Weddings* expresses an admiration at the refining he sees going on in ‘mature’ Larkin:

On the whole, though, one can only welcome and admire this volume. It has all the virtues of *The Less Deceived* and very few of

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<sup>43</sup> Timms 1973, p. 19.

its faults. Larkin has extended his range of interests with admirable ease and seems no longer concerned to pose. There is no saying what he might go on to achieve.<sup>44</sup>

While Hamilton is one of the few reviewers (Clive James is another) of Larkin's lifetime who constantly reminds their readers that Larkin's first collection was not the unquestionably good *The Less Deceived*, but the more troublesome (as it therefore requires consideration and comparison to the later works) and weaker *The North Ship*, he identifies and documents Larkin's development but never investigates it (until the *Collected Poems* in 1988). The ascribed 'ease', which Hamilton sees in Larkin's development, is a way of simply attributing change to the poet's genius.

While Clive James, in his review of *High Windows*, also reminds the reader that Larkin's body of work contains four collections, he toes Hamilton's line about development. If anything, he goes further backwards:

Larkin collections come out at the rate of one per decade: *The North Ship*, 1945; *The Less Deceived*, 1955; *The Whitsun Weddings*, 1964; *High Windows*, 1974. Not exactly a torrent of creativity: just the best. ...the parsimony is part of the fastidiousness. Neither writes an unconsidered line.

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<sup>44</sup> Ian Hamilton, review of *The Whitsun Weddings*. Originally appeared in *The London Magazine*, May 1964, pp. 70-74. Hereafter: Hamilton 1964. Reprinted as 'Philip Larkin' in *A Poetry Chronicle* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), pp. 134-138.

Larkin has never liked the idea of an artist Developing. Nor has he himself done so. But he has managed to go on clarifying what he was sent to say.<sup>45</sup>

Like Timms and Hamilton, James is willing to accept the unquestionable quality of Larkin's work, never probing or suggesting what might go into producing such a consistent body of poetry. These critics did not have Larkin's workbooks (though certain of his manuscripts were already on display in the Brynmor Jones Library in Hull, where he worked), but Alvarez's identification of literary shifts as dictated by emergent trends and new influences – while at times hysterical – is perceptive enough to make these later writers look a little too blindly accepting.

Which not every critic was, at the time. A colleague of Hamilton and James's at the *Review*, Colin Falck was able to at least enunciate the changes between Larkin's books:

Real life seems never to have borne very much relation to the idea that Larkin wanted to have of it, and the progress of his poetry since *The North Ship* is a kind of steady exorcising of romantic illusions, an ever-deepening acceptance of the ordinariness of things as they are. Or if not as they are, at least as they might seem to be, beyond all their dashed hopes and “unreal wishes”, to ordinary people.

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<sup>45</sup> James 1974, pp. 51-61.

Larkin's poems have nearly always turned on ideas, above all ideas of love and death, and one of the differences between *The Whitsun Weddings* and the earlier books is that the ideas themselves are now presented without very much poetic adornment.<sup>46</sup>

Falck identifies what has changed between one collection and the next and this acceptance that 'progress' exists at all, while not quite a full-throated expression of the alternative view of Larkin's writing to the 'fully-formed' view, is different from the majority critical consensus at the time.

Another critical consensus, that sought to limit the idea of Larkin's having had developing or shaping influences, by ascribing his genius to one key writer's effect, was emerging at the time. Donald Davie – another *New Lines* poet – summarises this other consensus:

I shall take it for granted that Philip Larkin is a very Hardy-esque poet; that Hardy has been indeed the determining influence in Larkin's career, once he had overcome a youthful infatuation with Yeats. Larkin has testified to that effect repeatedly, and any open-minded reader of the poems of the two men must recognize many resemblances, though Larkin, it is true, has shown himself a poet of altogether narrower range – it is only a part of Hardy that is

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<sup>46</sup> Falck 1964.

perpetuated by Larkin into the 1960s, but it is a central and important part.<sup>47</sup>

While Davie is governed by an agenda – his book seeks to show the overriding importance of Hardy in everything from Larkin to Tolkien – he is right to point out that Larkin ‘testified’ repeatedly to the influence of Hardy on his work. The ‘youthful infatuation with Yeats’, too, had been admitted by Larkin in interviews, and was used by many as an easy dismissal of his poetry prior to *The Less Deceived*. James again:

To become himself, Amis had first of all to absorb the bewitching influence of Auden, whose tones pervade his early poems just as thoroughly as the tones of Yeats pervade the early poems of Philip Larkin.<sup>48</sup>

This example is interesting, as it wasn’t until the *Collected Poems* that people were willing to talk about the extent to which Auden also influenced Larkin. The use of Yeats, however, to explain away Larkin’s early poetry is a common one.

Alan Brownjohn, in his brief monograph on Larkin, actually challenged the statement of Larkin’s that I open this piece with:

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<sup>47</sup> Donald Davie, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (London: Routledge, 1973), p. 63. Hereafter: Davie 1973.

<sup>48</sup> Clive James, ‘The Examined Life of Kingsley Amis’, review of Amis’s *Collected Poems 1944-79*. Originally appeared in the *New Statesman*, 1979. Hereafter: James 1979. Reprinted in *From The Land of Shadows* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982), pp. 141-147.

Introducing the new edition [of *The North Ship*] of 1966 (with slyly amusing reference to the circumstances of its original publication), Larkin sees in the poems evidence of ‘not one abandoned self but several’ – the ex-schoolboy for whom Auden was the modern master, the undergraduate looking to Dylan Thomas, and ‘the immediately post-Oxford self, isolated in Shropshire with a complete Yeats stolen from the local girls’ school’. But though there are certainly signs of all these poets (the first and third in style and content, the second in the realm of nature, which the poems mostly inhabit), there is never any slavish imitation, conscious or unconscious. And already the voice has some characteristic Larkin tones...<sup>49</sup>

This is an extension of the ‘fully-formed’ view back even to *The North Ship*. Brownjohn’s piece, like Davie’s, admittedly has an agenda, which is to present Larkin as a Great Writer to a by-no-means-expert audience, so the establishment of his individuality is understandable, yet once more the notion of Larkin’s having engaged with a poet as recent as Thomas is rejected. Brownjohn’s work is almost one of complete severance, hacking away any traces of influence or poetic inheritance from Larkin’s work, until – again – we are left with a born genius and ‘fully-formed’ poetry.

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<sup>49</sup> Alan Brownjohn, *Philip Larkin* (London: Longman, 1975), p. 6.

A different opinion was offered in 1980 by Blake Morrison. In his book *The Movement*, Morrison approached Larkin from a new direction – that of having been the lead poet in a truly revolutionary (rather than reactionary) shift in English writing. Morrison states that he has

tried to rescue the term ‘Movement’ and to show that it often stands not for what is peripheral and debilitating in these writers but for what is central and enriching.<sup>50</sup>

He breaks with the traditional assumption of the Movement as being the impersonal or detached opposites of the Alvarez/Lowell ‘extreme experience’ school, saying of Larkin that

it is a matter of his strategy: he nearly always earns the right to spokespersonship by beginning with a personal experience, and only gradually and tentatively universalising it.<sup>51</sup>

While Morrison does break here with the ‘impersonal’ cliché attached to the Movement, he also avoids simply marching Larkin across the border into the ‘Confessional’ camp. What emerges instead is the recognition of Larkin’s ability to communicate the universal qualities of personal experience. This is an important

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<sup>50</sup> Blake Morrison, *The Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 7. Hereafter: Morrison 1980.

<sup>51</sup> Morrison 1980, p. 125.

critical development, as it marks Larkin out as a distinctive poet who is unavoidably separate from his Movement colleagues:

What has been observed so far in this chapter suggests that the Movement writers saw themselves as writing for a small, academic audience. But with Larkin one is confronted with the presence of an opposite tendency in the group: the desire to write pleasurable and ‘accessible’ poetry that might reach a wider audience.<sup>52</sup>

It’s a subtle point, but the idea of Larkin writing ‘for’ an audience does imply that his writing is purposeful and also that, therefore, workmanship must go into that writing. Morrison’s placing of Larkin in the context of his time and the wider literary timeline, also suggests a poet developing, and *at work*.

Andrew Motion’s *Philip Larkin* (1982) agreed with Morrison’s schema of Larkin being a far more interesting and relevant contemporary poet than his withdrawn persona was given credit for by the early 1980s.

Motion does go a little further than previous critics, and largely states – even if he doesn’t properly follow it through – the alternative case for Larkin as a working-at and developing poet. Motion does this through arguing for a re-examination of Larkin’s engagement with Symbolism and Modernism. He removes some of the academic gloss that had obscured the conflict between what he sees as

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<sup>52</sup> Morrison 1980, p. 126.

the two traditions: native English and Modernist.

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Indeed, around the time *The New Poetry* came out, the argument between the proponents of modernism and what became known as ‘the English line’ had degenerated – as these things usually do – into bickering and squabbling, and versions of it still continue. One of the most damaging consequences was to distort the actual character and achievement of a number of poets caught in the quarrel.<sup>53</sup>

A highly perceptive point, as it highlights the extent to which both Larkin’s admirers and detractors, not to mention the poet himself, have let Larkin be

made to seem (and often made himself seem) a pillar of the provincial establishment, prissily genteel and creatively timid – a view that has obscured his real achievement.<sup>54</sup>

Motion here includes Larkin’s criticisms of the intertextual character of Modernist poems such as *The Waste Land*, and suggests that people (including Larkin)’s need for an oppositional figure to Eliot or Lowell and their intertextuality, had restricted

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<sup>53</sup> Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin* (London: Methuen, 1982), pp. 16-17. Hereafter: Motion 1982.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

any reading of Larkin as demonstrating either influence or intertextuality. This is a rare example of someone calling Larkin out for having oversimplified himself.

Motion goes some way to proving how much Larkin has done to 'relate the Modernists to the English line'<sup>55</sup>. He argues for Larkin's ability to relate and combine the English line and Modernism without having to take one side or the other.

Between them, Morrison and Motion widened the discussion of Larkin to allow not only influences but unexpected influences to play a part in any future consideration of Larkin as a poet. This is a very important shift in Larkin criticism, and it is only the lack of any real focus by either writer on Larkin's engagement with Eliot that, to my mind, frustrates their achievement.

Between Larkin's death and the watershed of the late 1980s and early '90s, two writers approached him from new angles.

Edna Longley, in 1988, addressed Larkin from the position of his most relevant predecessor being Edward Thomas. Longley points to the effect on Thomas's work of his being an associate of the Georgians in the early twentieth century, and how this both nourished and constrained his work. Larkin's relationship to the Movement is an obvious parallel to this, but Longley goes further in pointing out that Larkin's frustration in compiling *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse* (1973) was attributable to him not finding an English line, stretching from Hardy into the twentieth century. She suggests how this might have been proved:

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

He admitted that the Georgians ‘didn’t resuscitate themselves in my own mind’ and that he found their language ‘stale’.

But if instead of flogging the dead horses of Gibson and Squire, Larkin had placed a more limited selection from the minor figures in relation to a doubled representation of Thomas and of Owen, he might have found what he was looking for, and filled in his Owen genealogy.<sup>56</sup>

This is a new line in Larkin criticism that Motion has since gone on to explore: the notion of the English tradition that Larkin felt himself to be a part of and sought after was not that of Betjeman, early Auden and Hardy, but instead that of Owen and Thomas. It is also indicative of the shift which Morrison and Motion had effected at the start of the 1980s; that Larkin’s influences and innovation were now up for discussion, as opposed to his genius simply being an unquestionable bulwark against freer or more ‘extreme’ verse (that of Hughes, mainly).

The second new approach taken in 1988 was by Salem K. Hassan in his study of Larkin.

Hassan concentrates on the most ‘English’ of Larkin’s repeated symbols (trains, trees, churches), but also allows for Motion’s hypothesised symbolist elements to come through:

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<sup>56</sup> Edna Longley, ‘Any-angled Light: Philip Larkin and Edward Thomas’, *Poetry in the Wars* (Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 1986), p. 117. Hereafter: Longley 1986.

trains offer him momentary security against time, as he is aware that he could go home<sup>57</sup>

Hassan's reading of Larkin's English symbols as 'safe' means through which Larkin can explore the transcendental is a new and (subsequently) largely unexplored area of Larkin scholarship. He also draws attention to the relation of certain of Larkin's poems ('First Sight', 'High Windows') to Eliot's *Four Quartets*, which is a valuable point and one deserving of more examination than it has received up to this day.

As with Longley, there is the sense with Hassan of Larkin as deserving of more diverse considerations, in terms of influence and innovation, than had been given so far.

### **1.2 (iv) The Watershed**

Larkin appointed his friends and fellow-poets Anthony Thwaite and Andrew Motion as his literary executors. This is worthy of comment in terms of the differences between the two men. Thwaite was, and is, very much a junior Movement poet (he is only eight years younger than Larkin), whose poetry Larkin admired. Motion is of a different generation, having been born thirty years after Larkin. While Thwaite viewed his role in Larkin's life as being 'his editor'<sup>58</sup>, Motion had almost proved the

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<sup>57</sup> Salem K. Hassan, *Philip Larkin and his Contemporaries*, (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 84.

<sup>58</sup> Anthony Thwaite to Andrew Motion. Motion, 1993, p. 286.

literary distance between himself and Larkin through his earlier study of the poet. Larkin enjoyed Thwaite's poetry, but had very little time for Motion's. Thwaite's relatively non-academic background, compared to Motion's having worked as a lecturer, would also have appealed to Larkin.

As for the executing of Larkin's will, Hamilton puts it well when he says that

Larkin chose as his representatives two poets whose attachment to him was as much literary as personal. They were friends but they were literary friends; he would have known that neither Thwaite nor Motion was likely to destroy anything that issued from his pen.<sup>59</sup>

This demonstrates that Larkin's presentation of himself as withdrawn, uncluttered and uninterested in most literature was not something he necessarily wanted to survive him. If it had been, then there were 'literary friends', as Hamilton phrases it, whom he could have appointed as executors if he'd wanted the 'fully-formed' view of himself to survive; Kingsley Amis, for example, or even Robert Conquest. Larkin left a house full of neatly arranged and ordered correspondence and workbooks, which would go a long way to demonstrate his diversities of opinion, influence and workmanship – he would not have done so had he wished to remain thought of as the limited writer of the 'fully-formed' view. We can safely conclude this because he *did* destroy – or expressly instructed others to destroy – his many volumes of diaries.

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<sup>59</sup>Hamilton *KotF*, p. 308.

All this is by way of explaining that what occurred during the 1988-93 watershed was not, as several critics charged, the fault of two vandalising executors wishing to remake Larkin in their own image. Larkin bears most of the responsibility for the revelations about his poetry and life, and it is hard to imagine that he did not die knowing this.

Thwaite's role as Larkin's 'editor' continued – he edited the *Collected Poems* and the *Selected Letters* – while Motion's role as scholar and admirer likewise continued, with his writing the official *Life*. Motion is at pains, in the introduction to his biography, to state that 'He [Larkin] did not ask me to write this book'<sup>60</sup>, but his having written the short study in 1982, as well as a published study of Edward Thomas's poetry in 1980, surely played a part in Larkin's appointing him an executor – Thwaite was a good editor, but has no critical monographs to his name. It is also worth adding that Motion is an executor of the Rupert Brooke estate, so Larkin could be sure of his 'literary-executor' credentials as well as those of a friend.

The *Collected Poems* was published in 1988. Thwaite chose, when producing the book, to split it into two sections: at the front, the 'mature' Larkin and, at the back, 'Early poems'. Everything that Larkin wrote from 1946 to 1983, arranged in order of composition and completion made up the first half, with *The North Ship* and everything he wrote from 1938 to 1945 likewise arranged in the second. This ordering came under savage attacks, as it broke up the three 'mature' collections and put their poems alongside unpublished or uncollected pieces.

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<sup>60</sup> Motion 1993, p. xv.

The *Collected Poems* effectively doubled the size of Larkin's oeuvre. Many saw this as watering-down or polluting the Larkin canon, as it does demonstrate a series of apprenticeships that Larkin underwent before finding 'his' voice. Looking at the *Collected Poems*, Hamilton was able to deduce that

Hardy rescued him from Yeats, just as Yeats – three years earlier – had captured him from Auden. Under the Hardy regime, he was indeed able to find his own distinctive voice, but the Yeats and Auden periods offer almost nothing in the way of even potential Larkinesque.<sup>61</sup>

This is the 'fully-formed' school growing angry, as Thwaite's laying out of Larkin's development as a poet does puncture the myth of Larkin starting writing with *The Less Deceived* in 1955. However, Thwaite's ordering of the poems as he did works to show how the 'fully-formed' idea doesn't hold true in reality; that Larkin produced plenty of poems during his mature period that weren't as good as those that won him acclaim. The chief effect of Thwaite's ordering was to demystify Larkin's poetry a little; yet this is not something done out of malice on Thwaite's part, it is simply a presentation of one man's collected poems.

The critical backlash against the *Collected Poems* seemed genuinely to wish for an editing of Larkin's life whereby nothing apart from the later three collections and a handful of uncollected but published poems (such as 'Aubade') were preserved. This seems to demonstrate a fundamental misunderstanding of the term 'Collected

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<sup>61</sup> Hamilton 1988, p. 310.

Poems'. What Thwaite seemed caught between (in others' expectations of the volume) was a 'Selected' Larkin – of the type described above – and a 'Complete' Larkin, which he seemed to be trying to offer.

The publication of Larkin's *Selected Letters*, in 1992, is the real crisis that occurs during the watershed. In that volume Larkin's opinions and pronouncements seemingly cover every basis (bar, interestingly, homophobia) upon which people can be offended. Racism, misogyny, hard-line conservatism, stinginess and sniping about friends and enemies alike all find a place:

I don't mind England not beating the West Indies, but I wish they'd look as if they were *trying* to beat them. Sri Lankans likewise. And as for those black scum kicking up a din on the boundary – a squad of South African police would have sorted them out to my satisfaction.<sup>62</sup>

As far as I can see, all women are stupid beings.<sup>63</sup>

This [L's refusal to do a reading of his poetry] is because (a) I have a huge contempt for all 'groups' that listen to or discuss poetry: (b) some people get a bang out of reading their stuff, but I don't, I get

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<sup>62</sup> Larkin to Colin Gunner 15/9/84, *SL*, p. 719.

<sup>63</sup> Larkin to Kingsley Amis 20/8/43, *SL*, p. 63.

the reverse of a bang, a deathly silence in fact: (c) the reputation I could make by appearing publicly is nothing compared to the one I make by remaining hidden.<sup>64</sup>

God, the bloody England XI. THEY MUST STOP THINKING OF IT  
AS A FUCKING HOLIDAY WITH THE WIVES AND KIDS AND  
THINK OF THEMSELVES AS THE BEF oh well<sup>65</sup>

Larkin's heliotropism is both the reason that many saw him as duplicitous, and the proof that very few of these views stand up as 'proper' prejudice. Larkin tailored his letters to whomever he was writing; he was racist with racist friends, misogynist and crude with Amis, twee with Barbara Pym, loving and tender with his several female confidantes. However, comments like those above led to a critical onslaught, which dragged the poems into the mire with the views.

The letters have very little to do with the poems, but their effect was very similar to the complaints about the *Collected Poems*. The complainers seem to be largely unhappy with knowing *more* about Larkin than the poet himself offered. Just as the *Collected Poems* showed, to some extent, Larkin's working in his poetry, so too did the letters show where the intemperance and rage, so respectfully lacking from most of his poetry, was expended.

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<sup>64</sup> L to Richard Murphy 25/5/58, *SL*, p. 287.

<sup>65</sup> L to Conquest 9/1/75, *SL*, p. 520.

Motion's authorised biography was seen by many as bowing to the critical outrage which had so afflicted the *Collected Poems* and *Letters*' publication, despite it having been written at roughly the same time. The strength of the biography is what many chose to criticise; namely, Motion's commendably dispassionate tone. Despite having known, admired and loved Larkin, Motion is even-handed and considerate towards him, without attempting to hide or justify any of the more questionable aspects of his life.

In his introduction, Motion is equally considerate towards those opponents of Larkin's whom he must have known would be ready to attack him with the same fervour that they had levelled at Thwaite, forewarning of some 'surprises':

After Anthony Thwaite had edited and published the *Collected Poems* in 1988 most readers were astonished to find it running to more than 300 pages. Readers of this book will be surprised by the extent of Larkin's other kinds of writing: by the huge spread of his letters (which includes the correspondences with Monica Jones and Maeve Brennan that are only sketched in Thwaite's *Selected Letters*, and the previously unpublished correspondences with his father and mother); by the large number of drafts he made of his two complete and two incomplete novels; by the frequency (once again at the beginning rather than the end of his life) with which he produced essays, poems, stories, short plays and reviews of books and jazz records; by the existence of two full-length, facetious, would-be

lesbian romances written in the early 1940s under the pseudonym Brunette Coleman.<sup>66</sup>

It is likely that Motion knew that ‘surprise’ would also become outrage and shock, and he seems grimly prepared for these. What he might not have been prepared for was the extent to which – as had been the case with Thwaite – so much of the criticism would be directed not at Larkin but at himself. Repeatedly, the reviews of the biography home in on Motion’s tone, with a tone of their own that could best be described as disappointed:

Motion has said that he wrote this biography ‘with love’. He loves the poems, certainly, and leads us through them, one by one, with easy reverence, but his feelings about their author often seem equivocal. He wants to love Larkin but much of the time the best he can muster is a sort of muffled, reluctant pity-cum-contempt. Much of the time also there is a simple bewilderment: why *did* Larkin get so little sense of achievement out of what he had achieved?<sup>67</sup>

Andrew Motion has done something to show that Larkin chose the conditions in which to nourish his art, but not enough to insist that

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<sup>66</sup> Motion 1993, p. xvii.

<sup>67</sup> Ian Hamilton, ‘Self’s the Man’ originally appeared in the *TLS*, 2/4/93. Hereafter: Hamilton 1993. Reprinted as ‘Philip Larkin: 3. The Biography’ in *The Trouble with Money* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998), p. 324.

art of such intensity demands a dedication ordinary mortals don't know much about.<sup>68</sup>

Both Hamilton and James, having written extensively on Larkin prior to this, seem to feel that Motion should have, perhaps, allowed his poetic admiration for Larkin to err on the side of broader sympathy for the man. This leads their reviews to accept that the 'fully-formed' argument is essentially null and void after the *Collected Poems*' revelations, but also to simultaneously insist that poetic admiration be maintained over other considerations.

The problem was that, by the time their reviews had been published, poetic admiration was barely considered to be relevant. As James put it, 'by now everybody with something on him [Larkin] is bursting into print'<sup>69</sup>, and for several reviewers, the uproar surrounding the prejudices of the man finally served as the justification that (one senses) they had long wanted, in order to dismiss Larkin the poet:

His was a minor talent which exhausted itself too soon, leaving only a few slim volumes as a memento. There was a brief controversy last year about Larkin's more unfortunate obsessions, but they hardly matter. Of course you do not have to be a master of political correctness to realise that, by the end of his life, he had become a foul-mouthed bigot: that does not necessarily prevent anyone from

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<sup>68</sup> James 1993, pp 110-14.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

being a great poet as well, but in Larkin's case no such consolation was ever available.<sup>70</sup>

or

...there was no reason to worry about Larkin the racist because Larkin the poet was not very good anyway.<sup>71</sup>

Such casual denunciations led Tom Paulin to bemoan that he found it 'impossible to get an argument going – politically correct fools pushed in on the act, others flew the transcendental kite'<sup>72</sup>.

A direct result of this *ad hominem* muddying of the critical waters, I contend, was a panicked reversal of the progress made, in the publication of the *Collected Poems* and *Selected Letters*, in terms of seeing the fuller Larkin 'testing, filtering, rejecting, modulating, achieving'. Rather than risk a longer argument defending the indefensibles (the racism, for example), Larkin's supporters and executors 'flew the transcendental kite', by reminding everyone that the three 'mature' volumes of Larkin's poetry are indisputable in terms of quality, and that those are the important aspects of the man to be considered.

This was formalised in 2003, when Thwaite produced a second *Collected Poems* that 'restored' the poems to their 'original' state. This meant the placing of Larkin's four published collections in the order in which they appeared – 1945, 1955,

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<sup>70</sup> Ackroyd 1993, p. 255.

<sup>71</sup> Bonnie Greer in *The Mail on Sunday* in 2001, quoted in 'Larkin Treads the Boards' by Clive James. Hereafter, James, 2001. James, *The Meaning of Recognition* (London: Picador, 2005), p. 97.

<sup>72</sup> Hitchens 1993, p. 206.

1964, 1974 – and including an appendix of only those other poems that Larkin published in his lifetime. This reduced the *Collected Poems* by over half, and removed a lot of the poetry that people had found unsettling (‘Love Again’, ‘Letter to a Friend about Girls’). On the flyleaf to this new edition, Thwaite acknowledges that this is an about-turn of significance:

Preserving everything that he published in his lifetime, this book returns readers to the book Larkin might have intended if he had lived.<sup>73</sup>

This is as blatant an apology as Thwaite’s critics had been demanding of him, with his use of the word ‘returns’ a clear sign of penance.

Interestingly, most of the subsequent editions of Larkin’s work – a collection of his short fiction in 2002<sup>74</sup>, his early verse in 2005<sup>75</sup>, the (so far) only *Selected Larkin*<sup>76</sup> in 2011 and *The Complete Poems*<sup>77</sup> in 2012 – were all edited by non-executors of the Larkin estate, none of whom has arguable connection to the man himself. The only exception to this rule is the second volume of Larkin’s interviews and criticism, *Further Requirements*<sup>78</sup> in 2001. The wider point to be made about literary estates here is that Larkin seems to have undergone a confiscation by his

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<sup>73</sup> Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems* ed. A. Thwaite, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 2003). Hereafter: Thwaite 1993.

<sup>74</sup> Philip Larkin, *Trouble at Willow Gables and other Fictions* ed. J. Booth (London: Faber and Faber, 2002). Hereafter: Booth 2002.

<sup>75</sup> Philip Larkin, *Early poems and Juvenilia* ed. A. T. Tolley (London: Faber and Faber, 2005). Hereafter: *EPaJ*.

<sup>76</sup> Philip Larkin, *Selected Poems* ed. M. Amis (London: Faber and Faber, 2011). Hereafter: Amis 2011.

<sup>77</sup> Philip Larkin, *The Complete Poems* ed. A. Burnett (London: Faber and Faber, 2012). Hereafter: Burnett 2012.

<sup>78</sup> Philip Larkin, *Further Requirements* ed. A. Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 2001). Hereafter: *FR*.

publishers from his executors. It is unlikely that he intended such a thing, but he bears some responsibility for it, given his unclear will.

### **1.2 (v) After the watershed**

After the *Collected Poems* (1988 ed.), it was largely impossible for people to pursue the ‘fully-formed’ school of thought as they had before – the cat being so publicly out of the bag – but the 2003 edition of the *Collected Poems* was a quiet attempt to allow people to do so. Usefully, however, the critical landscape post-1993 did not mirror Thwaite’s penitence.

Andrew Swarbrick’s 1995 study of Larkin conceded the new difficulty in writing about the poet:

This book has been written in the conviction that Philip Larkin’s poetry is important to us. It aims to present Larkin as more adventurous and challenging than we are used to recognising, and to rebut both the old charges of genteel parochialism and the new charges of ideological incorrectness. Although it takes into account new biographical material, it is not simply an interpretation of the poems by way of the life. Indeed, as this study shows, the relationship between the two is in Larkin’s case extremely problematic.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Swarbrick, *Out of Reach: The Poetry of Philip Larkin* (London: Macmillan, 1995), p. ix. Hereafter: Swarbrick 1995.

Swarbrick went as much back-to-basics as he could, going back to Timms's account twenty years previously and dismissing the 'usual critical approach to Larkin's poetry' which he saw as being 'to examine early Larkin for signs of later Larkin'<sup>80</sup> – the move from Auden to Yeats and then to Hardy, before 'his' voice appears. This is a clear example of the 'fully-formed' argument being rejected and the Motion/Longley interest in Larkin's 'testing, filtering, rejecting, modulating, achieving' – what I term his workmanship – reappearing.

Swarbrick placed a new applied emphasis on the effect of poetics and philosophy on Larkin, citing Empson, Vernon Watkins, MacNeice and Dylan Thomas as important theoretical and philosophical influences. Crucially, his book demonstrates that the investigation of Larkin's influences and workmanship has not been completely abandoned in the wake of the 'new biographical material'. Swarbrick effectively argues for the reader to acknowledge that the link between the poet and his verse is not through biographical readings of the work (as Larkin's detractors have insisted), but instead on Larkin's choices as to which parts of his life and literature he used to achieve poetry.

A similar early study – post-watershed – that comes close but does not identify as well as Swarbrick does this playful 'trust' between Larkin and the reader, is A. T. Tolley's 1991 work. Tolley argues for a greater awareness of historical context for Larkin, but also resists biographical information altering the appreciation of both the

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<sup>80</sup> Swarbrick 1995, p. 23.

poetry and, more importantly, ‘the wide range of both influences and avoidances that Larkin employed in writing his poems’<sup>81</sup>.

Tolley, like Swarbrick, argues that there is no shame in knowing how Larkin *became* a genius, but that the poetic formation of the man is a separate ‘secret’ to the personal development – or degeneration – of the man himself. Again, it calls for greater awareness of and interest in Larkin’s workmanship.

This greater awareness was a key factor in two subsequent essay collections.

Stephen Regan’s editing of a *New Casebook*<sup>82</sup> on Larkin, in 1997, drew both on previous scholarship (Seamus Heaney’s ‘The Main of Light’, which had previously appeared in *Larkin at Sixty*<sup>83</sup>, is the first essay) but also on expanded and new perspectives. Motion’s essay ‘Philip Larkin and Symbolism’<sup>84</sup> considers the importance of the French Symbolist poets for Larkin’s work, highlighting one of the new perspectives Motion’s 1982 study (from which the piece is drawn) had addressed. Motion considers what he terms Larkin’s ‘undecideability’, coming close to Conquest’s assertion of the *New Lines* poets as having little time for ‘theoretical constructs’:

...[Larkin] clearly has no faith in inherited and reliable absolutes.

...[his] dilemma is not whether to believe in God but what to put in

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<sup>81</sup> A. T. Tolley, *My Proper Ground: A Study of the Work of Philip Larkin and its Development* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), p. 43.

<sup>82</sup> *New Casebooks: Philip Larkin* ed. Stephen Regan (London: Macmillan, 1997). Hereafter: Regan 1997.

<sup>83</sup> A festschrift for Larkin’s sixtieth birthday. *Larkin at Sixty* ed. A. Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 1982). Hereafter: Thwaite 1982.

<sup>84</sup> Regan 1997. pp. 32-54.

God's place; he is concerned in the poem ['Church Going'], he has said, 'with going to church, not religion'.<sup>85</sup>

Motion's consideration of Larkin's symbolist devices and techniques follows a close reading of the poems – the above point, about the poem being concerned with the church building itself rather than any worship which may go on within it, is a good example of this – and Motion is unafraid to challenge what he sees as lazy assumptions about Larkin. His comparison of Larkin's 'Femmes Damnées' with Baudelaire's poem of the same name 'demolishes the popular belief that Larkin has never read or liked foreign poetry'<sup>86</sup>.

This point is also addressed, though incompletely, in the essay that follows Motion's. Barbara Everett's 'Philip Larkin: After Symbolism'<sup>87</sup> is another expansion on an earlier (1980) consideration of Larkin's wider influences, and praises Larkin's ability to write what Everett sees as a symbolist poetry free of the complications often found in such work. When discussing 'Sympathy in White Major', Everett argues that

all of it except perhaps the title can clearly be understood by any ordinary person with common sense, some intelligence about loneliness and vanity and fantasy-making, and no knowledge whatever of Symbolist poetry.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Andrew Motion, 'Philip Larkin and Symbolism'. Regan 1997, p. 33.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>87</sup> Barbara Everett, 'Philip Larkin: After Symbolism'. Regan 1997, pp. 55-70.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

This argument – that Larkin writes sophisticated poetry, but in a manner readable by anyone – is a new way of praising Larkin’s readability without instantly associating it with simplicity or ‘dumbing down’. However, Everett might have gone further, rather than duck the option of doing so, as she does later in her article:

In a *London Magazine* interview published in 1964, Larkin was asked by Ian Hamilton whether he ever read French poetry, and answered ‘*Foreign poetry? No!*’ Larkin’s writings often suggest a man of scrupulous honesty, even to the point of some literalness. ...perhaps he had not read much French verse at that stage, or much contemporary French verse, or had ceased to read it, or remember it,<sup>89</sup>

Here Everett does what so many others have done, which is not read the next answer of Larkin’s in that interview, in which he lists a number of ‘foreign’ poets whose work he enjoys. I certainly see it as crucial in my project to stop *that* glib joke being all that is quoted from what is a thoughtful and revealing interview.

Regan’s book reopens Larkin scholarship to the considerations of innovation and influence, and goes some way to removing – though Alan Bennett’s piece acknowledges it – the detritus of Larkin’s personal life from the work.

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

While none of the pieces in Regan's book was new, the grouping of such a wide-ranging series of interpretations demonstrated the longevity and continuing relevance of interest in Larkin's formation as a poet. It also served to show that public controversies would not limit such interests and interpretations.

*New Larkins For Old*<sup>90</sup> continued the work started by Regan, with James Booth (a contributor to Regan's book) encompassing an even wider range of critical perspectives on Larkin, in his editorship. As well as relevant considerations of Larkin's personal life such as his affair with the novelist Patricia Avis, his views on imperialism and the recurring lesbianism in his early work, it offers a comparison of Eliot and Larkin (through the lens of Symbolism) which is one of the more under-discussed relationships of influence concerning Larkin, as well as post-modernist, post-colonial and even Eastern European perspectives on the poet.

John Osborne's essay is perhaps the most groundbreaking in both its aims and achievement. He states that

...I hope to demonstrate that Larkin is constantly attracted to that which he regrets, that across even his most ardently asserted opinions there regularly falls the brightening shadow of heresy, and his almost Derridean focus on undecideables is so drastic in its implications as to situate his *oeuvre* after Modernism, not just

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<sup>90</sup> *New Larkins For Old* ed. J. Booth (London: Macmillan, 2000). Hereafter: Booth 2000.

chronologically, but in the more crucial sense of having assimilated and then moved on from it.<sup>91</sup>

Osborne finally *states* the case that Motion and Longley only insinuated: that, first of all, Larkin is as much defined by that which he attacks or avoids as by that which he admires and engages with, that an assimilation of Modernism – by Larkin – *has* taken place, and that these factors contribute towards Larkin’s achievement and standing as a poet. He also rejects the theory put forward by Ian Gregson<sup>92</sup> that poets such as Larkin and Heaney (an unusual pairing) engage with aspects of Modernism only to argue with or reject those aspects, stating instead that equivocation plays a role in these poets’ assimilation of Modernism – filtering, again.

Osborne goes on to dismiss Larkin’s much-quoted condemnation of Modernism – in the form of an attack on Charlie Parker’s jazz innovations – as both inaccurate and disingenuous on Larkin’s part, before stating – far more stridently than either Hassan or Everett had done – that

As for T. S. Eliot, his influence is so pervasive that it is possible to detect echoes of his work, covering the spectrum from early to late, from ‘The Preludes’ to *The Cocktail Party*, in nearly forty Larkin poems.

...This list [of Eliot-influenced Larkin poems] could be multiplied several times over, though it is already long enough to suggest that

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<sup>91</sup> John Osborne, ‘Postmodernism and Postcolonialism in the Poetry of Philip Larkin’. Hereafter: Osborne 2000. Booth 2000, pp.144-165.

<sup>92</sup> Ian Gregson, *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism* (London: Macmillan, 1996).

Larkin's largely unremarked indebtedness to Eliot is as profound as that to Yeats.<sup>93</sup>

Osborne is to be applauded for stating this. However, his consideration of what he sees as the similarities between Eliot and Larkin largely take the form of thematic intimations and technical awareness, rather than comparing the archetypal antiheroes of Prufrock, Bleaney and Self, which I would contend is the strongest link between the two poets, and which I will pursue in my project.

Booth's book admirably balances the man with the work, but also brings a sense of cultural eclecticism coupled with critical rigour to Larkin scholarship. That such a diversity of opinion was now accepted, as the norm within Larkin scholarship, is a clear sign that the 'fully-formed' argument was effectively quashed – despite the near-contemporaneous publication of Thwaite's 2003 edition of the *Collected Poems*.

A few years later, when a volume of *Early Poems & Juvenilia*<sup>94</sup> was released, it seemed possible again to consider different aspects to Larkin, without having constantly to separate his life from his poetry.

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<sup>93</sup> Osborne 2000, p. 148.

<sup>94</sup> *EPaJ*.

## 1.2 (vi) Letters to Monica and The Complete Poems

In 2010, a second book of letters, *Letters to Monica*<sup>95</sup> brought together for the first time the intensely private and passionate letters of Larkin to his long-term girlfriend Monica Jones. Jones was a university lecturer in English Literature (at the University of Leicester) and there is evidence in these letters of a far more widely read Larkin than he and others had sometimes allowed him to be seen as. His report on the death of Sylvia Plath, for example, is very interesting,

...S. Plath gassed herself. She had had a mental breakdown once before, & is supposed to have feared another, while, as far as I can see, making certain of it. Ted had cleared off, not enjoying the symptoms.<sup>96</sup>

This is the same event of which Larkin was to disingenuously say to Motion in 1980, ‘There must be an awful lot of biographical stuff I don’t know – does anyone?’<sup>97</sup> This is a constant in Larkin’s interviews, criticism and letters; his insistence on biographical ignorance is a tool he used regularly to distract and divert others who had happened upon a surprising or unexpected interest of Larkin’s.

Something else that is enlightening about *Letters to Monica* is the enlivening tone and academic parlance that is almost totally lacking from Larkin’s letters to others. While it is true that he varied his views in his correspondence, adopting many

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<sup>95</sup> *Letters to Monica* ed. A. Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 2010). Hereafter: *LTM*.

<sup>96</sup> Larkin to Jones, 10/3/63. *LTM*, p. 317.

<sup>97</sup> Larkin to Motion, 15/11/81. *SL*, p. 660.

voices and tones for different people, comments such as the following are only ever found in letters to Jones:

I almost think I'd like a set of *The Messiah!!* How it *gets better towards the end* – this is almost a *sine qua non* of good art...<sup>98</sup>

Never return to the scene of the crime, as Frances says in *The Disguises of Love* [by R. Maculay: an American campus novel]<sup>99</sup>

I'm pressing on with *Moby-Dick* (it appears to be hyphenated) – it's a kind of fishy Dickens, so far.<sup>100</sup>

Even among those friends with whom he wasn't ashamed to demonstrate his education (anyone but Amis, it seems), Larkin rarely uses Latin phrases, while at the other end of the cultural scale there are few to no examples of him demonstrating having read an American novel at all, let alone a campus piece.

The tone, too, with which he talks to Jones about rereading *Northanger Abbey* and reading *Moby-Dick* for the first time is one of pleasure and interest. These two impulses barely register in the rest of Larkin's letters, so *Letters to Monica* is an

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<sup>98</sup> Larkin to Jones, 18/12/57. *LTM*, p. 232.

<sup>99</sup> Larkin to Jones, 13/12/59. *LTM*, p. 264.

<sup>100</sup> Larkin to Jones, 20/4/62. *LTM*, p. 295.

invaluable aid to understanding Larkin the scholar, and mapping out more clearly whether there are correlations between what he was reading and shifts in his writing.

Finally – or so we imagine – for the opening-out of Larkin scholarship, all of Larkin’s poetry was published in one volume. *The Complete Poems*<sup>101</sup> restored Larkin’s own ordering of the poems in his four collections, although, as Longley noted, ‘at 81 pages they constitute less than a third of the total poems’<sup>102</sup>. Longley identified the somewhat overwhelming amount of commentary that Burnett brought to the *Complete Poems*, but the huge volume does seem to mean that Larkin’s diverse reading and writing is available for both reading and discussing.

It can even be argued that *Letters to Monica* (along with the *Complete Larkin*) formed a second watershed in Larkin scholarship. It is certainly true that the public interest – and, in the press, involvement – in this second watershed was far less, but the reshaping effect on our understanding of Larkin’s work, interests and opinions on literature is just as profound. Put simply, a comment made about Larkin in an obituary of Kingsley Amis in 1995 (after the *Collected Poems* and *Letters*, yet clinging to the ‘fully-formed’ argument still) enunciates Larkin’s standing, after the first watershed:

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<sup>101</sup> Burnett 2012.

<sup>102</sup> Edna Longley, ‘Completism: Larkin’s *Complete Poems*’, *Areté* No.37 (Spring/Summer 2012), pp. 99-104. Hereafter: Longley 2012.

Just as Philip Larkin resolved that the future of English poetry lay not with complex Pound and Eliot but with simple Hardy and Betjeman<sup>103</sup>

‘Simple’, was apparently the type of poetry that Larkin wrote. Compare this to two comments made by Longley in her review of *The Complete Poems* in 2012:

It would be an error to boost his status now by outing him as an undercover ‘literary understrapper’ or by subjecting him to ‘modernist’ readings.

...

What they [the ‘not published’ poems in the *Complete Poems*] lack may highlight an aesthetic intensity and self-critical rigour of which contemporary poetry needs to be reminded. Yet their presence seems more likely to work the other way: to drag down Philip Larkin’s ‘high-bullded cloud’.<sup>104</sup>

The first point – while I disagree with her, as Larkin has long lacked ‘modernist readings – points out that Larkin’s status (his public standing, in other words) is dependent not on the goodwill of scholarship perpetually renewing his relevance and intellectual credentials, but on (those rare things) public appeal and talent.

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<sup>103</sup> John Sutherland, ‘A Modern Master’ from the *Sunday Times* 29<sup>th</sup> October 1995. Quoted in Zachary Leader, *The Life of Kingsley Amis* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2006), p. 811.

<sup>104</sup> Longley 2012.

However, if that might look to be a return to the ‘fully-formed’ argument, her second point negates any such return. Highlighting Larkin’s ‘aesthetic intensity and self-critical rigour’ as the key to both what he chose to publish and his resulting reputation, demonstrates the least ‘simple’ reading of both poet and poetry possible. The difference between the effects of the first watershed and the second is that, after the first, the private poetry and life were seen, indeed, to ‘drag down’ Larkin and so the only solution was to ignore or try and forget them. With the second, however, the extra details and the large body of worked-at but unpublished poetry contribute heavily towards an increased ‘boost’ to his status as they point out that he *was* at times an ‘undercover literary understrapper’ (he read more and more widely than he and others admitted), and that shaped his poetry both in the writing of it and what he chose to publish. If this – taking into account the life, the process of working and publishing – isn’t a ‘modernist’ reading, then it is unclear what Longley thinks is.

In recent years there have been several efforts on Larkin’s behalf, largely by the literary generation surrounding *the Review* in the 1960s and *The New Review* in the 1970s. Both Blake Morrison and Clive James have attempted to calm the infighting, among admirers of Larkin, through accepting that the deficiencies of the man himself almost strengthen the quality of the work. James:

Philip Larkin really was the greatest poet of his time, and he really did say noxious things. But he didn’t say them in his poems, which

he thought of as a realm of responsibility in which he would have to answer for what he said and answer forever.<sup>105</sup>

Morrison even terms the conflict facing the reader:

This is the Larkin paradox. Admirers should not try to explain away his prejudices but examine how his work accommodates, struggles with and floats free of them. Therein lies the secret of his greatness.<sup>106</sup>

And in a recent interview Morrison refers to the disparity that still exists between the high esteem in which Larkin is still held (voted Britain's 'Best-Loved Poet' in 2010) and the absence of perhaps more wide-ranging scholarship concerning Larkin's development:

Larkin is never given, I think, enough credit for his innovation. People just see him as the successor to Hardy, who writes in regular verse-forms, but the development of Larkin's 'voice' in those longer poems seems to me an extraordinary achievement, and I don't see what that comes out of.

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<sup>105</sup> James 2001, pp. 97-8.

<sup>106</sup> Blake Morrison, 'Larkin and Prejudice', in *Too True* (London: Granta Books, 1998), p. 258.

You could say that it comes out of Yeats...but I don't think that Yeats himself did that [wrote] in the way that Larkin did it. Larkin's man arguing with himself; thinking aloud, so to speak; that's real innovation, so his forms are more innovative than he's given credit for.<sup>107</sup>

Two critics who have given Larkin's forms and innovation the attention that Morrison clearly thinks they deserve are Clive James and Ian Hamilton, who go further than most in recognising and arguing for Larkin's achievements, even if they decide not to pursue certain lines of enquiry which I myself am interested in going after.

There is something of Larkin's 'Sheer Genius'<sup>108</sup> answer in both James and Hamilton's admiration of the poet. It's as if the effort of arguing for Larkin as being (a) a skilled poet, (b) a popular poet, and (c) an important poet is enough, without engaging in further investigation of his poetic formation. This is regrettable, as it leaves that cover-all caveat 'genius' to stand for a lot of unanswered, and unasked, questions.

## **1.2 (vii) At present**

The critical landscape of Larkin in 2013 is largely similar to how it was in the early 1980s. By this I mean that the 'fully-formed' school of thought still persists in some

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<sup>107</sup> 'A Conversation with Blake Morrison', *The Next Review* No.1 (Sept./Oct. 2013).

<sup>108</sup> *PR*, 1982. *RW*, p. 74.

areas; some people remain unwilling to accept that Larkin was anything other than an instant genius in *The Less Deceived*, but that, by and large, an awareness and understanding of Larkin's workmanship and development has been accepted.

What is still missing, however, is a more thorough examination of Larkin's development as a writer, which accepts two hypotheses largely suggested by work so far. These are that Larkin *set out* to be a poet of a particular sort, rather than simply ending up 'writing the kind of poetry that one has to write, or that one can write'<sup>109</sup>, as he claimed once. Also, that Larkin was open to all influences, but focussed on individual poets whom he saw as prefiguring the detached lyricism that he wanted to write, and that these poets form a largely unexamined 'secret tradition' for Larkin, which is both transatlantic and has more in common with Larkin's two contemporaries and assumed 'opponents', Ted Hughes and Thom Gunn.

When focussing on English poets I will show Larkin's strongest influences were firstly the combined effect of Edward Thomas and Wilfred Owen, who set out to combine a 'traditional' English poetry of the pastoral and other narrative-based subjects with a studied impersonality. Following this, Larkin's enthusiasm for early, pre-1940 Auden is acknowledged, but I contend that his interest in and influencing-by Auden persists beyond this period, and that what one critic termed in Auden 'the grip of the icy master' would prove to further inform Larkin's quest for studied impersonality. Finally, I will explore Larkin's admiration of but also his influencing-by Dylan Thomas. This is an area of study barely acknowledged, let alone considered

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<sup>109</sup> Philip Larkin in conversation with John Betjeman for 'Down Cemetery Road', a 1964 BBC *Monitor* film concerning Larkin.

important, but I consider it key to understanding Larkin's assimilation of types of poetry thought to be in opposition to his own, or those of his contemporaries.

I will allow for Larkin's separation of 'English' and 'American' verse, but not for the broad assumption that he was poetically xenophobic and deaf to American poets. I support the suggestions of Motion and Everett and the further work of Osborne on T. S. Eliot, but also argue that it is Larkin's assimilation of Eliot, as well as his building on Eliot's anti-hero foundations that enables Larkin to create the weak, dispassionate everymen of his poems. There has been no study of Larkin's having been influenced by Robert Lowell, though it is allowed that he admired *Life Studies*. A more focussed investigation into Larkin and Lowell's shared use of nocturnal or lunar landscapes, in order to bring events and reflection into a harsher light, needs to be done. Larkin's admiration (fearful though it may be) for Sylvia Plath also needs to be addressed in full for the first time: his resistance to his contemporaries' opinion of her, his championing of her *Collected Poems* and the apparently continuing influence that she had on his more private poems – particularly those he left unpublished in his lifetime – are crucial in understanding Larkin's transatlantic development of English poetry.

Finally, I will study the aims and achievement of Larkin in comparison with Hughes and Gunn. Gunn's avowed search for the 'impersonal 'I' of Elizabethan poetry – which he is considered to have perfected in America – is near-identical to Larkin's longed-for studied impersonality. The extent to which both combined English and American poetry to reflect more fully on, particularly, human sexuality and decay requires a detailed examination, and the lack of any serious comparison of the two poets (except as opponents), so far, is regrettable.

This is true also of Hughes and Larkin. They were two poets who shared many of the same influences (those listed above, for example), who both wrote on what they saw as England 'Going', on the lingering violence that two world wars had laid beneath behaviour and interaction, and on the countryside that both endured and outlasted human beings. Again, that they are often compared in opposition is regrettable. Larkin, Hughes and Gunn all worked to assimilate and transmit the innovations of twentieth century poetry – both English and American – into an English line that they felt themselves to be a part of, and which continues to exist and grow stronger as a result of all three. It is this assimilation and transmission that I will demonstrate.

## **Chapter 1: Larkin and studied impersonality: Edward Thomas, Wilfred Owen, W. H. Auden and Dylan Thomas**

### **1.1 The three lines**

When Larkin edited the *Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse* (1973), he somewhat typically complained about the process of reading, compiling and selecting that was involved in the project, but also saw an opportunity to test a theory he had clearly held for a while, both about English poetry in general and his own in particular. When talking about the anthology after its publication, he enunciated this:

I had in my mind a notion that there might have been what I'll call, for want of a better phrase, an English tradition coming from the nineteenth century with people like Hardy, which was interrupted partly by the Great War, when many English poets were killed off, and partly by the really tremendous impact of Yeats, whom I think of as Celtic, and Eliot, whom I think of as American. And I wondered whether, if one looked for them, there hadn't been some quite good poems which had become unfashionable which had never been dug up again and looked at. I certainly had this in mind when reading.<sup>110</sup>

However, Larkin's notion of an English tradition was not to stand the test of his rereading the group which might have been so cut off or replaced – the Georgians:

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<sup>110</sup> Larkin in conversation with Anthony Thwaite, originally appeared on BBC Radio Three, 12<sup>th</sup> April 1973. Hereafter, Larkin-Thwaite, 1973. *FR*, p. 96.

...quite honestly, the Georgians didn't resuscitate themselves in my mind. I like the poems I've included [six – a large number for Larkin's anthology – by Wilfrid Gibson and two by Sir John Squire, among other Georgians]... But a lot of the others I was disappointed in, and the worst thing about the Georgians as a class was, I'm afraid, what has already been said by so many people: that their language was stale. It was Eliot and Yeats, and perhaps even Pound, who sharpened up the language.<sup>111</sup>

Larkin is here pointing out that his belief in an English tradition was either short-lived or had become unconvinced or uncertain by the time the *Oxford Book* was published. Yet this idea, while slightly modified, has persisted in Larkin scholarship and even the popular discourse about Larkin. As recently as April 2013, the poet and editor Fiona Sampson had this to say about the lost 'English tradition' of Larkin's notion:

Our love of Edward Thomas is part of our resistance to Modernism, and I think Modernism was a tremendously good thing, as it made us all question our relationship to form but also to society, which I think is very important... So I'm an ardent Modernist and I do know that our love of the Georgians is a kind of resistance, a way of saying 'Look, there's a line of continuity from

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

Hardy to Edward Thomas to Larkin to Alan Jenkins.’ And it’s a slippage into cosiness, which I resist, although I admire all of those poets.<sup>112</sup>

Larkin’s realisation that the language of the Georgians was ‘stale’ is a rejection of the idea of ‘cosiness’, but certainly Larkin’s much-lauded love for Hardy in particular is popularly seen as a resistance to Modernism<sup>113</sup>; despite his above statement in defence of the sharpening-up of language that the Modernists (Yeats, Pound, Eliot) effected. The ‘line of continuity’ described by Sampson, then, can be termed the first of the three lines of tradition that I will consider in this section.

The second line in this series is again a popular and much-quoted one, almost to the point of cliché. In the May 1982 episode of *The South Bank Show* that marked Larkin’s sixtieth birthday, Melvyn Bragg’s introductory remarks reiterated the by-then accepted view of the second line of Larkin’s tradition:

His first book, *The North Ship* clearly showed the influence of Yeats, his second, *The Less Deceived*, showed Yeats replaced by Hardy<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Fiona Sampson, speaking at Poetry East, 13/4/2013. <http://www.poetryeast.net/News>. Hereafter, Sampson 2013.

<sup>113</sup> For example: ‘It was a time of insularity [the 1950s and 1960s] and of an almost wilful philistinism, when English poets, believing they had nothing to learn from the great modernists of a previous generation, fashioned a style that was at once parochial and outmoded – characteristically dealing with what were considered to be the more ‘ordinary’ emotions, as if that were some kind of riposte to the pioneering work of Pound, Eliot and even Auden. It represented an aesthetic of narrow forms, narrow cadences, and an even narrower idea of poetry, which reached its apotheosis in the work of Philip Larkin.’ - Peter Ackroyd, review of *A Various Art* (a poetry anthology edited by Andrew Crozier and Tim Longville, 1987), originally appeared in *The Times*, 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1987. Reprinted in *The Collection* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2001), p. 211. Hereafter, Ackroyd 1987.

<sup>114</sup> *The South Bank Show*, ITV, series 5, episode 27. Originally aired 30<sup>th</sup> May 1982.

Upon the publication of Larkin's first *Collected Poems* in 1988, Ian Hamilton expanded this a little, but reinforced the retroactive nature of Larkin's 'influences':

Hardy rescued him from Yeats, just as Yeats – three years earlier – had captured him from Auden. Under the Hardy regime, he was indeed able to find his own distinctive voice, but the Yeats and Auden periods offer almost nothing in the way of even potential Larkinesque.<sup>115</sup>

This second line, so stated, is certainly more pronounced than the first, and it is easy to see why Al Alvarez was so vociferous in his arguing for such a 'tradition' being a 'negative feedback' against Modernism. Hamilton allows Larkin's dalliance with Modernism in the form of his 'periods' with early (Eliot-influenced) Auden and Yeats, but forcefully states that they 'offer almost nothing' towards the forming of Larkin's voice, as opposed to Hardy, who it would seem is largely responsible for Larkin's 'voice' as it appears in his first 'mature' collection, *The Less Deceived* in 1955.

Whether in the general categorising of Bragg, the more deferent reflections of Sampson or the supposed certainties of Hamilton, this second line of tradition has been generally accepted as true both by Larkin's supporters and by his detractors. It serves several ends. It allows Larkin to be thought of as proof that 'traditional' English poets could still be formed by pre-war sensibilities like Hardy even after the sea-change that Modernism effected. It allows for the more unpleasant and publicly known of Larkin's personal views to be seen to be merely congruent with a generally

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<sup>115</sup> Hamilton, 1988, p.310.

retroactive and self-limiting tendency. Finally, it allows Larkin to form one pole of post-Modernist English verse, while Ted Hughes forms the other, and a scale of sorts is established by which to organise verse both contemporaneous to and following those two poets.

However, both the first and second lines of tradition are misconceived. Larkin himself rejected the first – as he says in the interview – and, often in the teeth of wide opposition, others have gone some way to rejecting the second. By far the clearest rejection of the second line is that of Edna Longley, who recognises the importance of Edward Thomas in understanding the actual complexities of Larkin's influences:

It sometimes looks as if Larkin, like Thomas, has to live down affiliations with the wrong minor poetic school. ...Larkin has been as firmly prised apart from the Movement as Thomas from the Georgians. Although qualitative distinctions must be made, this sundering could one day leave him vulnerably solitary like Thomas, credited with anomalous excellence, a shrine to be routinely saluted one one's way to the big altars, while his central contribution to modern poetry is ignored.

...if [in his *Oxford Book*] instead of flogging the dead horses of Gibson and Squire, Larkin had placed a more limited selection from the minor figures in relation to a doubled representation of Thomas and of Owen, he might have found what he was looking for, and filled in his own genealogy.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Longley, 1986, pp. 116-7.

Longley makes two valuable points here. Firstly, it is dangerous and unhelpful to view literary history and poetic genealogies to be a simple matter of either cliques and movements or ‘anomalous excellence[s]’ – remarkable individuals who seemingly appear fully-formed and possess an equally remarkable lack of connection to anyone else. Secondly, Longley argues for the importance of Thomas and Wilfred Owen as not merely the survivors of Georgianism – or its most successful writers – but the two poets who acted as a discriminating conduit for the better elements of early-20<sup>th</sup> Century poetry (the influence of Hardy, for example), but whose individual and combined influence would allow Larkin to contribute further to modern poetry, without having to worry about the ‘dead horse’ or ‘stale’ influences of the Georgians.

Longley points out that, via Thomas and Owen, the positive influence of 19<sup>th</sup>-Century poetry can continue to progress once Georgianism had passed away. For this to be the case, as I contend that it is, and for this ‘third’ line or tradition to be sufficiently different from the first and second lines suggested, then Thomas and Owen – and, I would add, Auden after them – must have demonstrated a particular aspect of poetry which Larkin prized both for its ‘traditional’ and non-Georgian characteristics. This aspect, I will demonstrate, is that of studied impersonality. This trait was dominant in Thomas and Owen’s work, but also carried over into the post-Eliot poetry of W. H. Auden and even, though to a lesser extent, in that of Dylan Thomas. These four writers would combine to have an important role in the shaping of a studied impersonality all of Larkin’s own.

## 1.2 Misconceptions

Generally speaking, what were the ‘accepted’ pre-1914 influences for a poet of Larkin’s generation – or one of the Movement – to admit to? As the man who had a hand both during Larkin’s life and after his death in trying to remake him in his own image (and with his own tastes), Kingsley Amis provides a useful list of these ‘acceptable’ writers. When reviewing *High Windows* (1974), Amis argues for certain poets the distinction of passing ‘the night-owl test’:

When everyone else has gone to bed, how many poets compete successfully with a new recording of Tchaikovsky B flat minor as accompaniment to the final scotch?...remarkably few: Housman, parts of Graves, Betjeman, the early Tennyson, the Macaulay of ‘Horatius’, the early R. S. Thomas, and Philip Larkin. The quality they share is immediacy, density, strength in a sense analogous to that in which the scotch is strong.<sup>117</sup>

Admittedly, elsewhere in the piece, Amis remarks that his ‘test’ of these poets is ‘a more searching and serious one than anything involving hierarchies of merit’ – so how seriously do we take the above list? – but he also describes ‘Victorian literary values’ as ‘usually the best of guides’, and this is telling. Of the poets described above – Larkin aside, though Amis clearly doesn’t think so – three are doggedly Victorian, while Graves was a Georgian who had survived the First World War without it changing his poetry (interestingly, Larkin once said that he liked Amis’s verse best

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<sup>117</sup> Kingsley Amis, ‘A Poet for Our Time’, originally appeared in the *Observer* 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1974. Reprinted in *The Amis Collection* (London: Hutchinson, 1990), pp. 211-2.

‘when he’s being himself, not when he’s Robert Graves’<sup>118</sup>, which seems to suggest that he saw Graves’s surviving Georgianism as a weakness), Betjeman was essentially a throwback poet (whom Larkin, though in a positive manner, described as ‘like William Morris’<sup>119</sup>, another Victorian), and Amis’s liking for early R. S. Thomas is explained in his letters as due to those poems’ reminding him of Clare and Hopkins. The generally Victorian character of this list is more than Amis talking about his accompaniment to his scotch, it is also a calculated effort on his part to align Larkin with these poets.

Amis’s list is important, though, in demonstrating that (even in 1974) there was the preconception that Larkin was seen as an anti-Modernist as much by his supposed ‘traditional’ English influences as by his pronouncements, critical writings and poetry.

There is a common misconception about the eventual result, or climax of Larkin’s early and ‘English’ influences. The idea is that the young Larkin – for which is taken anything written prior to the poems included in *The Less Deceived* (1955) – moved from one poet to the other, before graduating to the ‘Great’ poetry of Yeats and then Hardy, apparently seamlessly. While this would seem to be self-evidently problematic (reading the contemporary or at least recent verse of Edward Thomas, Wilfred Owen, W. H. Auden and Dylan Thomas *before* reading the earlier work of the older Yeats and Hardy, and these last two virtually eradicating any earlier reading or influence of the others), it is a point of view repeatedly put.

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<sup>118</sup> Larkin in conversation with Ian Hamilton, originally appeared in *The London Magazine*, November 1964. Collected in *FR*, p. 25. Hereafter, Larkin-Hamilton 1964.

<sup>119</sup> Larkin in conversation with Neil Powell, originally appeared in *Tracks* Summer 1967. Collected in *FR*, p. 29.

Donald Davie, in a remarkably self-assured – but also self-aware – act of projection, put the case thus:

I shall take it for granted that Philip Larkin is a very Hardy-esque poet; that Hardy has indeed been the determining influence in Larkin's career, once he had overcome a youthful infatuation with Yeats. Larkin has testified to that effect repeatedly, and any open-minded reader of the poems of the two men must recognise many resemblances, though Larkin, it is true, has shown himself a poet of altogether narrower range – it is only a part of Hardy that is perpetuated by Larkin into the 1960s, but it is a central and important part.

The narrowness of the range, and the slenderness of Larkin's record so far (three slim collections of poems, and of those only two that are relevant) might seem to suggest that he cannot bear the weight of significance that I want to put on him, as the central figure in English poetry over the last twenty years.<sup>120</sup>

That Davie views *The North Ship* as not 'relevant' is odd, as the prevailing opinion (established, in his introduction to Faber's 1965 republication of *TNS*, by Larkin himself) is that the differences between *TNS* and *The Less Deceived* are the clear

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<sup>120</sup> Davie 1973, p. 63-4.

indicators of the abandoning of Yeats for Hardy; one would think that Davie had time for it if only to illustrate the ‘youthful infatuation with Yeats’.

Admittedly, Davie’s article appears in a book in which he is arguing for the acknowledgement of Hardy as *the* definitive poet of the twentieth century, so some bias towards twisting a poet like Larkin (who had himself suggested more than a little debt to Hardy) into a man of flawless indebtedness to Hardy is predictable. Clive James, however, recognised where misuse of Larkin to justify a narrow agenda was taking place:

Davie mentions Larkin’s conversion from Yeats to Hardy after *The North Ship* in 1946, thus tacitly proposing from the start that Larkin was doing the kind of severe choosing which Davie asserts is essential. Neither at this initial point, nor later on when Larkin is considered at length, is the possibility allowed that Yeats’s influence might have lingered on alongside, or even been compounded with, Hardy’s influence. One realises with unease that Davie has not only enjoyed the preface to the re-issue of *The North Ship*, he has been utterly convinced by it: instead of taking Larkin’s autobiographical scraps as parables, he is treating them as the realities of intellectual development. Larkin conjures up a young mind in which Hardy drives out Yeats, and Davie believes in it.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Clive James, ‘Yeats v. Hardy in Davie’s Larkin’ originally appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement* 13<sup>th</sup> June 1973. Collected in *At The Pillars Of Hercules* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 66.

In fact, as James attempts to offer, diplomatically,

Technically, Larkin's heritage is a combination of Hardy and Yeats – it can't possibly be a substitution of the first by the second. The texture of Larkin's verse is all against any such notion.<sup>122</sup>

Combination, or what Andrew Motion termed Larkin's view of 'literary evolution, rather than revolution', would seem the only reasonable way to discuss the influences that Larkin exhibited. A recent, non-academic, summation of Larkin involves the open-minded judgement that

He was infatuated with Dylan Thomas's poems and with Yeats up to *Words for Music Perhaps*. Hardy was his tonic against the excesses of Bohemia. Auden provided a crucial vaccination against Romanticism.<sup>123</sup>

This summation of Larkin's reading or influences, though a little slapdash and random in its phrasing, offers a valuable reminder that combination, rather than saturation swiftly followed by replacement or rejection, is a more helpful way to think about Larkin's influences.

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid. p. 69.

<sup>123</sup> Michael Schmidt, 'Philip Larkin', *The Great Modern Poets* (London: Quercus, 2006), p. 153.

What can be said is that there is a popular, simplified narrative, as regards Larkin's poetic 'forming' (interestingly the only person Larkin ever admitted to having 'formed me' was Cyril Connolly, or rather the latter's editorship of *Horizon*) by his accepted, 'English' tradition forebears. Ian Hamilton's summation of successive 'rescues' and 'captures' of Larkin from one poet by another is an example of this simplified narrative. 'Rescued' and 'captured' suggest revolution rather than evolution, with the idea of influences combining together, as James put it, given short shrift.

It is indeed true that Larkin viewed Yeats as a poet he had significantly engaged with in the 1940s. In his 1965 Introduction to the re-issue of *The North Ship*, Larkin describes an evening at Oxford in 1943 when Vernon Watkins addressed the university English Club and 'swamped us with Yeats... As a result I spent the next three years trying to write like Yeats, not because I liked his personality or understood his ideas but out of infatuation with his music (to use the word I think Vernon used).'<sup>124</sup>

Yeats, however, was much closer to Modernism, and in order perhaps to protect himself from accusations of hypocrisy regarding his occasional dismissals of Modernist poetry, Larkin always made a distinction between Yeats, whom he viewed as 'Celtic', and Eliot and Pound who were 'American' to him. This was important to his understanding and unease with Modernism as a movement. There was never, therefore, going to be a *Waste Land* period for Larkin, certainly not after his Auden-esque younger work.

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<sup>124</sup> Larkin 1965, p. 29.

In moving from Auden to Yeats, Larkin had to swallow a certain amount of spiritual transcendentalism and more mythic language than his early or later work demonstrates was natural to his writing, but Yeats allowed him to experiment with writing verse outside of the English tradition while maintaining certain of that tradition's key characteristics; pastoral scenes, more tragic war poetry, dreams and Christian imagery.

It can be argued that Larkin's use of Yeats to 'tighten up' his poetry was indicative of his wider view towards Modernism, or poetry outside of his perceived English tradition. This view saw that the changes to language brought about by Modernism should not simply breed imitation but instead challenge more traditional English poetry to adapt to and incorporate useful aspects of the new, while continuing to 'write on the same themes' but changing 'the old styles' in order to 'do a little better than those before us'<sup>125</sup>.

One of the things I would seek to demonstrate through an analysis of Larkin's engagement with Edward Thomas, Owen, Auden and Dylan Thomas is that Larkin did not simply cut from one and run to another, leaving any influence or effect on his writing behind. Instead, Larkin's approach was one of identifying characteristics and aspects of each poet's work that he either admired or found useful in his own writing, and it is the eventual progression and combination of these aspects – rather than simple changes of allegiance – that would help create the voice largely described as 'Larkinesque'.

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<sup>125</sup> Thomas Hardy, quoted in Robert Graves' *Goodbye To All That* (London: Penguin, 2000 ed.) [1929], p. 51.

### 1.3 Edward Thomas and Wilfred Owen

The old Edwardian brigade do make their brief little world look pretty tempting. All home-made cakes and croquet, bright ideas, bright uniforms. Always the same picture: high summer, the long days in the sun, slim volumes of verse, crisp linen, the smell of starch. What a romantic picture. Phoney, too, of course. It must have rained sometimes. Still, even I regret it somehow, phoney or not. If you've no world of your own, it's rather pleasant to regret the passing of someone else's.<sup>126</sup>

When, in 'I Remember, I Remember' and 'Coming', Larkin described his childhood as variously a 'nothing' and 'a forgotten boredom', the sense of vacancy pervading the words is similar to the bitterness spoken by Jimmy Porter against 'the old Edwardian brigade', and Larkin's nostalgia for an England he never knew often serves as a substitute for the 'nothing' he insists was actually the case. In poems like 'At Grass' and 'Going, Going', he mourns the passing of the England of Empire and gymkhana, and dreads the unintentional transformation of Edwardian England slowly into the 'first slum of Europe'.

Having been born in the 1920s, Larkin is part of a generation that were both suspicious of the present (permanently, in many cases) and full of longing for the pre-1914 England which they felt they had just missed. In Larkin's case, this was of poetic

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<sup>126</sup> Jimmy Porter in John Osborne's *Look Back In Anger* (London: Evan Brothers Ltd., 1957), pp. 13-14.

concern as well as social, and was most clearly expressed in his talk of an English tradition

...coming from the nineteenth century, with people like Hardy, which was interrupted partly by the Great War, when many English poets were killed off<sup>127</sup>

Larkin's engagement with the poetry of the First World War is unavoidably – it seems – bound up with the poetry that came afterwards, but also with that which came before, and it's perhaps here where Larkin's opponents and defenders 'hitch Larkin firmly to [among others] Hardy'<sup>128</sup>, and see his reading of First World War poets as an attempt to reach back to an older English tradition:

Larkin posits an 'English tradition' running back to the late Victorian period, the means of transmission of an authentic national identity. But he is also unsparingly clear-sighted that the continuities that might have been represented by Owen and Thomas were fatally severed by their deaths in battle.<sup>129</sup>

His reading of the poetic scene immediately post-1918 was that of 'outside' influences such as Eliot, Pound and Yeats (all of whom, it should be noted, were writing before

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<sup>127</sup> Larkin-Thwaite 1973 p. 96.

<sup>128</sup> Steve Clark, "The Lost Displays: Larkin and Empire". Booth, 2000, p. 175.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

and during the war as well) gaining a hegemony over English poetic influence due to the lack of a more 'traditional' English poetry which either petered out in the face of war's horror, couldn't stand up to Modernism, or was killed off with the poets who were killed.

As we have seen, Larkin's flawed notion, with his *Oxford Book*, cites the First World War and 'the really tremendous impact of Yeats, whom I think of as Celtic, and Eliot, whom I think of as American'<sup>130</sup> as the two events which, between them, buried or eclipsed a supposed English tradition, coming from the nineteenth century, of Hardy and others. Larkin's labelling of Yeats and Eliot's influences as being 'non-English' is important as that leaves the First World War largely to 'blame' for the supposed tradition disappearing. That Larkin's subsequent search amongst the immediately pre-war Georgians actually came to nothing (in terms of finding a tradition of quality to equal Hardy) didn't matter, because two very important poets (in terms of Larkin's formation as a poet) died in the war: Edward Thomas and Wilfred Owen.

What divides Thomas and Owen, in Larkin's view, are their 'subjects' and also their roles. Owen was 'a war poet' to Larkin because

a 'war' poet is not one who chooses to commemorate or celebrate a war but one who reacts against having a war thrust upon him: he is chained, that is, to a historical event, and an abnormal one at that.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Larkin-Thwaite 1973, p. 96.

<sup>131</sup> Larkin, 'The War Poet' originally appeared in the *Listener* 10<sup>th</sup> October 1963. Collected in *RW*, p. 159. Hereafter: Larkin 1963.

This is in stark contrast to Thomas, who Larkin believed

[...]was not a war poet. He volunteered, it is true, but only after contemplating emigration to America, applying for a job in the War Office, and attending for interview for a post in a boys' school. The Army did not so much give him a subject as bring his proper subject, England, into focus.

[...]

In consequence, the England of his poems is not a Georgian dream, but the England of 1915, of farms and men 'going out', of flowers still growing because there were no boys to pick them for the girls.<sup>132</sup>

It is true that Owen (like thousands of others) volunteered for idealistic reasons which then suffered, and it is this supposed shift of poetic/public mood from that of Rupert Brooke's 'The Soldier', through Sassoon's 'The General' to Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum Est' that often caricatures the First World War's poetry as a series of bitter learning-curves. The frequent sentimentality of this caricature was perhaps one of the reasons which led Yeats to reject Owen from his *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* in 1936, and include only the most inoffensive Sassoon pieces he could find, under the claim that 'passive suffering is not a theme for poetry. In all the great tragedies, tragedy is a joy to the man who dies'<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Larkin, 'Grub Vale' review of a critical biography of Thomas. Originally appeared in the *Guardian*, 12<sup>th</sup> February 1970. Collected in *FR*, pp. 189-190.

<sup>133</sup> W. B. Yeats, Introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892-1935* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), p. xxxiv. Hereafter: Yeats 1936.

It is also true that Thomas considered other options before volunteering for the Front, but in 1915 (on Boxing Day, after what seems to have been a tough family Christmas with his gung-ho patriot father) he wrote a poem – ‘This is no case of petty right or wrong’ – which seeks to offer calm but heartfelt reasons for fighting for one’s country. This poem – coupled with the famous line ‘now all roads lead to France’ does imbue a sense of inevitability to Thomas’ joining the war. The arguments in ‘This is no case...’, however, never quite convince in the way that Rupert Brooke’s warrior patriotism does (insofar as its sincerity cannot be doubted, even if the motives are questionable). Indeed, John Gray has gone so far as to ascribe suicidal urges to Thomas’ joining up, with work like ‘This is no case...’ designed merely to cover his tracks<sup>134</sup>.

This latter point is important in a consideration of Larkin’s interest in Thomas and Owen, as it demonstrates an unavoidable chilling of voice and tone brought on by the presence of death in the work. Owen’s poetry (perhaps most obviously ‘Strange Meeting’, but also ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’) is both fascinated with and appalled by the coming of death, in a way that Sassoon (though something of a nihilist on the battlefield) never let overcome his anger at the inefficiencies and complacencies of war. Thomas’s apparently irresistible tug towards death perhaps explains his value to Larkin in the same way as Yeats’s in a poem of the First World War:

I balanced all, brought all to mind,

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<sup>134</sup>‘...he [Thomas] coveted death, found himself locked into an introspection that he couldn’t get out of...I think he went to war in order to die, that he bequeathed his intractable problems to death.’ John Gray in a discussion with Martin Amis and Blake Morrison at Manchester University, July 2010 ([www.martinamisweb.com/events](http://www.martinamisweb.com/events)).

The years to come seemed waste of breath,

A waste of breath the years behind

In balance with this life, this death.<sup>135</sup>

It's an obvious point, but Larkin's own fascination with death was hugely influenced by these unavoidably colder poems and poets, with more than a little nihilism and suicidal tendency than has ever been allowed in considerations of Larkin's work.

Larkin is right in terms of dividing up Owen and Thomas's 'subjects', as Thomas never wrote directly about the Trenches, and Owen wrote little of worth that wasn't centred upon them.

What can be seen in Larkin's prizing of both Thomas and Owen is a recognition of the two chief elements Larkin thought important in English poetry and the combination of which would shape much of his own poetry. With Thomas, Larkin sees a similar style and perception to that which he admired in Hardy and Hopkins. With Owen, Larkin sees the blunt realism of Siegfried Sassoon (and partly Robert Graves, who also encouraged Owen, too) perfected in a studied impersonality and resultant universality. In both, the cold presence of death was crucial.

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<sup>135</sup> Yeats, 'An Irish Airman Foresees his Death', *Yeats's Poems* ed. A. N. Jeffares (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), p. 237.

With Thomas, the element Larkin most obviously likes and shows influence of in his own poetry ('Here', 'The Whitsun Weddings') is what he called 'Thomas's meditative, fitful wandering line'<sup>136</sup>, and can also be seen in Larkin's liking of Hardy.

In Larkin's selection of Thomas for his *Oxford Book*, there are flashes of Thomas' influence on Larkin's own poetry, particularly that 'meditative, fitful wandering line'. In 'Adlestrop', Thomas's 'line' is most strongly present in the stopping to listen that dominates the poem. Like Larkin's 'The Whitsun Weddings', the poet has stumbled upon a sound – for Thomas birds, for Larkin weddings – which reminds the poet of the isolated nature of their listening. Both Thomas and Larkin describe small stations, which would eventually be closed by the reforms of Dr Beeching (which closed a large number of local or regional stations) and so are, in themselves, a reminder of an England that is remote, and either temporal or hard to return to, and an England Larkin would go some way to immortalising the 'end' of.

If Larkin's concerns are the change brought about to the train journey by the change which the couples themselves have undergone, then 'Adlestrop' is important as it demonstrates the change that an otherwise unremarkable, transitory station undergoes through the sound of birdsong.

And for that minute a blackbird sang

Close by, and round him, mistier,

Farther and farther, all the birds

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<sup>136</sup> Larkin, 'Keeping up with the Graveses' originally appeared in the *Guardian*, 15<sup>th</sup> May 1959. Hereafter: Larkin 1959. Collected in *FR*, p. 206.

Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.<sup>137</sup>

The technical aspect of 'The Whitsun Weddings' that is most radical is the use of four-syllable second lines in the otherwise decasyllabic stanzas. If all the other lines in the stanzas seek to transmit the constant rhythm of a moving train, then the second lines' serve as the 'stoppings' in the verse; the stations.

As if out on the end of an event

Waving goodbye

To something that survived it. Struck, I leant

[...]

Success so huge and wholly farcical;

The women shared

The secret like a happy funeral;

[...]

Just long enough to settle hats and say

*I nearly died,*

A dozen marriages got under way.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Edward Thomas, 'Adlestrop', *The Annotated Collected Poems* ed. E. Longley (Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2008), p. 51. Hereafter: Longley 2008.

<sup>138</sup> Larkin, 'The Whitsun Weddings', *CP*, pp. 114-6.

The effect of the short second lines is to bring the reader up, as though stopping or pausing, and almost encourages them to 'look around' the poem, just as the poet is looking around the station. A similar effect is achieved in 'Adlestrop', with Thomas' use of short sentences and quatrains that try not to overload the descriptions, so that 'All the birds / Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire' is the weightiest image that the poem leaves, its shires stacking up, so that the effect of birdsong filling the air is achieved. In Larkin's poem, too, the mention of 'Where sky and Lincolnshire and water meet' is a clear echoing rhyme of Thomas' counties.

The 'meditative, fitful wandering line' is elsewhere to be found in Larkin in 'Here'. Almost a sister poem to 'The Whitsun Weddings', 'Here' uses imagery reminiscent of Thomas to chart a rail journey from the city out to the countryside.

Swerving east, from rich industrial shadows  
And traffic all night north; swerving through fields  
Too thin and thistled to be called meadows,  
And now and then a harsh-named halt,

The alliteration of the 'harsh-named halt' acts as almost a stopper to the stanza, another station, similar to those of the second-line breaks in 'The Whitsun Weddings'. The descriptions of the fields is similar to Thomas'

[...]angled fields

Of grass and grain bounded by oak and thorn,

(‘Wind and Mist’<sup>139</sup>)

However, Larkin’s sense of the countryside he sees is always separate (the poet is in a train, after all)

And out beyond its mortgaged half-built edges

Fast-shadowed wheat-fields, running high as hedges,

Isolate villages, where removed lives

Loneliness clarifies. Here silence stands

Like heat. Here leaves unnoticed thicken,

Hidden weeds flower, neglected waters quicken,

Luminously-peopled air ascends;

And past the poppies bluish neutral distance

Ends the land suddenly beyond a beach

Of shapes and shingle. Here is unfenced existence,

Facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Longley 2008, p. 73.

<sup>140</sup> Larkin, ‘Here’, *CP*, pp. 136-7.

Where for Thomas the countryside bustles, willing to accept the wanderer or poet into its life, Larkin's countryside is separate, private. The 'leaves unnoticed' are almost anti-social, the weeds hiding their flowering from eyes, and the 'unfenced existence' is impossible for the watcher, visitor or poet to engage with, standing as it does 'untalkative, out of reach'.

Whereas with 'Adlestrop', the poet or visitor is swallowed up in the birdsong, in 'Here' the countryside's existence is separate and only describable by the poet. The sense of the transitory, removable nature of train travel is also heavily present in 'Here', with no facet of natural beauty (like 'Adlestrop's birdsong) able to hold the poet in one place or with the environment.

Like Thomas's, Wilfred Owen's poetry is concerned with coming death, but with Owen, Larkin's interest is in the relatively new style, which Owen had learned from Siegfried Sassoon, (who had in turn perhaps honed it after Robert Graves, though Graves himself showed little evidence of such honing) which allowed the poets of the First World War to write bluntly and realistically about death. Larkin refers to Sassoon's poetry as being formed by a poet 'whose characteristic voice was a bitter casualness'<sup>141</sup>, and talks about his effect on Owen's writing as being undeniable:

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<sup>141</sup> Larkin 1963, p. 160.

...it is hard to imagine that Owen would have written 'Smile, Smile, Smile' or 'The Dead-Beat' without this coincidental and fortunate contact [with Sassoon].<sup>142</sup>

Larkin goes on to observe that the difference between Sassoon and Owen is that

While Sassoon sought to turn the insensitivity of war into disgust, Owen tried to turn it into compassion. Sassoon concentrated on the particular ('When Dick was killed last week he looked like that, / Flapping all along the firestep like a fish'); Owen deliberately discarded all but generalities.<sup>143</sup>

This is not an entirely fair or accurate distinction between Owen and Sassoon. 'Dulce et Decorum Est', with its 'he's and 'him's, refers to a specific (if unnamed) individual, while 'The Sentry' limits the subject of the poem to his post and his subordinate rank to Owen (whom he addresses as 'Sir'); both of these poems recount horrific suffering, but it is of unnamed soldiers, which chills their compassion. At the same time, Sassoon's 'Aftermath', though it uses specific examples of the war, is a far more universal call to remembrance than Larkin suggests he is capable of.

For Larkin, what Owen achieved was an advanced detachment from the war, which Sassoon's anger at the officers and civilians would never allow him. Larkin quotes Owen's 'Strange Meeting' (not in Larkin's *Oxford Book*, interestingly, but

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

perhaps he felt it was over-anthologised already) to detect a wider significance in Owen's poetry:

'It seemed that out of battle I escaped...' It was less an escape than a contrived withdrawal into a mythopoeic impersonality that so far from muffling his words lent them extraordinary resonance.<sup>144</sup>

The label 'war poet' becomes meaningless to Larkin, regarding Owen, in large part because Owen has achieved the 'contrived withdrawal', which Larkin so highly regards in poetry, regardless of subject matter, and which must – like that of Thomas's be partly due to the cold presence of imminent or accepted death. Sassoon – even at his most acidic – is concerned with living to rage on, while both Thomas and Owen are able to cast more than a little of Yeats's cold eye on life, on death, due to their cool acceptance of mortality.

In Larkin's writing about Owen, he references Hopkins when reviewing the matter of 'choice' when it comes to subjects:

However well he [the war poet] does it, however much we agree that the war happened and ought to be written about, there is still a tendency for us to withhold our highest praise on the grounds that a poet's choice of subject should seem an action, not a reaction. 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', we feel, would have

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

been markedly inferior if Hopkins had been a survivor from the passenger list.<sup>145</sup>

This is, in part, a concession to Yeats's infamous rejection of Owen (which later in his review Larkin attacks) in his 1936 introduction to his *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, when Yeats spoke of his 'distaste' for the War poetry of the First World War, saying that 'passive suffering is not a theme for poetry.'<sup>146</sup>

However, while Larkin does cite certain 'historical predictabilities' and 'historical limitations' as affecting Owen's work, his mention of Hopkins' talent is not meant as a slight against Owen. Being aware of W. B. Yeats' famous omission of Owen from his own Oxford anthology in the 1930s, Larkin is at pains to point out Owen's achievement:

...In the end Owen's war is not Sassoon's war but all war; not particular suffering but all suffering; not particular waste but all waste. If his verse did not cease to be valid in 1918, it is because these things continued, and the necessity for compassion in them.<sup>147</sup>

And just in case his rejection of Yeats' dismissal of Owen is not explicit enough

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Yeats 1936, p. xxxiv.

<sup>147</sup> Larkin 1963.

This makes him the only twentieth-century poet who can be read after Hardy without a sense of bathos. His secret lies in the retort he had already written when W. B. Yeats made his fatuous condemnation 'Passive suffering is not a theme for poetry':  
'Above all, I am not concerned with poetry.'<sup>148</sup>

Owen's value, to Larkin, is the 'mythopoeic impersonality' which leaves Owen free to view his writings not even as poetry, and so is unrestrained by the historical predictabilities or postures otherwise associated with 'the war poet'.

This value finds itself most clearly shown in the similarities between Larkin's 'The Whitsun Weddings' and Owen's 'The Send-Off'. In Owen's poem, there is a sense of the world's moving the soldiers without their realising it, as if the war has removed them from the rest of humanity already:

Then, unmoved, signals nodded, and a lamp

Winked to the guard.

So secretly, like wrongs hushed-up, they went.

They were not ours:

We never heard to which front these were sent;<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Wilfred Owen, 'The Send-Off', *The Poems of Wilfred Owen* ed. J. Stallworthy (London: Chatto & Windus, 1985, 1990 ed.), p. 149.

The men's youthful enthusiasm does not move the signals or mechanisms which bear them towards death, and while an earlier allusion to these troops as being from 'the upland camp' (not local recruits, in other words), it is more the joining of the war that has made these men 'not ours'. Owen's impersonality completely removes the emotional importance of the men's idealism, their patriotism or any factor other than their being meat for the grinder.

In 'The Whitsun Weddings', Larkin's tone matches Owen's, and the sense of a social formality (like joining up) like marriage depersonalising the couples, placing them in a far more general and detached context:

At first, I didn't notice what a noise  
The weddings made  
Each station that we stopped at: sun destroys  
The interest of what's happening in the shade,  
And down the long cool platforms whoops and skirls  
I took for porters larking with the mails,  
And went on reading.<sup>150</sup>

The weddings are predictable, as Larkin cites Owen's subject-matter as being historically predictable, and even the specificity of 'Whitsun' is annual, repeated. That

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<sup>150</sup> 'The Whitsun Weddings', *CP*, p. 114-116.

Larkin directly mistakes the predictable wedding-noise for the expected, regular station noises demonstrates not just how generic the married couples are, but also how utterly impersonal marriage has rendered them; ‘A dozen marriages got under way’, as he says later.

Larkin allows the couples a moment of individuality, but even that is tainted by it referring to couples generally and, like Owen’s not-knowing to which front the troops were sent, highlights the separation taking place as the couples pass into social structures

They watched the landscape, sitting side by side

– An Odeon went past, a cooling tower,

And someone running up to bowl – and none

Thought of the others they would never meet

Or how their lives would all contain this hour.<sup>151</sup>

The impersonal register of Owen is present here as the wedding becomes ‘this hour’, which is also shared by the poet reading on the train, and the couples are as much controlled by the train taking them away as the soldiers were.

With Owen, Larkin saw the ‘bitter casualness’ of Sassoon turned into a universal impersonality of Owen’s own, which allowed Owen (as it had not allowed Sassoon) to still imbue the events described in the poetry with lyrical charm and a

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

sense of observational beauty that Larkin made quite his own while never losing the impersonality.

If we broadly accept the notion, that what Steve Clark referred to as the ‘continuities’ to the pre-war English tradition were best represented by Thomas and Owen, but that the stopping of those continuities through their deaths was also representative of a halt in that tradition, then Larkin’s engagement with both poets is less an act of nostalgia and can be seen more as act of salvaging. Larkin’s belief that one of the reasons for Eliot and Pound’s hegemony being a physical lack of poets – killed in the First World War – to provide continuity to an English tradition informs his readings of Thomas and Owen, because they are the two poets whom he most seems to have felt could have provided that continuity. What Larkin takes from those poets, in that case, is representative of what he felt much post-war Modernist poetry to lack; from Thomas the sense of isolation inherent in nature, as well as the observations of change to the countryside that ‘updated’ the tradition of Hardy and Tennyson, and from Owen the studied impersonality and resultant universality that still allow for lyrical charm and observational beauty.

He felt these facets to be important for a tradition of English poetry to continue. He also felt that Eliot and Pound, for all their positive effect in ‘tightening up the language’, neither replaced, nor marginalised the need for that tradition and those aspects of it.

Thomas Hardy’s comment about ‘the same old...’ English forms and subjects, it has been suggested, explained the first responses to and reactions against Eliot and Pound’s Modernist poetry of the 1920s, and so the English tradition survived *The Waste Land* because, as Al Alvarez put it,

Since about 1930 the machinery of modern English poetry seems to have been controlled by a series of negative feedbacks designed to produce precisely the effect Hardy wanted.<sup>152</sup>

However, it is worth pointing out that Alvarez' use of Hardy's comment to Graves is as much a wilful misuse as those who saw Larkin's 'rejection' of one influence for another as evidence of a determined conservatism in the English poetry of the time. Hardy was not offering the statement as a manifesto, and Graves includes it almost as a footnote to the older poet's life. Alvarez used it in order to ascribe some conspiratorial element to what he saw as 'negative feedbacks' against the influence of Modernism.

The first of these 'feedbacks', as far as Alvarez saw it, was the early poetry of W. H. Auden, the poet – it can be argued – that Larkin saw as picking up where Thomas and Owen had left off, but assimilating the valuable advances of Eliot's Modernism as well.

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<sup>152</sup> Alvarez 1962, p. 21.

## **1.4 Larkin and W. H. Auden**

### **(i) Larkin as the 'other' Auden**

Usually, where Larkin is defined or compared against Auden is in the differing paths they took during and after the Second World War. Auden was seen as in thrall to a wide range of 'foreign' influences from Eliot to Cavafy, while Larkin was thought to have experimented with Yeats and then picked up where Hardy had left off, writing what Larkin himself referred to (in summarising some critics' opinion of his work) as a 'welfare state sub-poetry'. This poetry was seen to comfort and reassure the reading public after the war in a way in which Auden seemed uninterested in doing, John Masefield (then Laureate) was emotionally incapable of and Betjeman was viewed as insufficiently serious to do.

To many in the English cultural world Auden was never forgiven his 'flight' to America on the eve of the Second World War, and this apparent desertion was seen as a literary one as well. If Auden had been the first poet post-Owen and post-Thomas to, in Larkin's eyes, continue the English tradition *and* learn from the new poetry of Eliot, then his abandoning of England in 1939 was only equalled by his abandoning of his early style for the more 'American' character of 'Later Auden'. Larkin, and many others, preferred to view Auden as having died in 1939. This of course left space for the 'next' poet in the English tradition, and I would contend that Larkin for some time saw himself as the 'heir' to early Auden.

Mature Larkin and late Auden, in other words, are popularly thought to be very different poets, writing very different poetry. In a sense this was the first serious poetic contrast that Larkin would be involved in; the second was with Ted Hughes.

What I seek to show is that Auden far more enduringly influenced Larkin than has been previously acknowledged. Common perception has never questioned Larkin's reading of and admiration of pre-1940, early Auden and the poet himself was happy to admit to this. After the publication of *Another Time* by Auden in 1940, however, it is held that Larkin and others rejected this and subsequent work on the grounds of its difference (in fact more of a watershed than a complete shift, which would come later) from the earlier 'great' poems.

In fact, *Another Time* had a far greater effect on Larkin than he or others have been prepared to admit. There are poems in each of Larkin's three mature collections which I will seek to show are similar to Auden's *Another Time* poems, whether as re-imaginings, Larkinesque versions of or successors to the Auden work.

One suspects that Auden knew himself to be viewed – or at least to have been viewed in the 1930s – as the pre-eminent poet of his generation, and while it was not until the several high-profile reviews of *The Whitsun Weddings* that Larkin was afforded a similar eminence, both poets could be said to be both the public writer of their constituent literary generations and the most highly-rated as poets.

These parallels may appear superficial, but in terms of identifying a recognisable sequence or pattern in the poetic landscape that precedes and follows the Second World War, such superficiality is actually quite helpful. Two poets of successive generations who were friends with (at least some of) their literary contemporaries, and who would eventually outshine them – if only in the anthologies – to go on to be the 'representative' or 'definitive' poet of those generations. Of such vague similarities are lineages and traditions made.

Auden was similarly careful about laying out an English line as Larkin would later be, in his failed 'notion' of an English tradition. That being said, Auden's *A Certain World* can be seen as his attempt to do so in much the same way as Larkin's *Oxford Book of Twentieth Century Verse* was his attempt to formalise such a line. Auden, like Larkin, was perhaps aware that to speak of a poetic tradition or poetic forebears is to make a claim to inherit it.

How much the two poets' work was influenced by an English tradition is tempered by the anxiety of both writers not to suggest they be compared, or worse contrasted, with their illustrious forebears. Like the unspeakable name of God, with both Auden and Larkin it is as if to clearly identify the progression of poetry would be to rob it of its value, or at the very least to rob their own work of any value which could be seen to be crafted from influence.

Auden is popularly read as a poet of two careers. The first of these broadly covers the 1930s, with his voice the dominant, engaged voice of the period; political, fashionable and satirical. If Auden wrote about the more traditional English pastoral subjects, then it was with a tailored version of Eliot's English, and both the technical language – be it geographic or that of military or strategic planning – and the industrial subject matter were designed to demonstrate the Modern, updated nature of the poetry. This is the Auden that Larkin was most willing to declare public allegiance to; the poet who was making good use of the 'tightening up' of language that Eliot and Pound had applied to poetry, while also showing clear signs of the tradition of Thomas, Owen, Hardy and Housman.

Auden's second career – that Larkin held to begin with the publication of *Another Time* in 1940, although that book contained poetry largely written in England during the 1930s – is largely referred to as his 'American' career, and is held as 'bad Auden', by Larkin, who largely dismisses it. He would certainly not claim any admiration or influence from this second career.

What both of Auden's careers have in common, however, is the cold eye, the studied impersonality that he had taken partly from Eliot and Yeats, but also – as Larkin would have perceived – from Thomas and Owen, not to mention Hardy. This cold eye is even admitted by Ian Hamilton, when he refers to Larkin's Auden-period as being one of 'enslavement to the icy Master'<sup>153</sup>.

In his review of Auden's 1960 collection *Homage to Clio*, in order to highlight what he sees as the stark difference that the 1939 move to America brought about in Auden's work, Larkin starts by imagining

a conversation between one man who had read nothing of his  
[Auden's] after 1940 and another who had read nothing before.<sup>154</sup>

Larkin describes the early poems being those of

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<sup>153</sup> Hamilton 1988, p. 310.

<sup>154</sup> Philip Larkin, 'What's become of Wystan?' originally appeared in *The Spectator*, 15<sup>th</sup> July 1960. Hereafter: Larkin 1960. Collected in *RW*, p. 123.

a tremendously exciting English social poet full of energetic  
unliterary knock-about and unique lucidity of phrase<sup>155</sup>

while Auden's post-1940 work was that of

an engaging, bookish, American talent, too verbose to be  
memorable and too intellectual to be moving.<sup>156</sup>

Interestingly among his contemporaries, the generation who lived through and many of whom fought in the Second World War, Larkin did not invent or extemporise a literary objection to Auden's post-1940 work in order to criticise Auden's perceived cowardice or unpatriotic flight in the face of Nazi aggression. Larkin's objection to Auden's later work is sincerely couched in his seeing an overt change in the style of the poems; he termed it 'American'. In mentioning Auden's *New Year Letter* of 1941, Larkin sadly reflects that

He had become a reader rather than a writer, and the Notes –  
eighty-one pages of James, Kierkegaard, Chekhov, Rilke,  
Nietzsche, Goethe, Milton, Spinoza and so on against fifty-eight  
pages of text – gave warning how far literature was replacing  
experience as material for his verse.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Larkin 1960, p. 125.

What is interesting is that while in 1941 and in 1960 (when he wrote ‘What’s become of Wystan?’) Larkin recognises there as being two Audens, this view would not last – or at least not last in the same form – for long. Less than a decade after ‘What’s become of Wystan?’, Larkin would view ‘both’ Audens as worthy of equal placing in his selection for his *Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse* (1973).

While it is not infallible as a means of identifying Larkin’s ‘favourite’ poetry, his selection for the *Oxford Book* is useful in gauging which poetry he felt best represented a poet. In his selection of Auden’s verse, Larkin’s supposed bias towards the early work is hardly in evidence. Auden has sixteen poems in the *Oxford Book*, taking up twenty-two pages. Larkin was unwilling to be drawn (in the interview regarding the anthology) on which poets he considered ‘the most important’, saying instead

I tended to work more in terms of poems [than pages]. The people you’ve mentioned [Eliot, Hardy, Auden, Yeats, Kipling, Betjeman, Bunting, Dylan Thomas], with one possible exception, I gave no limit to. I just wanted to represent them fully.<sup>158</sup>

It is almost indisputable that Larkin viewed Hardy as the dominant poet in his anthology; he has twenty-six poems; but only Yeats (at nineteen poems) has more

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<sup>158</sup> Larkin-Thwaite 1973, p. 95.

than Auden, while Eliot has only nine, so Larkin was making it clear how important he viewed Auden as being.

What is more interesting is the distribution – across Auden’s ‘two careers’ – of the poems Larkin chose. He may well have been trying to ‘represent them fully’, but Larkin knew that his selection was, after all, *his* selection and so was under no particular pressure to provide a balanced and level selection of certain poets if he felt their careers to be lop-sided or unevenly distributed in terms of quality. With Auden, surely, after the statements made in ‘What’s become of Wystan?’ Larkin could give proper eminence to the early work and forgo any overt duty to show the later, ‘American’ work that he claimed to find so inferior?

There are indeed poems from the 1930s Auden in the *Oxford Book*. ‘Missing’, ‘No Change of Place’, ‘This Lunar Beauty’, ‘That Night When Joy Began’ (from ‘Five Songs’) and ‘The Exiles’ are all taken from the period 1927-33. The next three poems, ‘The summer holds: upon its glittering lake’ and ‘You are the town and We are the clock’ and ‘Night Mail’ are 1935 pieces. Halfway through Larkin’s selection, and it becomes clear that he has cut his choice in half: eight poems for the first career, eight for the second.

Again, this may simply be part of his wish for full representation, but if Larkin truly felt Auden to be – after Hardy and Yeats – the only poet approximate to Eliot in terms of influence and importance, then to give equal placing to the poems supposedly thought to be inferior to the early works suggests otherwise. It suggests that Larkin’s view of the much-maligned *Another Time* (about which he writes so cuttingly at the time of publication) has become more positive than was previously thought; after all, three of the remaining poems are taken from it.

That there was ‘later’ Auden that Larkin felt of sufficient merit or importance to be included is important. These later pieces include ‘The Fall of Rome’ (1947) and ‘Good-Bye To The Mezzogiorno’ (1958 – from the Larkin-mauled *Homage To Clio*, no less), but also two from a collection of Auden’s published whilst Larkin was making his selection – ‘Up there’ and ‘On The Circuit’, both from *About The House* (1966).

While in his letters Larkin extols ‘great Auden’ as the Auden of *The Orators* or *Look, Stranger!* there is only one poem from the latter and none from the former in Larkin’s anthology<sup>159</sup>.

That Larkin would seek to show Auden’s skill and poetic power persisting right up until the year that he (Larkin) started to compile the anthology (1966), demonstrates Larkin’s interest in a valuing of Auden’s ‘second’ career at least as much as his ‘first’, 1930s career.

## **(ii) Larkin and Auden’s early work**

To read Larkin’s early poetry is to recognise the embryonic version of his later, mature voice, with certain styles and techniques being tried out, often depending on which poets Larkin is undergoing an exposure or apprenticeship to at the time. Larkin was aware – as Auden had been with Eliot – of his apprenticeship, ruefully reflecting

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<sup>159</sup> That *The Orators* is ‘An English Study’ rather than a conventional book of poems would not seem to be a reason for Larkin’s omission of it. Larkin has no problem taking extracts from unconventional works of poets – he includes choruses of Eliot’s from *Murder in the Cathedral*. Also, while he includes the whole of *The Waste Land*, only ‘Little Gidding’ is present from *Four Quartets*, demonstrating a willingness to include ‘full’ works if he considers them important enough, but also to at least include extracts from longer works that he considers worthy of representation.

on it in a 1941 letter, complaining about poets included in the anthology *Eight Oxford Poets*, particularly Alan Shaw whom Larkin termed ‘the only Auden imitator’ of the book:

What poets like these lack is a sense of drama, of what is around the next corner. They just don’t interest me. People like Shaw, as well, should realise that the best Auden is not the tripe of ‘Another Time’, but the Auden of ‘Look, Stranger!’ ‘The Orators’ and ‘Poems’: they shouldn’t imitate bad Auden. That is just silly. I do it myself – or used to – but it is silly.<sup>160</sup>

Auden would be the first serious influence on Larkin, followed briefly by Yeats before his arrival at his most widely-accepted influence, Hardy. Unlike his engagement with Yeats and Hardy, however, Larkin’s letters show an effusive enthusiasm for Auden. In a letter while at University, Larkin praises Auden’s *Look, Stranger!* (1936), quoting the following poem

Let the florid music praise  
The flute and the trumpet,  
Beauty’s conquest of your face:  
In that land of flesh and bone,

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<sup>160</sup> Larkin to J. B. Sutton, 10/11/41, *SL*, pp. 25-27.

Where from citadels on high

Her imperial standards fly

Let the hot sun

Shine on, shine on.

O but the unloved have had power,

The weeping and striking,

Always; time will bring their hour:

Their secretive children walk

Through your vigilance of breath

To unpardonable death,

And my vows break

Before his look.<sup>161</sup>

If we accept the idea (as put forward in the letter to Sutton) that Larkin loves early Auden but dislikes everything from *Another Time* onwards, it is perhaps easy to see why in 1941 – the year after *Another Time* had been published – Larkin is recommending the earlier Auden with such fulsome praise ('I don't know about the

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<sup>161</sup> Auden, 'Let the florid music praise', *TEA*, pp. 158-159.

second verse, but the first is really beautiful – Auden at his greatest and inimitablest. When I read stuff like this I tend to fold up and die...<sup>162</sup>).

It is also possible to see, in Auden's 'O but the unloved have had power', an influence that would help shape a later poem of Larkin's. Whether or not Larkin 'knew' about the second verse, the unfulfilled capacities and possibilities of Auden's 'unloved' find their power again affirmed in a later Larkin poem:

...but across most it sweeps  
as all that they might have done had they been loved.  
That nothing cures. An immense slackening ache,  
As when, thawing, the rigid landscape weeps,  
Spreads slowly through them<sup>163</sup>

The sense of culmination, thwarted though it ultimately is, that acknowledges the 'power' the unloved have is in Larkin's poem identified as terrifyingly huge; spreading through the unloved as a reminder of their state. Auden is a little – but not much – more positive in his use of the presence of children as a way in which the unloved will endure, but even those children move towards the universal end, death.

In another letter to Sutton, Larkin quotes an edited version of a poem he had written and had published around this time, 'Observation'. In the first stanza of this

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<sup>162</sup> Larkin to Sutton, 20/11/41, *SL*, pp. 27-28.

<sup>163</sup> Larkin, 'Faith Healing', *CP*, p. 126.

there is the same sense of wryly recognising the unrealistic nature of books that Larkin would go on to more starkly write about in 'A Study of Reading Habits' (1960).

'Observation' is loaded with the imagery of war and destruction:

But since the tideline of the incoming past  
Is where we walk, and it is air we breathe,  
Remember then our only shape is death  
When mask and face are nailed apart at last.

Range-finding laughter, and ambush of tears,  
Machine-gun practice on the heart's desires  
Speak of a government of medalled fears.<sup>164</sup>

The poetic 'we' of this poem is certainly Audenesque, and the sonnet form of the poem is indicative of the main aspect of Larkin's learning from Auden: that of mastering the sonnet form. 'Observation' was also written during the Second World War, and that context alters the otherwise gloomy tone of the opening stanza. Books, far from being a simple misrepresentation or disappointment, seem to offer the honest, perfectible alternative to the chaos of war.

The last lines are as close to rabble-rousing as Larkin gets:

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<sup>164</sup> Larkin, 'Observation', *EPAJ*, p. 158.

Shake, wind, the branches of their crooked wood,  
Where much is picturesque but nothing good,  
And nothing can be found for poor men's fires.<sup>165</sup>

This wears its influences clearly; the 'branches of their crooked wood' reminiscent of Shelley, but the 'nothing good' blatantly Audenesque, and this reminds the reader of the opening lines of the poem, with its reminder that 'Only' in books and dreams (in freedom of speech and expression) are definite and honest engagements made. Politics and war may try to borrow the 'picturesque' from literature but it yields them 'nothing good', just as when they seek to use human emotions they can marshal them only in warlike ways.

Unlike 'A Study of Reading Habits', 'Observation' is a fierce defence of the artistic outlook and an attack on those who in wartime would seek to oppose or misuse the arts – be they the British or German governments. Literature has not let Larkin down yet and it may be one of the things worth fighting for.

In the letter to Sutton which includes 'Let the florid music...' and 'Observation', Larkin does not admit the latter poem to be modelled on or inspired by the former. The letter does, however, mention his unwillingness to join the army and even his consideration of suicide as an alternative to fighting in the war, which perhaps reveals the 'sense of drama' in 'Observation' to be more theoretical than representative of an actual intention to fight for the better things.

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

Where the influence of Auden is most clear in 'Observation' is its form; the sonnet. If Auden made a significant formal contribution to English poetry, it was his re-shaping of the sonnet, changing it from its more traditional viewpoint – that of the first-person declaratory or suppliant voice – to that of third-person biographical narratives. He also, to a certain extent, refrigerated the sonnet, acting as the vaccination against romanticism that Andrew Motion describes as being part of his appeal to Larkin, and this new coldness in the sonnet form would go on to inform Larkin's own writing of sonnets, and his liking of other people's efforts: namely, Robert Lowell's.

Coupled with this, it is Auden's use of the definite article – '*The Composer*', *the* ships in 'Musée des Beaux Arts' – that has the most obvious and visible effect on Larkin's poetry, as it offered him a way to tie in the reader to the poem. One thinks of 'the crowns of hats' in Larkin's 'MCMXIV', but a more extended use with an effect that is more pronounced is in 'The Whitsun Weddings'.

For the first half of the poem, the non-specific mentions of 'a street of blinding windscreens', 'a hothouse flashed uniquely', 'canals with floatings of industrial froth' are governed by the indefinite article. In much the same way as the journey prior to the weddings being noticed is vague and unremarkable, so is all that is seen.

When, in the third stanza 'The weddings' make such a noise as to alert the poet and reader to something important going on, the definite article reinforces that importance: 'The fathers with broad belts', 'the perms / The nylon gloves and jewellery substitutes, / The lemons, mauves', 'the girls', 'the last confetti and advice were thrown'. Larkin's sudden clarifying view of the weddings – even if the poem can be read as him noticing weddings as unremarkable and formulaic – is given weight by the constant, hammering 'the's which identify them.

*Another Time* uses the sonnet form to great effect – a total of seven sonnets are in the ‘People and Places’ section, and Larkin’s reading of them is clearly shown in ‘Observation’. Where the influence is combined with another, is in the difference between the published ‘Observation’, which resembles Auden’s *Another Time* sonnets (‘A.E. Housman’, ‘Edward Lear’, ‘Brussels In Winter’), and the version he sends Sutton, which is more similar to Larkin’s poems in *The North Ship* (1945), which owe more to Yeats. The ‘Yeatsian’ ‘Observation’ is recognisable as an early Larkin poem, similar to the first stanza of poem ‘IX’ in *The North Ship*, though the later poem owes its imagery and rhyming scheme more to Yeats than Auden:

Climbing the hill within the deafening wind,  
The blood unfurled itself, was proudly borne  
High over meadows where white horses stood;  
Up the steep woods it echoed like a horn  
Till at the summit under shining trees  
It cried: Submission is the only good;  
Let me become an instrument, sharply stringed  
For all things to strike music as they please.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Larkin, ‘IX’, *CP*, p. 301.

By contrast, the later version of 'Observation' is more easily recognisable as a sonnet of the type Auden published in *Another Time*. Compare its end with Auden's 'VI. A. E. Housman'

In savage notes on unjust editions  
He timidly attacked the life he led.  
And put the money of his feelings on  
  
The uncritical relations of the dead,  
Where purely geographical divisions  
Parted the coarse hanged soldier from the don.<sup>167</sup>

For all Larkin's protestations and criticism of *Another Time*, it is perhaps the volume of Auden's that can be seen as being nearest to his own poetry, in terms of both style and subject matter.

A poem written 'before March 1940' clearly echoes Auden in its impersonal use of the third person, and shows Larkin as having firmly grasped the technical possibilities that Auden's re-shaping of the sonnet offered:

Nothing significant was really said,

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<sup>167</sup> Auden, 'VI. A. E. Housman', *TEA*, p. 238.

Though all agreed the talk superb, and that  
The brilliant freshman with his subtle thought  
Deserved the praise he won from every side.  
All but one declared his future great,  
His present sure and happy; they that stayed  
Behind, among the ashes, were all as stirred  
By memory of his words, as sharp as grit.

The one had watched the talk: remembered how  
He'd found the genius crying when alone;  
Recalled his words: 'O what unlucky streak  
Twisting inside me, made me break the line?  
What was the rock my gliding childhood struck,  
And what bright unreal path has lead me here?'<sup>168</sup>

What makes this poem more Larkin than Auden is the connection offered in finding 'the genius crying when alone', which, even when Larkin tries to impersonalise him to 'The one', still offers a connection with the reader that allows the emotional outpouring and romanticism of the last four lines to have full effect. The rest of the

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<sup>168</sup> Larkin, 'Nothing significant was really said', *CP*, p. 235.

poem, however, is decidedly Audenesque, with the impersonal third person keeping the reader at a distance.

There may also have been for Larkin a sense of awkward similarity between his own work and Auden's, which the younger poet recognised. The following sonnet, 'A Writer', published in *Cherwell* in May 1941, may even have been conceived as a response to Auden's 'XXXIII. The Novelist':

'Interesting but futile', said his diary,  
Where day by day his movements were recorded  
And nothing but his loves received inquiry;  
He knew of course, no actions were rewarded,  
There were no prizes: though the eye could see  
Wide beauty in a motion or a pause,  
It need expect no lasting salary  
Beyond the bowels' momentary applause.

He lived for years and never was surprised:  
A member of his foolish, lying race  
Explained away their vices: realised  
It was a gift that he possessed alone:  
To look the world directly in the face;

The face he did not see to be his own.<sup>169</sup>

At this point in his life Larkin had not yet published either of his novels, nor his first collection of poetry, so the differentiation that Auden was able to make in ‘The Novelist’ between the poets who can ‘amaze us like a thunderstorm, / Or die so young, or live for years alone.’<sup>170</sup> and the novelist who must ‘become the whole of boredom, subject to / Vulgar complaints like love, among the Just / Be just, among the Filthy filthy too,’<sup>171</sup>, would not have been of great importance to Larkin.

Larkin mixes the ‘whole of boredom’ with a lack of self-awareness that stops the writer recognising his role as the universal voice, but the two poems share the ‘sense of drama’ that Larkin requires of ‘great Auden’.

### **(iii) Larkin and ‘late’ or ‘American’ Auden**

It is a mistake to view Yeats’ influence on Larkin as replacing or eradicating Auden’s influence. An apprenticeship as thorough – particularly in terms of form, the sonnet specifically – as Larkin’s with Auden was always going to play a major role in later work. There are two poems in particular that clearly demonstrate the endurance of Auden’s work – most interestingly the poems of *Another Time* – despite being written long after what Hamilton refers to as Larkin’s ‘Auden period’.

The first of these poems, ‘I Remember, I Remember’, is a rejection of any attempt to mythologise or idealise a ‘formative’ childhood, especially for a writer, and

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<sup>169</sup> Larkin, ‘A Writer’, *EPaJ*, p. 151.

<sup>170</sup> Auden, ‘XXXIII The Novelist’, *TEA*, p. 238.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*

it achieves literary ends while being a poem which, if not anti-literary, ridicules certain expectations and clichés of literature.

The final claim of 'I Remember, I Remember' is that

'Nothing, like something, happens anywhere.'<sup>172</sup>

The poem of Auden's that that 'Nothing' brings to mind is 'Musée des Beaux Arts', with its wry

About suffering they were never wrong,

The Old Masters: how well they understood

Its human position; how it takes place

While someone else is eating or opening a window or just

walking dully along;<sup>173</sup>

Like Larkin, Auden repeatedly punctures the dramas of life – for Larkin, the exciting childhood not had, for Auden the myths and biblical events – with a calm, half-cynical reminder that life goes on around these events, paying little heed to them, the sun shining (as Auden says) 'as it had to'<sup>174</sup>. Here is the cold, detached universality of Owen and Thomas, used first by Auden and then Larkin to depersonalise the

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<sup>172</sup> Larkin, 'I Remember, I Remember', *CP*, pp. 81-82.

<sup>173</sup> Auden, 'Musée Des Beaux Artes', *TEA*, p. 237.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

unexciting lives of individuals and render that lack of excitement ‘normal’ to the reader.

The inherent irony of Larkin’s ‘nothing’ of a childhood, is that it is only arrived at after a long description of all the expected aspects of a writer’s childhood have been listed and dismissed, ‘a doggedly negative listing of all the things that didn’t happen there’<sup>175</sup>. There is even a questionable moment, in light of the publication of the 16-year-old Larkin’s ‘December Nocturne’, which may be a knowing or deliberate example of disingenuousness:

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* –<sup>176</sup>

At this point the brooding speaker of the poem is interrupted by his companion, but the question remains as to whether he is tagging a real event – which he views as just as ridiculous as the fictional non-happenings – on the end of his list of childhood clichés. The detail of ‘a distinguished cousin of the mayor’ is specific enough to have

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<sup>175</sup> Stan Smith ‘Margins of Tolerance: Responses to Post-War Decline’, Regan, 1997, p. 178. Hereafter, Stan Smith.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

been a real event while also pompous enough to sound worthy of a place in Dickens or Chesterton; this double suitability renders it perhaps the most important example in the poem of Larkin's ambivalence about childhood or youth being misused for literary ends.

Larkin is also aware of the dangers of both reading too much into a childhood and the over-emphasis literature can place on even a youth in which 'nothing' happened. In order to guard against this Larkin isolates the poem twice; once by the voice being cut off, mid-reverie, by his companion's interruption, and then again by setting the entire poem within the transitory few minutes that a train stops in a station, before moving off in much the same way that the reader moves onto the next poem in the collection.

A later poem than 'I Remember, I Remember' which owes something to the Auden of *Another Time*, both in terms of attitude and execution, is 'For Sidney Bechet'; which, ironically, bears relation to Auden's 'XXII. The Composer'. Both are poems concerned with artists outside of literature, but both praise musicians for being able to communicate something they feel is beyond what literature can achieve. The main difference between the two is that Auden is ecstatic in appreciation, while Larkin is moved more towards the desperate longing he feels music can evoke.

The chief similarity between the poems is found in the two poets' attitudes towards both the purpose and effect of music, though the obvious difference between the two poems is found in either the active or passive behaviour of the listener, or receiver, of music. For Auden, neither writers nor painters are capable of conveying an attitude towards life without overloading or compromising their work with a weight of feeling or emotional outpouring:

All the others translate: the painter sketches

A visible world to love or reject;

Rummaging into his living, the poet fetches

The images out that hurt and connect.

From Life to Art by painstaking adaptation,

Relying on us to cover the rift;<sup>177</sup>

Auden, however, allows the implication that music is a form of communication as much as poetry or painting:

Only your notes are pure contraption,

Only your song is an absolute gift.<sup>178</sup>

‘The Composer’ is a brash poem, stating more than arguing its case and applying without exception the absolute power of all music to transcend and, as opposed to poetry or painting, do actual good in its pouring out of ‘forgiveness’. ‘For Sidney Bechet’ is a poem that is more specific, allows for greater diversity in the effect

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<sup>177</sup> Auden, ‘XXII The Composer’, *TEA*, p. 239.

<sup>178</sup> Auden, ‘The Composer’, *TEA*, p. 239.

of music, and is clearer about the position art occupies and what can be expected from it in terms of actual effect.

That note you hold, narrowing and rising, shakes

Like New Orleans reflected on the water,

And in all ears appropriate falsehood wakes,

Building for some a legendary Quarter

Of balconies, flower-baskets and quadrilles,

Everyone making love and going shares —<sup>179</sup>

From the opening determiner, '*That note*', Larkin is clear as to the specificity of his subject. Not only is he writing a poem about one particular jazz artist, but about one specific piece of music and, indeed, one single moment within that piece, which he feels encapsulates what he considers great about the musician and his music.

The poem itself is indebted to Auden in terms of form. The lines are arranged as triplets, but they are in fact broken-up quatrains, with the whole poem revealing itself as an extended version of a sonnet.

While Larkin immediately suggests the image of New Orleans as being evoked by the music, he does not insist upon this image as being the inevitable effect of the note, once heard. Larkin actually goes so far as to suggest that, not only does everyone

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<sup>179</sup> Larkin, 'For Sidney Bechet', *CP*, p. 83.

respond to music individually, but that these responses are so personal and unique that they really have nothing to do with either the music or the intention of the composer, when he says ‘in all ears appropriate falsehood wakes’.

This idea of relative fantasy is outlined in the following lines:

Oh play that thing! Mute glorious Storyvilles  
Others may license, grouping round their chairs  
Sporting-house girls like circus tigers (priced  
Far above rubies) to pretend their fads,  
While scholars *manqués* nod around unnoticed  
Wrapped up in personnels like old plaids.<sup>180</sup>

The ‘may’ in the second line affords Larkin’s tone a lightness and lack of certainty which is lacking from Auden’s prescribed musical consequences. It also seems to be important to Larkin that he allow others their supposed responses to Bechet’s music for ten lines before arriving at his own experience of the music, which he is at great pains to remind the reader is an entirely personal response:

On me your voice falls as they say love should,

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

Like an enormous yes. My Crescent City  
Is where your speech alone is understood,  
  
And greeted as the natural voice of good,  
  
Scattering long-haired grief and scored pity.<sup>181</sup>

‘Like an enormous yes’ is a strangely (for Larkin) assertive simile, and might be seen as the brash tone of Auden appearing once again. The obvious difference between this final praising of the music by Larkin and Auden’s closing statements in ‘The Composer’ is the lack of competition or comparison. Auden’s rapturous response to the music he hears is partly in contrast to what he views as the shortcomings of poetry and painting.

For Larkin there is no such comparison, and as a result the tone is slightly more joyful. Both poets, it can be said, affect almost religious – or at the very least highly romantic – language in their closing lines, Auden’s ‘Oh’ and the fall of the voice of Bechet upon Larkin both seek a blissful consummation between hearer and music.

What is found in the last lines of Larkin’s poem, however, is almost the reverse of what Auden speaks of admiring about music in his poem. Auden measures and then dismisses or praises the three art forms he lists in his poem by either (in poetry and painting’s case) their failure to adequately replicate or transmit real-life experiences, or (for music) the ability of an art form to offer something untainted by

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

‘translation’ of an experience, so much so that it seems to exist entirely separate from the ‘real life’ that is so uninspiring to ‘translate’.

In Larkin’s poem he makes a case similar to the one he made in ‘Observation’, thirteen years previously, that ‘only’ in art can perfectibility be achieved to make up for the disappointments of the everyday. ‘On me your voice falls as *they say* love should’ (my italics) is not that the poet has never felt love, nor denying that love is impossible in the actual world, but suggesting instead that the romantic, the erotic and the fantastical elements of love are never unaccompanied by the realities of commitment and fidelity in quite the same way as they are in art; or in this piece of music in particular.

If Auden’s praise of music is its ability to exist apart from the foul rag and bone yard of the heart (to borrow a phrase of Yeats’) and so not infect with other art-forms’ translations of ‘the images...that hurt and connect’, then Larkin’s praise is that of an experience that is too impossibly perfect for the ‘real’ world to be rendered in the notes played and heard in music.

Though on the face of it a very different poem from ‘The Composer’, ‘For Sidney Bechet’ can be seen quite fairly as a tightening of Auden’s over-bountiful praise, while at the same time removing the negative comparisons between art forms to leave a poem full of praise for the overwhelmingly positive effects of music, in much the same tradition as Hardy’s ‘The Chimes Play ‘Life’s a Bumper!’’. Larkin’s achievement is to convey the joy in Auden’s apparent intention with a more generous tone and less authoritative assertion.

The defining and lasting formal influence of Auden upon Larkin was that of mastery of the sonnet. While Larkin would not produce any kind of sonnet sequence – as is found in *Another Time* – the endurance of its discipline was certainly an aspect of Auden’s writing that he never rejected nor found fault with.

Beyond this, the wider influence that Auden had upon Larkin, and also the similarity between the two poets’ contributions towards the English tradition in poetry, is that of reassessing the responsibilities of literature, both to the public and to itself.

Auden and then Larkin both saw the value in how the Modernism of Yeats, Eliot and Pound ‘sharpened up’ (Larkin’s phrase) English poetry, after the staleness of the Georgian poets, and how that tighter, less clichéd or sentimental language could be used to (to adapt Hardy’s phrase) try to do a little better than those who had gone before. They shared an awareness of the danger posed to literature and its subjects by the subject of literature; be it the over-referencing of high Modernism or the endless pastoral sketches and Classical re-imaginings that defined so much late Victorian poetry.

At the start of this section I stated that, to many, Larkin’s mature work was the poetry which had been expected of the older, matured Auden had the latter remained in England, seen out the war and been appointed Laureate – either official or unofficial. I broadly accept this schema, but would state that such work was not possible, or would have been very different, without the enduring influence of both ‘careers’ of Auden’s. What Larkin undeniably achieved perhaps to a greater extent than Auden was a usage and incorporation of the ‘tightened up’ language of Modernism into the renewed and newly-relevant subject matter of what both poets saw as the tradition of English poetry.

The main way in which Larkin did this was to master anti-climax and bathos, which is largely down to Auden, though Eliot's 'Prufrock' would also contribute to this. The idea embodied in the 'expensive delicate ship' that continues about its business, as Icarus falls from the sky, is honed and recurs again and again in Larkin; from the 'I don't know' that closes 'Mr Bleaney', to the wry 'Regicide and rabbit pie' at the end of 'Livings'. It demonstrates the inaccuracy of Ian Hamilton's contention that 'Yeats...rescued him from Auden', as Larkin's eye on events remains bathetic and wry, in contrast to Yeats's 'cold eye'.

### **1.5 Larkin and Dylan Thomas**

In most considerations of Larkin's formation and influence, Dylan Thomas is politely ignored, or his more excessive or undisciplined efforts held up as examples of what Larkin *wasn't* doing, or was seeking to counter.

The result of this mishandling or misunderstanding of Larkin's 'English'<sup>182</sup> influences and favoured writers, in the decades immediately preceding his own writing, is to devalue their presence in his poetry.

So much of an emphasis is made on fitting poets such as Thomas and Larkin into an easily recognised sequence of opposites that Larkin's debt to earlier poets like Thomas is either caricatured or ignored, and his engagement with the real concerns which link their writing with his is often overlooked.

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<sup>182</sup> I will include Dylan Thomas under this heading; partly for convenience, and partly because it was in English and in London that his poetry was most written and celebrated.

If the Movement was, as Al Alvarez has argued, a ‘negative feedback<sup>183</sup>’, then perhaps the writer it could most be seen to be reacting against was Dylan Thomas. Most mentions of the Movement, either in passing or at the beginning of a longer consideration of it, cite Thomas as the antithesis of what the Movement was ‘about’. Elaine Feinstein, trying to give a sense of the literary world of the 1950s has this to say:

As a Movement it could be more defined by what it was against [...] Dylan Thomas, the most celebrated poet of the preceding generation, was felt to depend far too much on rhetoric to be trusted.<sup>184</sup>

David Perkins offers something more detailed:

Dylan Thomas was too relentlessly melodious and rhetorical, making the fifties poets all the more conscious of the morality of plainness. Moreover, they could not recognise their world in the sentimental clichés of ‘Fern Hill’ or *Under Milk Wood*, and thus they were motivated all the more toward an honest realism. That Thomas’ archetypal symbols seemed vague and obscure to the

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<sup>183</sup> Alvarez 1962.

<sup>184</sup> Elaine Feinstein, *Ted Hughes: The Life of a Poet* (London: Phoenix, 2001), p. 42. Hereafter, Feinstein 2001.

point of self-indulgence impelled them with stronger conviction toward lucid, rational discourse.<sup>185</sup>

Blake Morrison goes so far as to ascribe xenophobic intentions to the Movement's dismissal of Thomas:

Movement poets took the same line on Dylan Thomas, blaming America for destroying what was left of his talent (that talent being modest in the first place because he had come from Wales, so they would have argued).<sup>186</sup>

This implied cultural xenophobia seems to me baseless; Kingsley Amis produced several novels set in Wales, which reveal the delight he took in first living and working in and then, later, visiting the country, and Larkin often holidayed there.

In the same volume of essays, Deborah Bowman again perceives an active avoidance of or reaction to Thomas, when discussing D. J. Enright's 'On the death of a child':

[...]the poem Enright is deliberately not looking back to is Dylan Thomas's 'Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in

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<sup>185</sup> David Perkins, *A History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 1987), p. 423.

<sup>186</sup> Blake Morrison, "Still Going On, All of It': The Movement in the 1950s and Today'. From *The Movement Reconsidered* ed. Z. Leader (Oxford: OUP, 2009), p. 25. Hereafter: Leader 2009.

London' [...] This could easily stand as a fable about the displacement of Thomas, as representative of the romantic 1940s.<sup>187</sup>

How much this critical consensus is indicative of what Alvarez sees as a pattern in English literature – every generation reacting against the previous one – and how much it is based on the pronouncements, poetry and prose of the writers themselves is difficult to fathom.

Kingsley Amis had little time for Dylan Thomas: that much is clear from his correspondence with Larkin:

How horrible it must of ben, hering Mr. Thos. Doesn't he know how unwisely he talks?<sup>188</sup>

Talking of words, I think I have traced the nastiness of my early words to the influence of Mister Dylan Thos. *Nay*: influences are good if they are good influences, like Auden and you less recently, but if they are SODDING LOUSY influences, like that of Mr Thos, then they are bad, years, years.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> Deborah Bowman, 'Empson and the Movement', in *The Movement Reconsidered* ed. Z. Leader 2009, pp. 161-162.

<sup>188</sup> Amis to Larkin, 2/12/46, *TLoKA*, p. 103.

<sup>189</sup> Amis to Larkin, 9/1/47, *TLoKA*, p. 109.

['Refusal to Mourn...'] is a very good example of Thos. using his verbal alchemy to dress up a trite idea in language designed to prevent people from seeing how trite it is – it is the mankind making dark one. I wish he'd GROW UP.<sup>190</sup>

...he made a very strong and very nasty impression on me, not as a charlatan so much as a terrible second-generation G.K.C. or Alf Noyes – you know, frothing at the mouth with piss.<sup>191</sup>

There is even a subsection of the index entry on Thomas in Amis's *Letters* titled 'Amis disparages', in reference to the sheer weight of criticism given Thomas, usually in letters to Larkin. This is not the only example, but it is a good one, of Larkin being tarred with the same brush as Amis. One of Amis's objections to Thomas was rooted in personality; the former had very little time for those who would not stand their round in a pub, or who scrounged money from others, both of which were characteristics flaunted and openly admitted by Thomas. Amis's personal encounter with Thomas, as recorded in the former's *Memoirs*, is heavily influenced by his dislike of meanness or showing off, both of which he sees in Thomas' behaviour.

However, no matter the barrage of abuse regarding Thomas that Larkin receives from Amis, Larkin refuses to join in. The closest he comes to Amis' abuse of Thomas is an expressed reservation as to Thomas' misuse of language:

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<sup>190</sup> Amis to Larkin, 24/3/47, *TLoKA*, pp. 121-122.

<sup>191</sup> Amis to Larkin, 29/4/51, *TLoKA*, p. 256.

[...]he doesn't use his words to any advantage. I think a man ought to use good words to make what he means *impressive*: Dylan Thos. just makes you wonder what he means *very hard*. Take a phrase that comes at the start of a poem in *Deaths & Entrances* – something about waking up in an 'immortal hospital'. Now that is a phrase that makes me feel suddenly a sort of *reverent apprehension*, only I don't know what it *means*. Can't the FOOL see that if I could see what it *means*, I should admire it *2ce as much*?<sup>192</sup>

This letter was written (in 1947) shortly after Larkin had read Hardy's poetry in full for the first time, which perhaps accounts for the purist streak in Larkin's demand. There is also a touch of the Yeatsian hangover from *The North Ship* (1945), reminding the reader that during his 1940s reading and use of Yeats in his poems of the time, Larkin had been primarily concerned with using 'good words to make what he means *impressive*'.

One of the other points that this letter raises is that Thomas's rhetoric is effective on Larkin; it does impress him, even if it also infuriates him in its seemingly meaningless state. That he 'admires' the poet for raising in him a state of 'reverent apprehension' is proof enough that his views on Thomas differ vastly from those of Amis.

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<sup>192</sup> Larkin to Amis, 11/1/47, *SL*, p. 133. The poem being referred to is 'Holy Spring'.

Larkin, like Amis, had met Thomas. This was at a university event while he was at Oxford, and his account couldn't differ more from Amis' experience of meeting the older poet:

Dylan Thomas came to the English Club last week. Hell of a fine man [...] there was a moment of delighted surprise, and then a roar of laughter.<sup>193</sup>

Later, in his letters, Larkin's reaction to Thomas's sudden death, in 1953, is heartfelt:

And while on the subject of literature, I hope you're wearing a leek reversed – I can't believe D. T. is truly dead. It seems absurd. Three people who've altered the face of poetry, & the *youngest* has to die.<sup>194</sup>

This is certainly warmer and more upset than Larkin would be at the announcements of the deaths of both Eliot and Auden. Something that this points out as well is Larkin's view of poets (no matter how diverse) being significant, even if not his favourite writers; Auden by this point was well into his 'American' career and Larkin was regularly bemoaning the supposedly substandard nature of his verse, while Eliot

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<sup>193</sup> Larkin to J. B. Sutton, 20/11/41, *SL*, p.29.

<sup>194</sup> Larkin to Patsy Strang (nee Avis), 11/11/53, *SL*, p. 218. The other two people were T.S. Eliot and W. H. Auden.

was for Larkin a necessary evil (in sharpening up post-1918 poetry), but not a poet whose work he would say he enjoyed.

Thomas occupies a unique place in Larkin's correspondence and interviews as seeming to be something of a hero or ideal of the poet as public figure. This is demonstrated in the warm asides that he earns, particularly in Larkin's letters to Monica Jones (this correspondence is perhaps the most honest among Larkin's letters):

I was reading Oscar Wilde's trials last night, & *Dylan Thomas in America*, in an effort to convince myself that fun-having does you no good. Felt convinced *in re* Thomas, but less so *in re* Wilde.<sup>195</sup>

[...]I feel like cutting my throat with a blunt cunt, as I find Dylan Thomas said. (I don't think that funny in the way most people wd, but I think it mildly funny all the same.)<sup>196</sup>

As you know, every writer has a book he wants to rewrite (Dylan Thomas said his was *Pilgrim's Progress*): mine is *The Seasons*.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Larkin to Monica Jones, 2/12/57, *LTM*, p. 231.

<sup>196</sup> Larkin to Jones, 22/11/66, *LTM*, p. 369.

<sup>197</sup> Larkin to Jones, 26/9/71, *LTM*, p. 425.

The comment as to Larkin finding a quotation of Thomas's funny in a way different to others is similar to his frustration (in his letter to Amis) about liking Thomas' poetry, but not for the 'popular' reasons. There is an almost jealous nature to Larkin's liking of Thomas; as if he wants to keep him to himself. This feeling is borne out through the aggressive attack on Thomas' wife, Caitlin, elsewhere in the letters<sup>198</sup>.

Few other writers are quoted in the letters in the manner in which Larkin quotes Thomas, and the constant allusions to him as 'the writer' show Larkin's admiration for him to be almost hero-worship, as if Thomas (with his wild life, public profile and success) was what a poet 'should' be.

This adoration is similarly shown in a 1979 interview with the *Observer*, in which Larkin mentions Thomas in a similar way as in his letters to Jones:

And I've always thought a regular job was no bad thing for a poet.

Indeed, Dylan Thomas himself – not that he was noted for regular jobs – said this; you can't write more than two hours a day and after that what do you do? Probably get into trouble.<sup>199</sup>

I always thought the reading habits of Dylan Thomas matched mine – he never read anything hard.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> See Larkin to Jones 15/7/60, *LTM*, p. 270.

<sup>199</sup> Larkin in an interview with the *Observer*. Originally appeared in the *Observer*, 16<sup>th</sup> December 1979. Reprinted in *RW*, p. 51.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid*, p. 53.

The fact that, after mentioning ‘poet’ in the abstract, Larkin confirms Thomas ‘himself’ as synonymous with that role, and then almost wistfully refers to Thomas’s bad behaviour at the end, demonstrates an identification with Thomas that is absent from Larkin’s comments on other writers.

A myth about himself that Larkin was pleased to help support was that he read little and without much variation. His liking for Thomas, however, shows how much this was untrue, even though it is with Thomas that he defends himself. It’s worth mentioning that Larkin’s claim about Thomas never reading ‘anything hard’ is inaccurate, with one poet recently referring to him as ‘remarkably well-read’<sup>201</sup>.

In a 1964 interview with Ian Hamilton, Larkin says, about his early work,

I wrote a great many sedulous and worthless Yeats-y poems, and  
later on far inferior Dylan Thomas poems – I think Dylan  
Thomas is much more difficult to imitate than Yeats.<sup>202</sup>

This would have been a surprising admission for Hamilton to have heard from Larkin; after all, in 1964 the Movement was only beginning to decline as an idea, Alvarez’s *The New Poetry* Introduction attacks having given it an extended life through criticism. Which poems Larkin was referring to are hard to identify. In the poetry he wrote in the late 1930s and early 1940s (when, in the interview, he claims to

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<sup>201</sup> Derek Mahon, *Dylan Thomas: Selected Poems* ed. D. Mahon (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), p. vii.

<sup>202</sup> Larkin-Hamilton 1964, p. 21.

have been writing ‘far inferior Dylan Thomas poems’), there are surprising pieces, which certainly don’t read as ‘typical’ Larkin poems:

What is the difference between December and January?

Between green December and frosty January

Between frosty December and sunny January

What is it?<sup>203</sup> (1939)

Where should we lie, green heart,

But drowned at summer’s foot,

As our arms embroider

Each tall tree shut

In the heat’s soundless armour?<sup>204</sup> (1942)

These pieces can certainly be seen as Larkin trying out the kind of rhetoric that Thomas was known for, but Larkin probably knew too well that – as an affectation – his ‘Thomas’ poems were flawed by a lack of confidence in that rhetoric. When Larkin writes about the pastoral and rural scenes that Thomas also wrote on, he tended more towards Hardy or Edward Thomas; or Yeats, whose use of mythic language was as

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<sup>203</sup> Larkin, ‘What is the difference between December and January?’. *EPaJ*, p. 39.

<sup>204</sup> Larkin, ‘Where should we lie, green heart’, *EPaJ*, p. 173.

close to Dylan Thomas' sense of transcendence as Larkin was probably comfortable with.

Besides, Larkin's admiration of a poet did not necessitate imitation or similarity in his own poetry, and as much as Larkin (in the conversation with Hamilton) dismisses imitation, the fact that he considers Thomas harder to imitate than Yeats is, to me, a measure of his admiration for Thomas. In another, much later, interview Larkin again reaches for Thomas when needing to express a personal viewpoint he may feel uncomfortable with himself:

I don't understand the word sentimentality. It reminds me of Dylan Thomas's definition of an alcoholic: 'A man you don't like who drinks as much as you do.' I think sentimentality is someone you don't like feeling as much as you do.<sup>205</sup>

As in his letters to Jones, there is that hint of Thomas-loyalty here, as if Larkin feels Thomas' turn of phrase is his yardstick on things well-said.

The most revealing (and almost unambiguous) statement Larkin made about Thomas was to Anthony Thwaite, in an interview concerning Larkin's selection for *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse*:

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<sup>205</sup> Larkin in an interview with John Haffenden, originally appear in *London Magazine* April/May 1980. Hereafter: Larkin-Haffenden 1980.Reprinted in *FR*, p. 60.

[Thwaite]...*Are you saying that after Dylan Thomas there is no commanding poet?*

[Larkin] Yes, really. And this is a popular point of view. I'm not Dylan Thomas's greatest admirer, but I do feel that he was the last person to produce a corpus of work that really was worth arguing about and obtained an international reputation. Plenty of people were born after Dylan Thomas and wrote quite nicely, but I don't think, to be honest, that we have had his equal.<sup>206</sup>

While Larkin tries to pass off his selection as 'a popular point of view' (and later claims that his choice of Thomas is '...doing no more than what is generally thought at sixth form level'<sup>207</sup>), he does clearly state here that in terms of importance and the value of the work, there has been no one to equal Thomas in the previous thirty or so years.

Larkin's jealous 'guarding' of Thomas is equally present in his reviews of other people's writing on Thomas. When reviewing John Bayley's *The Romantic Survival* in 1957, for instance, he writes with genial condescension

[...]and although he fails to get a proper purchase on the work of Dylan Thomas, Mr Bayley does very rightly insist that all estimates must begin at the chief characteristic of Thomas's

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<sup>206</sup> Larkin-Thwaite 1973, p. 100.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

poems, the sensation 'that we are being assaulted by some means other than words'.<sup>208</sup>

The gracious air of this, coupled with his agreement with Bayley's schema for dissecting Thomas reads as if half-relieved that Bayley has not uncovered or exposed the secret of Thomas, of which Larkin considers himself to be the keeper.

A later review of Vernon Watkins' collection of poetry *Cypress and Acacia* (1959) features Larkin using Thomas as the yardstick hinted at in his interview with Thwaite, when he writes

Comparing him to Dylan Thomas is like comparing 'A.E.' to Yeats: one misses the verbal force and the sudden direct outcroppings of humour and realism that made exalted mannerisms more tolerable.<sup>209</sup>

That Larkin then goes on to state that he finds 'Mr Watkins in some places mightily obscure' is particularly interesting when bearing in mind his frustration at Thomas' use of language in his letter to Sutton. It is as though Watkins cannot be compared to Thomas because Larkin will allow only Thomas his obscure uses of language: no one else. Again there is the respect that he has for Yeats while being fully aware of the

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<sup>208</sup> 'Poetry at Present', originally appeared in the *Guardian* 7<sup>th</sup> May 1957. Reprinted in *FR*, p. 170.

<sup>209</sup> 'Texts and Symbols', originally appeared in the *Guardian*, 27<sup>th</sup> November 1959. Reprinted in *FR*, p. 213.

'Celtic' factor he knows is not remotely present in his own poetry, or in the poetry of those he more publicly praises; Hardy or Betjeman, for example.

From a review of his letters, interviews and critical writings, we can see that there is for Larkin, in Thomas, a model of the poet that Larkin knows he will never be, and also the most 'innocent' admiration for a poet that Larkin expresses. Unlike his attitudes towards Hardy, Betjeman and later Gavin Ewart, there is no attempt by Larkin to either justify his admiration of Thomas on critical or theoretical grounds or to state a similarity between his own poetry and that of the other poet. His unwillingness to 'join in' with Amis's derisory comments about Thomas is one of several examples of the two friends (usually reasonably similar in views on poets; Hughes, Heaney and early Auden, for example) disagreeing, if not acknowledging it, that is telling in Larkin's correspondence.

The evidence of any actual poetic influence or reaction to Thomas in Larkin's verse is harder to point out. Indeed, it is very tempting simply to dismiss the idea of influence entirely.

After all, there are certain of Larkin's poems which are almost specifically anti-Thomas. When Thomas urges the dying to 'Rage, rage against the dying of the light', Larkin witheringly points out in 'Aubade' that 'Death is no different whined at than withstood.' Thomas's calling leads him to

[...]sit at open windows in my shirt,

Observe, like some Jehovah of the west

What passes by, that sanity be kept.<sup>210</sup>

The poet as bard, in other words. In contrast, when considering his calling and work more generally, Larkin grimly admits that

Something sufficiently toad-like

Squats in me, too;

Its hunkers are heavy as hard luck,

And cold as snow.<sup>211</sup>

In fact, the poeticism with which Larkin adorns his need to work at a day-job could be seen as a silent admission of what his interviews and letters suggest; that Larkin knows he can never be the dramatic public poet in the way in which Thomas was, and that a few similes concerning his job are as romantic as he will allow his calling to seem.

A good example of how far apart Thomas and Larkin can be is a comparison of Thomas's 'Fern Hill' (the poem Perkins used to demonstrate the Movement's distance from Thomas) with Larkin's 'I Remember, I Remember', a poem which can be seen as written almost intentionally to deride Thomas's poem.

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<sup>210</sup> Thomas, 'That sanity be kept', *Dylan Thomas* ed. W. Davies (London: Everyman & J. M. Dent, 1997), p. 20.

<sup>211</sup> Larkin, 'Toads', *CP*, p. 89.

Thomas's poem is vivid and a good example of his rhetorical style:

Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs  
About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green.  
The night above the dingle starry,  
Time let me hail and climb  
Golden in the heydays of his eyes,  
And honoured among wagons I was prince of the apple towns  
And once below a time I lordly had the trees and leaves  
Trail with daisies and barley  
Down the rivers of the windfall night.<sup>212</sup>

This is full of the language that Larkin is frustrated at not being able to understand in Thomas: 'the heydays of his eyes' and 'the rivers of the windfall night', for example. It also contains an example of Thomas toying with catchphrases that so annoyed Amis for their flippancy, when instead of saying 'once *upon* a time' Thomas inverts the preposition, turning it into 'below'.

And nothing I cared, at my sky blue trades, that time allows

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<sup>212</sup> Dylan Thomas, 'Fern Hill', *Collected Poems 1934-1952* (London: J. M. Dent, 1952), p. 159. Hereafter, *DTCP*.

In all his tuneful turning so few and such morning songs

Before the children green and golden

Follow him out of grace,

Nothing I cared, in the lamb-white days, that time would take me

Up to the swallow-thronged loft by the shadow of my hand,

In the moon that is always rising.<sup>213</sup>

The child Dylan not caring that childhood ends, that innocence is presumably lost, serves to make the 'lamb-white days' obviously unrealistic and the view of them as clichéd and over-romanticised. This implies a distance, whether bred out of a later jaded sense of anti-climax, or in a realisation that childhood is (literally) nothing to write home about the result is the same: the poet is cut off from the childhood, as he almost admits he knew he would be.

This should not be confused with the poet regretting or hating his childhood: no serious look at Thomas' time spent at the farm of Fernhill with his aunt Ann Jones would claim that. Yet the cutting off of the poet from his childhood moves him outside of the rhetoric, turning him into more of an observer of the described fantasies.

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid. p. 160.

An outsider's view, coupled with a grim matter-of-factness, is certainly at play in 'I Remember, I Remember', in which Larkin produces a more graphically inverted version of childhood from the ultra-transient setting of a railway carriage. Larkin's detachment from his childhood starts at the beginning of the poem:

[...]watching men with number-plates

Sprint down the platform to familiar gates,

'Why, Coventry!' I exclaimed. 'I was born here.'

I leant far out, and squinnied for a sign

That this was still the town that had been 'mine'

So long, but found I wasn't even clear

Which side was which.<sup>214</sup>

Larkin does not say he 'grew up' in Coventry (though it's both implied and enquired upon by his companion later), but instead that he was born there. The 'mine', with its quotation marks, as well, can be seen as a parody or criticism of the type of rhetoric at play in 'Fern Hill', with Thomas's idyllic childhood settings, and his being 'prince of the apple towns', 'lordly' over his surroundings.

What 'I remember, I remember' does is demonstrate the complete separation that Larkin feels from his childhood. The poem, with its litany of disabuses of

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<sup>214</sup> 'I Remember, I Remember'. *CP*. p. 81.

childhood myths, is the account of a sudden realisation that childhood does not become more important or gain significance with hindsight. If ‘nothing’ happened then nothing happened, and that nothing does not become something through age. Neither does it become something, in Larkin and Thomas’s case, through becoming a writer in need of a good back-story.

Later in the poem, as he relentlessly ploughs through the heap of Lawrentian and Thomasian childhood prerequisites, Larkin uses rhetoric similar to Thomas’s, but to a different end. To put so much effort into describing ‘blinding theologies’, non-existent though they may be, demonstrates in Larkin an understanding and use of rhetoric beyond the purely theoretical.

To stack up the parodies of other, more fanciful, writers’ accounts of childhood is a rhetorical act, even if the intention is to ridicule that rhetoric, as Stan Smith points out, ‘The poetry of place [in Larkin] is, in fact, a poetry of displacements lovingly cultivated.’<sup>215</sup> That loving cultivation is what links ‘Fern Hill’ and ‘I remember, I remember’ because both are self-aware of the falsity inherent in cultivated images of childhood, and both use them to their own, largely separate and detached ends.

Of course ‘I Remember, I Remember’ seeks to debunk a lot of the florid mythology of literary childhood, and ‘Fern Hill’ will have been in Larkin’s mind as he did so, but Thomas’s poem is not as simply self-indulgent as it looks, and I suspect that Larkin’s admiration for Thomas might have helped him realise that.

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<sup>215</sup> Stan Smith, Regan 1997, p. 178.

While neither Larkin nor Thomas was a Christian, their poetry shares an awareness of the role that religious writing and ceremony plays in the forming of language and the uses to which that language can be put.

Thomas' poetry makes use of religious phraseology and style, from the ornate to the overblown, almost in order to demonstrate to the reader how commonplace and easily mocked-up religion is.

Larkin's awareness of the influence of the King James Bible, say, or The Book of Common Prayer on the English language and the poets he admires never actually spills over into obvious use of or reference to those works. When the speaker of 'Church Going' steps up to the lectern in order to

peruse a few

hectoring large-scale verses, and pronounce

'Here endeth' much more loudly than I'd meant<sup>216</sup>

Larkin is here making a point about the overblown rhetoric of religious texts; 'large-scale' is the kind of poetry Larkin disliked. He is also, however, pointing out how funny and ridiculous phrases such as 'Here endeth the lesson' have become to people, how quaint and meaningless they have become for any purpose other than reading loudly in a church.

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<sup>216</sup> Larkin, 'Church Going', *CP*, p. 97.

'Here endeth' stands out in the poem because Larkin's poetry, unlike Thomas', is not meant to sound rhetorical or mythic, so the archaism is out of place in the poem, just as it is out of place in the empty church it echoes around.

Strangely, then, when the two poets write about the ritual of worship or belief; Larkin in 'Water' and Thomas in 'This bread I break'; it is Larkin who is more 'religious' in his tone, more aware of the wonder and innocence contained in belief and less critical of it than Thomas.

In 'Water', Larkin proposes his own religion, with a wry nod in the opening lines as to the essentially manmade and non-transcendent nature of the roots of religion:

If I were called in  
To construct a religion  
I should make use of water.

Going to church  
Would entail a fording  
To dry, different clothes;

My liturgy would employ  
Images of sousing,

A furious devout drench,

And I should raise in the east

A glass of water

Where any-angled light

Would congregate endlessly.<sup>217</sup>

Larkin is oddly benign in his tone. There is no open contempt at the ridiculous things other people believe, nor is the language laconic, cynical or sarcastic. There is, in 'dry, different clothes' a gentle reminder that the apparently saving powers of water are probably non-existent, but an awareness that there is a difference, basic though it may be, between being wet and being dry and that he understands why it makes symbolic sense for religion to utilise that difference in the act of baptism.

The closest that Larkin permits himself to religious rhetoric or overtly referential spiritual phrasing is the alliteration of 'a furious devout drench'; though like the example above, Larkin is here illustrating the man-applied symbolism to a simple fact of getting wet; and the use of 'the east' in a way that implies astrological or focal-worship towards the sun (also the direction in which churches 'point').

What Larkin does not do in this poem is to accuse religion of hijacking or misusing natural occurrences or elements in order to justify or serve a false idea. There is a joy in the poem at the wonder to be found in the simplest of things, and while that does lend a condescending air to the poem ('look how easily I can organise

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<sup>217</sup> 'Water', *CP*, p. 93.

devotion, there is no mystery to it'), it is never at the cost of the compassionate angle with which Larkin views those who worship, even though he considers it silly and manmade.

Dylan Thomas, in 'This bread I break', takes a far more critical and accusatory tone towards religion and the religious:

This bread I break was once the oat,

This wine upon a foreign tree

Plunged in its fruit;

Man in the day or wind at night

Laid the crops low, broke the grape's joy.

Once in this wind the summer blood

Knocked in the flesh that decked the vine,

Once in this bread

The oat was merry in the wind;

Man broke the sun, pulled the wind down.

This flesh you break, this blood you let

Make desolation in the vein,

Were oat and grape

Born of the sensual root and sap;

my wine you drink, my bread you snap.<sup>218</sup>

In the acquisition of bread (traditionally viewed as the most basic and essential food) and wine (a celebratory drink) as humourless symbols of the body, blood and death of Jesus, religion has – in Thomas’ eyes – exhibited mankind’s overarching tendency to destruction and contamination. This is shown most obliquely when Thomas shows man, not content with harvesting crops and grapes, also ‘broke the sun, pulled the wind down’, through the appropriation of the wonder felt towards the natural world for ritual purposes.

It is interesting to compare these two poems and note the suspicion in Thomas towards religion, which would not find a voice in Larkin’s work until his dismissal in ‘Aubade’ of religion as ‘that vast moth-eaten musical brocade / created to pretend we never die’<sup>219</sup>. Larkin’s dismissals of religion are never vindictive or aggressive.

In ‘The Building’, for example, Larkin sees no difference in the effect of religion or medicine in attempting to stave off death

for unless its powers

outbuild cathedrals nothing contravenes

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<sup>218</sup> Thomas, ‘This bread I break’, *DTCP*, p. 39.

<sup>219</sup> ‘Aubade’, *CP*, p. 208.

the coming dark<sup>220</sup>

Which goes to show that what Larkin dislikes is false consolation, however it is offered. Similarly, the would-be healed sick in 'Faith Healing' are cast as gullible and wrong, but not savage or assaulting, Larkin going so far as to recognise the primal, inner impulse to such belief when he says 'all time has disproved'<sup>221</sup>, which recognises the irremovable need that human beings have always had to believe in something greater than themselves when afraid.

What the poems have in common, and this is perhaps where Larkin has been influenced by Thomas the most, is the knowledge of how easily, but also with what need man sanctifies the world around him in order to feel wonder. Whether it is the 'different clothes' of baptism or man pulling 'the wind down', the two poets are aware that the need exists for transcendence.

Also, in the style of their writing (Thomas's referencing the Eucharistic prayer, Larkin's 'devout drench' and 'raise[d] glass in the East') the two poets are fully aware of the role language plays in religion, worship and the celebration of the wonders of the natural world.

It is very difficult to make a case for Dylan Thomas' influence on Larkin's poetry as being crucial to what makes Larkin unique. When compared with Larkin's more accepted influences of early Auden, Yeats and Hardy, the poetry that is imitative or responsive to Thomas is hardly there at all.

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<sup>220</sup> 'The Building', *CP*, p. 191.

<sup>221</sup> 'Faith Healing', *CP*, p. 126.

On the one hand, Larkin's claim that he felt Thomas to be very difficult to imitate, or write poetry in the same style as, might go some way to explaining this. In Larkin's juvenilia and the early poems that survive, there are none that clearly could not have been written without Larkin having read Thomas. To some extent, the stand taken by the Movement against Thomas includes Larkin, wilfully or not, simply through the absence of Thomas as an important writer to Larkin's poetry in a way that is immediately obvious.

All that being said, Larkin's own views on Thomas lead to a different conclusion. It is very rare to find another writer whom Larkin mentions (in interviews and letters) in a manner which can be described as hero-worship. Thomas' poetry is crucial in understanding not just Larkin's poetry but also the man himself. In the work, Thomas stands as a huge influence and impetus on Larkin to 'use good words to make what he means sound impressive', a feat Larkin surely achieved (T. S. Eliot said of Larkin, '...he often makes words do what he wants.'<sup>222</sup>), even if he did not pursue the purely rhetorical path to the impressive that Thomas did.

To Larkin himself, Thomas was an example of the poet as he idealised the role; he may have been the poet whom Larkin least resembled in terms of behaviour or poetic impulse, but he also was the poet Larkin came closest to calling his hero.

Unlike his contemporaries – and indeed in direct contrast to certain of them – Larkin recognises and allows for Thomas's unique talent and style to at least show him a different side to the 'traditional' English poetry of which he was so fond. Larkin probably knew that he would never write in a style similar to Thomas, but it is important, and overlooked by many critics and scholars of Larkin, that this did not

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<sup>222</sup> Charles Monteith, 'Publishing Larkin', Thwaite 1982, p. 40.

automatically mean Larkin disapproved of or disliked him. With Thomas, Larkin recognises the value of innovation in English tradition, even if he does not seek to emulate it.

## 1.6 Conclusions

Dylan Thomas aside, it is difficult to see how the four poets that I have considered in this chapter would be viewed as especially objectionable to those who, like Kingsley Amis, prefer to think of Larkin as harking back – both in terms of writing and influence – to late-Victorian, pre-1914 poetry. Edward Thomas, through his association with the Dymock Poets and travel guides, is largely thought of as a comfortably Georgian poet. Wilfred Owen’s summation of his poetic achievement, similarly, was as one ‘held peer by the Georgians; I am a poet’s poet’<sup>223</sup>. One view of Auden might be easily phrased as Ian Hamilton put it:

He’s wonderfully memorable and skilful of course and I have a high regard for him but no real fondness, if you see what I mean. He’s one of the greatest technicians of the last century, if not the greatest. He could do anything.<sup>224</sup>

However, both Auden and Dylan Thomas are probably best known for bereavement poems – the former’s ‘Stop all the clocks’ (*not* ‘Funeral Blues’, as recent culture has

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<sup>223</sup> Owen to Susan Owen, 31/12/17. *Collected Letters* ed. H. Owen and J. Bell (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 521.

<sup>224</sup> *Ian Hamilton in Conversation with Dan Jacobson* (London: Between the Lines, 2002), p. 78. Hereafter: Hamilton-Jacobson.

claimed) and the latter's 'Do not go gentle into that good night'. Ironically, this funereal fame demonstrates the residual fascination with death that characterises Larkin's relationship with all four poets, but they are poems lacking the cold eye and tone that Larkin really admired in Thomas, Owen, Auden and Dylan Thomas.

What makes these four poets crucial to an understanding of Larkin's formation, but also to one of his later engagements with Modernism, are the different aspects that Larkin prized in their work, which are rarely if ever their most public credentials.

Larkin's admiration of Thomas's cold awareness of death and its perpetual presence – even in supposedly idyllic rural settings – is very different to his 'train poems' perceived kinship with 'Adlestrop'. Likewise, Larkin shares with Owen not a memorialising tendency nor War-Graves-Commission solemnity, but the grim (and, again, *cold*) facing-up to death, and the impersonal distance and clarity that this acceptance brings.

With Auden, Larkin put a lot of effort into claiming only interest in Auden's earlier, ameliorative efforts: 'great Auden'. Yet it is in the mid to late Auden that Larkin finds the clear, chill voice of studied impersonality that would accompany and shape his own mid and late work with terse observation shaped by the sonnet and other technically proficient forms.

Finally, with Dylan Thomas, Larkin did not simply glory in the supposedly huge contrasts between Thomas's rhetoric and his own generation's down-to-earth approaches. Instead, Thomas served as an important resource in subject-matter – particularly the much-maligned 'myth-kitty' – that Larkin employed for his own

engagements with the world around him. Thomas also served in the not unimportant role of 'ideal poet' or literary icon, which fascinated and drove Larkin.

In the next chapter I will show that these engagements with these four writers were accompanied and followed by a concerted engagement with three American poets who – far from horrifying Larkin with their Modernism – expanded yet focussed his poetry, lending subject-matter, setting and characters to the cold eye and studied impersonality that were the real gift of his English influences.

## Chapter 2: Larkin and the Americans: Eliot, Lowell and Plath.

### 2.1 Larkin and America

It is very easy to find instances of Larkin dismissing, or expressing common stereotypes about, America (a country that he never actually visited). One such example is his much-quoted – and equally misunderstood, often wilfully – comment to Ian Hamilton about ‘the modernist revolution in English poetry’:

What I do feel a bit rebellious about is that poetry seems to have got itself into the hands of a critical industry which is concerned with culture in the abstract, and this I do rather lay at the door of Eliot and Pound. I think that Eliot and Pound have something in common with the kind of Americans you used to get around 1910. You know, when Americans began visiting Europe towards the end of the last century, what they used to say about them was that they were keen on culture, *laughably* keen – you got jokes like ‘Elmer, is this Paris or Rome?’ ‘What day is it?’ ‘Thursday’ ‘Then it’s Rome.’ – you know the kind of thing. This was linked with the belief that you can order culture whole, that it is a separate item on the menu – this was very typically American<sup>225</sup>

While there is a serious point here – about the idea of ordering ‘culture whole’ – which Larkin goes on to expand on, the concentration on humour and English clichés

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<sup>225</sup> Larkin-Hamilton 1964. p. 19.

about gauche American tourists are run-of-the-mill stereotypes. Larkin was self-aware about this, saying in a later interview

I suppose everyone has his own dream of America. A writer once said to me, If you ever go to America go either to the East Coast or the West Coast: the rest is a desert full of bigots. That's what I'd like: where if you help a girl trim the Christmas tree you're regarded as engaged, and her brothers start oiling their shotguns if you don't call on the minister. A version of pastoral.<sup>226</sup>

These fond ideas are important as Larkin's reaction to certain types of poetry, politics and social change was often influenced by nationality, though there is a danger of simplifying this. The spasmodic racism of his letters is just that – spasmodic, too random to be a technique or facet of judgement. As Clive James has pointed out, the comments about 'niggers' and 'wogs' are equalised by the praise for Sidney Bechet, Duke Ellington and Billie Holliday – not that this justifies or excuses the former comments, but they serve to demonstrate the trickiness in ascribing consistency to Larkin's views on cultures outside of his own.

He did, however, as he mentions above with his laying 'at the door' of Eliot and Pound, consider the Modernism of the 1920s to be an imported product, to be viewed with suspicion. When he talks about the mythic (as he proved it not to exist) 'lost' English tradition, he ascribes the 1920s Modernists equal, violent influence to the First World War:

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<sup>226</sup> Larkin in an interview with *Paris Review*, originally published summer 1982. Reprinted in *RW*, p. 70. Hereafter: *Paris Review* 1982.

...an English tradition coming from the nineteenth century... which was interrupted partly by the Great War, when many English poets were killed off, and partly by the really tremendous impact of Yeats, whom I think of as Celtic, and Eliot, whom I think of as American.<sup>227</sup>

Clearly a part of Larkin's rejection of the influence of Yeats here is both to do with Yeats's influence on poetry generally and on Larkin himself (he described the influence of Yeats as 'like garlic: one touch of Yeats and the whole things stinks of it'<sup>228</sup>), as Yeats was an influence he would do much to conceal. It is arguable, as I will go on to show in this chapter, that such covering of his own influences was also going on with his calling Eliot (a British citizen since 1927, and the majority of whose poetry was written in Britain) 'American'.

Larkin was one of a generation of English males who had lived through the Second World War and, as a result of America's late entry into the conflict, the apparently brash presence of 'Yanks' in Britain prior to D-Day and America's sidelining of the British in the closing stages and aftermath of the war, automatically viewed Americans with something approaching haughty contempt. This would have been a factor in his reading of American writers.

However, Larkin did read American writers, particularly poets, and often spoke warmly of them (though because it has not suited certain agendas this fact is often ignored or glossed over). Also, as a man aware of the inevitable influence of a

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<sup>227</sup> Larkin-Thwaite 1973, p. 96.

<sup>228</sup> Larkin-Haffenden 1980, p. 28.

writer's reading-matter on the work they produce, he would have been aware of the influence that certain American poets would have had on him.

The three poets who show their influence most strongly on Larkin are Eliot, Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath. They are not equal in their effect, nor in the length of time that their individual influences lasted; Eliot's was a permanent presence, Lowell a brief though important one, while Plath was a secret interest and influence who manifested herself in ways Larkin was both fascinated and concerned by.

T. S. Eliot published *Prufrock and Other Observations* in 1917. In 1959, Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* was published. Six years later, Ted Hughes oversaw the posthumous publication of his first wife Sylvia Plath's second collection of poems, *Ariel*. In terms of the effect – on the English literary world – of these three books, and of the poets in question, there is the sense of a diminishing, which is broadly representative of the effect of poetry per se on the reading public.

The three works that I will most consider in this chapter – *Prufrock*, *Life Studies* and Plath's *Collected Poems* – are all chiefly concerned with their authors' psychodrama.

The case then rests that Eliot is undeniably the most significant and influential of the three poets, Lowell still a major poet if not quite as titanic, and Plath an immensely famous poet, if not an important one. There is of course the matter of lineage and chronology: Lowell could not have written without Eliot's influence, and Plath learned a great deal from Lowell, both as a poet and as a student of his poetry seminars at Boston University in the early 1950s.

The matter of these three American poets' influence on Larkin is largely concerned with four questions, which I will answer where relevant to the individual poets, with the exception of the second question, which warrants a separate answer.

The four questions are:

- When did Larkin first read these poets?
- What was Larkin's perceived reaction to these poets? His 'public view', in other words.
- Was there a disparity between his perceived 'public view' and Larkin's personal view of these poets, as shown in his letters, criticism and interviews?
- Where can the effect of Eliot, Lowell and Plath be seen in Larkin's poetry?

With the exception of Eliot – whose poetry was not contemporary to Larkin's in the same way as Lowell and Plath's – the chronological question is essential to understanding the influence of these three American poets on Larkin.

## **2.2 Larkin and Eliot**

In his book *Against Oblivion: Some Lives of the Twentieth Century Poets*, Ian Hamilton's entry for Larkin is fulsome in its praise but – written sixteen years after Larkin's death – seeks neither to equal Peter Levi's canonisation of Larkin – 'It is possible to feel about him, as people felt about Eliot, that he was the last great poet'<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> Peter Levi 'The English Wisdom of a Master Poet', originally appeared in *The Sunday Telegraph*, 8<sup>th</sup> December 1985. Reprinted in *An Enormous Yes: in memoriam Philip Larkin* ed. H. Chambers (Calstock: Peterloo Poets, 1986), p. 33.

– nor execute one judgement of oblivion so bluntly put by Peter Ackroyd less than a decade earlier:

His was a minor talent which exhausted itself too soon, leaving only a few slim volumes as a memento. ...Of course, ...[being] a foul-mouthed bigot does not necessarily prevent anyone from being a great poet as well, but in Larkin's case no such consolation was ever available.<sup>230</sup>

The contrasting views of Levi and Ackroyd are important in that both had felt the question of Larkin's legacy, influence or individual impact to be an important one worth addressing. It is hard to say who could be accused of being more premature in their judgement; Levi, writing less than a week after Larkin's death (though admitting in his piece that 'after 1974 he wrote very little', so perhaps viewing himself as actually a decade on from the death of the poetry) claiming Larkin as 'the last great poet', or Ackroyd, writing eight years after the death and believing that to have been sufficient time to commit Larkin to Hamilton's oblivion.<sup>231</sup>

One of the striking features of Hamilton's book is his assertion<sup>232</sup>, however, that all of the poets therein are 'attached', as it were, by influence to one or all of the same

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<sup>230</sup> Ackroyd 1993, p. 255.

<sup>231</sup> There are personal considerations – though in Ackroyd's case these are less forgivable, given the arena he is writing in; as reviewer of a book *about* Larkin. Levi was a friend of the poet's, writing in a small memorial volume of appreciative eulogies. Ackroyd had long been a fierce opponent of Larkin's and this was neither the first nor (oddly) the last time he would dismiss him as 'a minor talent'.

<sup>232</sup> '...Hardy, Yeats, Eliot and Auden. For these four, it appears to me, oblivion presents no threat. There can be no disputing either their mastery or their supremacy, as the twentieth century's most gifted poetic presences, and those most likely to endure. ...In this book, the presence of Hardy, Yeats, Eliot and Auden can be felt throughout. They overshadow modern poetry in all its several strands and they impose a twofold influence: as encouraging exemplars or as giant-sized inhibitors.' Ian Hamilton, *Against Oblivion: Some Lives of the Twentieth-Century Poets* (London: Penguin, 2002), p. xvi. Hereafter: Hamilton 2002.

quartet of writers (Hardy, Yeats, Eliot and Auden), and yet remain starkly individual. This raises the question of the unavailability of influence – no matter how different James Merrill, Larkin, Ted Hughes and R. S. Thomas may seem, there is no denying their having been influenced by the same poetic forebears. There is no way that writing after Hardy's *Wessex Poems* or 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree', after the publication of *The Waste Land* or Auden's *Poems*, that a writer can be unaffected or untouched by these previous works.

All of this is worth pointing out before engaging with the question of T. S. Eliot's influence upon or role in the shaping of Larkin's poetry. Larkin was born two months before the first publication of *The Waste Land* in the *Criterion*. Whether or not it is Eliot's most famous work, *The Waste Land* is probably still his most important, simply in terms of the cultural impact it had on the poetic landscape; not through its critical reception with reviewers, but instead 'with undergraduates and young writers who saw it as the revelation of a modern sensibility'<sup>233</sup>.

I would not contend that *The Waste Land* is the most influential of Eliot's poems on Larkin. Indeed, it is fairly representative – possibly because of the clear and recorded influence of Ezra Pound – of the type of Modernism that Larkin consistently opposed: quotation-heavy, 'culture ordered whole' and 'American'. The two works of Eliot's that I will show Larkin as being most clearly indebted to are the earlier *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917) and *Four Quartets* (1944).

However, Larkin was never going to be able to avoid the influence of Eliot's most famously ground-breaking poem. *The Waste Land* effected a considerable shift in English poetics, one that – even ninety years later – poets who came after it would

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<sup>233</sup> Peter Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984), p. 128.

have to react to. Perhaps the clearest effect it had upon Larkin was by way of its effect on Larkin's early poetic love, W. H. Auden. Auden's tutor Nevill Coghill remembers the following exchange taking place in 1926/7:

[Auden] 'I have torn up all my poems.'

[Coghill] 'Indeed! Why?'

'Because they were no good. Based on Wordsworth. No good nowadays.'

'Oh...?'

'You ought to read Eliot. I've been reading Eliot. I now see the way I want to write. I've written two new poems this week. Listen!'<sup>234</sup>

That Larkin 'received' the influence of Eliot through the filter of Auden has never been much disputed, but it has also served as a way for both Larkin's defenders and detractors to separate Larkin from Eliot. The Englishness of early Auden – and Larkin himself defined the early Auden as 'English', while post-1940-Auden was 'American' – sits comfortably with those who, for both supportive and dismissive reasons wish to limit Larkin's transatlantic influences.

Hamilton's argument in the introduction to *Against Oblivion* is merely enunciating a widely accepted idea: that if a writer precedes another writer – particularly in a field as particular as poetry written in English in the twentieth century – then the later writer cannot avoid being effected or influenced by the earlier

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<sup>234</sup> Nevill Coghill, 'Sweeney Agonistes' *T. S. Eliot: A Symposium* ed. March and Tambimuttu (London: PL Editions, 1948), p. 82.

writer. Whether that manifests itself in reaction against or clear imitation or emulation of that writer is immaterial – the connection remains. I state this again simply to point out how unusual it is that criticism of Larkin, by and large, has sought either to ignore Eliot’s role in his poetic life and writing, or to act (at times) as though Larkin is the exception to the rule of poetic precedent, at least as far as Eliot is concerned. Certain writing on Larkin and Eliot treats the two as if they were either the same age or lived in separate centuries. Most writing on Larkin makes scant mention of Eliot at all, and when it does cites Larkin’s criticisms of Eliot in his reviews, letters and interviews.

Andrew Motion, in the introduction to his biography of Larkin states quite plainly the perceived difference between Larkin and Eliot:

It is part of his [Larkin’s] poems’ strength to speak directly to most people who come across them. He makes each of us feel he is ‘our’ poet, in a way that Eliot, for instance, does not – and each of us creates a highly personal version of his character to accompany his work.<sup>235</sup>

Leaving aside the question of whether or not *every* poet (and indeed, writer) is viewed in a different ‘highly personal’ way by each reader, Eliot was not without poetic personae among the general readership: Prufrock, the many voices of *The Waste Land*, Sweeney, or Old Possum’s cats. I would argue that the most identifiable trait of Eliot’s that Larkin values and incorporates into his own verse is the rack of masks available to the poet. After Prufrock came the anti-hero versions of Larkin that

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<sup>235</sup> Motion 1993, p. xx.

would occupy the imagined world of Mr Bleaney, but also the more clearly defined poet moaned about by Jake Balakowsky, invited for drinks by Warlock-Williams and who sees 'a couple of kids' and guesses that 'he's fucking her'.

Where the principal disagreement between Eliot and Larkin lies is in how much the poems' protagonist is an anti-heroic version of the poet and how much of it is much more autobiographical.

Biography takes some of the credit for this. The Eliot of *Prufrock* is very similar to the Larkin who had stopped writing poems in the last decade of his life. Separation from his first wife enabled Eliot to stop turning into *Prufrock* permanently and being slowly ground down by that inward-turning of the poetry which, Motion and others argue, did for Larkin's poetry in the end. That Eliot later happily remarried allowed him to write from a distance, describing more and more, and unloading less and less. As a recent biography has put it, 'after 1930 he [Eliot] did his best not to write poetry that was personal'<sup>236</sup>.

The opposite, almost, was true of Larkin. He spoke of his creativity upon leaving University as being 'like taking the cork out of a bottle'<sup>237</sup>, and the briefest look at his bibliography demonstrates a slow thinning and eventual stop of creativity between 1942 (when he was twenty) and 1975 (when he was fifty-three). Larkin strongly believed in committing the self to the poems, saying, in response to an interviewer who stated that Larkin's reviews 'tend towards a biographical interpretation of a writer's work',

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<sup>236</sup> John Worthen, *T. S. Eliot* (London: Haus, 2009), p. 152.

<sup>237</sup> Motion 1993, p. 106.

I think we *want* the life and the work to make sense together: I suppose ultimately they must, since they both relate to the same person. Eliot would say they don't, but I think Eliot is wrong.<sup>238</sup>

Larkin's poems moved from the cold detachment of his Audenesque then Yeatsian phases towards a more involved but also subsequently more vulnerable voice. Again, this is the opposite to Eliot's slow movement towards a contented, separate voice, which was aided, in any case, by a conversion to Christianity and happy marriage, both of which Larkin saw as anathema to himself.

Before looking at the poems themselves, some space must be given to what the perceived relation of Eliot to Larkin was in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

As far as the poetry of the 1950s, and Larkin's poetry as well, went in referring to or being influenced by Eliot, critical approaches have been more or less uniform. Al Alvarez insisted<sup>239</sup> on there being 'negative feedbacks' against the Modernist poetry of Eliot and Pound, and Peter Ackroyd made a near-identical point as to the 'almost wilful philistinism' that sought

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<sup>238</sup> Larkin-Haffenden 1980, p. 49.

<sup>239</sup> See Alvarez 1962.

an aesthetic of narrow forms, narrow cadences, and an even narrower idea of poetry, which reached its apotheosis in the work of Philip Larkin.<sup>240</sup>

Motion's point as to Larkin being 'our poet' and Eliot not being so makes a subtler but nonetheless separating point between the two writers. Throughout his biography, or so it would seem, Motion is at pains to demonstrate the utter disconnection of Larkin from Eliot, yet a closer examination of the book reveals an entirely different reading to be gained from Motion. To his credit, he consistently cites Larkin himself as the source of any perceived gap between Eliot and Larkin, adducing such quotations as

It is as obvious as it is strenuously denied that in this century English poetry went off on a loop-line that took it away from the general reader. Several factors caused this.... One, I am afraid, was the culture-mongering activities of the Americans Eliot and Pound.<sup>241</sup>

And describing Larkin's first collection of essays as defending

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<sup>240</sup> Ackroyd 1987, p. 211.

<sup>241</sup> Larkin, 'It Could Only Happen in England', written as an introduction to the American edition of John Betjeman's enlarged *Collected Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971). Hereafter: Larkin 1971. *FR*, pp. 216-7. Cited in Motion 1993, p. 173.

what is local, well-made, modest and accessible. Early Auden, Hardy, William Barnes, Edward Thomas, Housman, Owen, Betjeman and Pym are praised, Eliot and Pound derided.<sup>242</sup>

A key factor to notice, however, in these examples – and it recurs in an essay<sup>243</sup> by Christopher Ricks – is the pairing of Eliot with Pound. In Larkin’s own criticism and Larkin criticism alike, whenever an attack on the Modernist ‘project’ of the 1920s (which *The Waste Land* is seen as central to) is made that cites Eliot, it is always ‘Eliot and Pound’. I would contend that Motion is aware of this, as elsewhere (as I shall show below) he tentatively, if incompletely, draws parallels between Eliot and Larkin’s work, and even places Eliot as an important presence in the early poetry of Larkin that is traditionally thought to echo only Auden.

The importance of Larkin’s constant suffix of ‘and Pound’ whenever decrying or criticising Eliot’s effect on poetry is firstly to emphasise Eliot’s American background by placing him constantly in the company of another American Europhile, and secondly to present Eliot and Pound in a simplistic manner (which Larkin himself admits to the simplicity of, through his ‘I’m afraid’ or elsewhere, ‘I do rather lay this at the door of Eliot and Pound’<sup>244</sup>) as part of Modernism as a planned modification of the arts, as opposed to it being just a different way of writing.

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<sup>242</sup> Motion 1993, p. 503.

<sup>243</sup> ‘Larkin’s classical temper shows its mettle when he deplores modernism’ Ricks goes onto cite Larkin’s famous triadic dismissal of ‘Parker, Pound or Picasso’. Christopher Ricks, ‘Like Something Almost Being Said’, Thwaite 1982, p. 123.

<sup>244</sup> Larkin-Hamilton 1964. p. 19.

Elsewhere in the *Life*, Motion mentions Eliot with a subtle suggestion as to the actual importance of his effect upon the young Larkin. In the 1920s and 1930s, Larkin's father, Sydney, was happy to provide him with work by D. H. Lawrence and other recent writers, and this clearly had an effect on Larkin as, when later preparing for his final school exams,

He worked hard, widening his reading to include Verlaine and Lamartine as well as Auden and Eliot, and changing the mood and style of his own poems accordingly. 'Pseudo-Keats babble' gave way to imitations of Auden and Eliot, and included a short series of lyrics about a Sweeney-esque character called Stanley:

The dull whole of the drawing room  
Is crucified with crystal nails,  
Dresden shepherdesses smirk  
As Stanley practises his scales.

Flaunting these new, sophisticated influences, Larkin began to change his image in school. Instead of pranking or lurking, he became serious and urgent.<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> Motion 1993, p. 31.

The poem quoted is ‘Stanley en Musique’, one of a series of poems written by Larkin that use his school friend Earnest Stanley Saunders as a Sweeney-esque character to build Eliotian imagery around. The full poem was written on the 15<sup>th</sup> July 1939 and described in a note by Larkin as ‘Eliotian but amusing. Somehow, one can’t be serious about Sanders. He is too – how shall I put it? Oh, I don’t know.’<sup>246</sup> This entry is interesting, particularly as Larkin would later deny or fail to mention any engagement with Eliot as a child on the same grounds as he would admit to his reading of Auden, Owen or Housman. It also bears the first signs of Larkin’s hesitancy as to Eliot (that would last his entire life): that of finding it difficult to place absurd or funny real-life situations in a heavily rhetorical poem laden with ‘the sense of drama’ he so valued in early Auden. ‘Eliotian but amusing’ could serve as a fair description of such later poems as ‘Mr Bleaney’, ‘Self’s the man’ and ‘The Whitsun Weddings’, and as I will show later in this chapter, those three poems each echo Eliot in a manner rarely allowed by Larkin’s supporters or detractors.

Motion’s comments, as to Larkin’s engagement with Eliot at school actually changing his behaviour, are important as it is rare in Larkin’s life to find him ‘Flaunting...new, sophisticated influences’ at all. Whether or not Larkin’s wider reading was as a direct result of his father’s encouragement, is debatable, but it is rare to find Larkin later admitting – certainly to casual interviewers who do not press him, or in letters to friends such as Kingsley Amis, Barbara Pym or Robert Conquest – to such an international variety of reading matter as is listed here by Motion.

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<sup>246</sup> Diary entry included as footnote to ‘Stanley en Musique’. *EPAJ*, p. 21.

Larkin's 'Eliotian' moments, both in his juvenilia and later are informative to look at, if only because they demonstrate a writer in flux, between his younger influences and the mature voice Larkin would be known for. One piece, written in 1946 and intended for inclusion in the successor to *The North Ship* (1945) (a collection Larkin tentatively entitled *In The Grip Of Light*) shows a marked Eliotian influence that allowed Larkin, Motion suggests, to

Tell stories which pass off their real emotional occasion as an anecdote about a third party. ... 'Two Guitar Pieces', opens with a description of a guitar player (he has 'a southern voice') sitting by a railroad. It then turns to an 'I' and a friend standing at a window ... Apparently random, this music [of the guitar, evoked in the poem] nevertheless creates art's 'accustomed harnessing of grief', consoling the speaker even as it reminds him of his isolation and social sterility. 'And now the guitar again,' the poems ends, echoing Eliot, 'Spreading me over the evening like a cloud, / Drifting, darkening: unable to bring rain.'<sup>247</sup>

While the poem certainly echoes Eliot, both in terms of the detached speaker and the dry comment as to art's 'accustomed harnessing of grief', it also engages with *The Waste Land*, with its imagery of the parched land to which Larkin is 'unable to bring rain'

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<sup>247</sup> Motion 1993, p. 151. The poem cited is 'Two Guitar Pieces', *EPAJ*, pp. 299-300.

And the accustomed harnessing of grief  
Tightens, because together or alone  
We cannot trace that room; and then again  
Because it is not a room, nor a world, but only  
A figure spun on stirring of the air,  
And so untrue.

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.

(‘Two Guitar Pieces’<sup>248</sup>)

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<sup>248</sup> Larkin, ‘Two Guitar Pieces’, *EPaJ*, pp. 299-300.

The powerlessness that Larkin feels gripped by, which he attributes to the guitar's effect upon him, is similar to the litany of hopelessness in *The Waste Land*:

And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,

And the dry stone no sound of water.<sup>249</sup>

Just as the dry stone gives no sound of water, so too the younger Larkin can only listen to another's art. The music 'harnesses' the grief that, even in the poem, he feels he cannot express. He is held by the music, but separate from it, so he cannot realise the moment or the situation because he can neither 'trace' the room, nor say the music perfectly captures the moment. This inability stems from both his (and his companion's) experience of the music being unique to them – the 'figure spun on stirring of the air' is untrue because it is, after all, just music. The figure is their projection onto the music. That the art is not his own is why he can only drift, and is 'unable to bring rain', for as he cannot contain the moment, nor can he express it. It is essentially a poem about another's expression – a poem about art he has no control over.

Compare this to the older Larkin, of 'The Whitsun Weddings', where the last stanza sums up and 'looses' the whole poem:

...and it was nearly done, this frail

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<sup>249</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* 'I. The Burial of the Dead', *TCPaP*. P. 69.

Travelling coincidence; and what it held  
Stood ready to be loosed with all the power  
That being changed can give. We slowed again,  
And as the tightened brakes took hold, there swelled  
A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower  
Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.<sup>250</sup>

In the poem, Larkin contains the weddings/rites of passages seen in three ways; first on the separate station platforms, then in ‘this frail travelling coincidence’ – all these people in the same carriages, at the same time – and finally in the poem itself. The ‘sense of something falling’ has three meanings. It is the train coming into London (as the poem points out earlier, ‘there we were aimed’), but also the married couples setting off on their new lives together elsewhere, and finally the poem itself, finished.

This last meaning is particularly important, when compared to the earlier poem, as it is Larkin (dare I say it) *happy* with the poem, and feeling that it can be loosed as it says all that has to be said about the subject. Whereas in ‘Two Guitar Pieces’, the art ‘tightens’ because the guitar music is out of the poet’s control, the poem ends in a state of unreleased tension. Yet when, in ‘The Whitsun Weddings’, the journey (and poem) comes to an end, only ‘the brakes tighten’, and the result of that tensing is to release, or loose the poem.

Larkin’s later poem is still a story passing off its real emotional occasion ‘to tell an anecdote about a third party’ (or parties, in the weddings), and as an unmarried,

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<sup>250</sup> Larkin, ‘The Whitsun Weddings’, *CP*, p. 115.

lone traveller, Larkin's 'isolation and social sterility' aren't much improved from the earlier poem. What is different, however, is that Larkin is writing about an event, rather than 'culture-mongering', as he put it, by describing some other cultural piece of artistic expression – the guitar music of the earlier poem. Eliot's presence remains, even in 'The Whitsun Weddings', in Larkin's isolated, dry observer (who, it must be remembered, views the weddings in an unmoved and decidedly anti-emotional or unemotional state), yet the poem's direct transmission of personal experience allows 'the life and work to make sense together', and so Larkin is no longer worried about at least *admitting* to a real emotional occasion within the poem: that of the 'frail, travelling coincidence' that allows the poem to be written.

Motion's most interesting argument for a pervading Eliotian influence on Larkin is in relation to Larkin's final collection, *High Windows*. Motion is aware of Larkin's use of personae and unusual 'voices' (that is, styles or forms such as Symbolism for which he is not widely renowned or thought of as being defined by) in order to express influences that he is either cagey about or that he would feel intellectually uncomfortable justifying or explaining in a serious academic context.

Motion cites the early writing of Larkin done under the pseudonym 'Brunette Coleman' as having helped Larkin create a 'second language' and that

This second language is the one so deeply yet so subtly affected by the Symbolist writers he later decried – and the Symbolist-influenced ones he also scorned, notably Eliot – and it is this second language that Brunette helped to develop.

... He may have invented her as a joke, but her openness to foreign influence allowed him to find his own, mature voice. She helped him become himself by allowing him to find his own, mature voice. She let him see himself plainly, albeit briefly in a distorting mirror.<sup>251</sup>

This is a serious consideration of Larkin's writing under the Coleman pseudonym, a body of Larkin's work that is often dismissed, due to its subject matter being a series of quasi-erotic sketches involving schoolgirls, spanking and lesbian tension. Motion recognises, as well, the unexpected influence that this 'joke' had on Larkin, where others either dismissed or took exception to what can be seen merely as extended adolescent fantasies.

It is with the poem 'High Windows' itself that I would contend Eliot truly re-emerges in Larkin's writing, though not without some notable contrasts that re-invoke the importance of both Yeats and Hardy when considering Larkin's engagement with Eliot.

While Larkin had a lot more time for the later Eliot, of *Four Quartets* and *Murder in the Cathedral* (both of which he excerpted in his *Oxford Book*), than he had had for *The Waste Land* (though that is also included in the *Oxford Book*) the differences in the two poets' views of time and history would lead to Larkin's most obvious poetic similarity to Eliot, but also to that similarity serving only to exemplify the utterly different viewpoints of the two.

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<sup>251</sup> Motion 1993, p. 99-100.

Larkin and Eliot's differences over time and history owe something to two earlier poets. In Larkin's case, his mistrust of religion blurring the borders of life and death (with an afterlife, resurrection or spiritualism's hauntings) is partly taken from Hardy. Eliot, on the other hand, owes something to Yeats in his view of the sublime or transcendental making life, death and therefore history and the past less definite than the grave would suggest. This division between Hardy and Yeats was enunciated well by Donald Davie, writing that

Hardy appears to have mistrusted, and certainly leads other poets to mistrust, the claims of poetry to transcend the linear unrolling of recorded time. This is at once Hardy's strength and his limitation; and it sets him irreconcilably at odds with for instance Yeats, who exerts himself repeatedly to transcend historical time by seeing it as cyclical, so as to leap above it into a realm that is visionary, mythological, and (in some sense or to some degree) *eternal*.<sup>252</sup>

Davie allows that this should not prevent a reader from enjoying both, but he does view these differences as being major. It must also be said that Davie is writing a strongly opinionated book (Larkin was uneasy about some of the claims made on his behalf, not to mention Davie's savage review of his *Oxford Book*), but it does allow for a comparison between and analysis of the engagement (on Larkin's part) with *Four Quartets*.

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<sup>252</sup> Davie 1973, p. 4.

When Eliot writes, in 'Little Gidding', that

...the communication

Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the

living.

Here, the intersection of the timeless moment

Is England and nowhere. Never and always.<sup>253</sup>

he prefigures Larkin's later observation, as described by Motion, that

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.<sup>254</sup>

Both poems talk about an understanding or resolution that is out of both the poet and reader's view or grasp – the last lines of both are, as Motion puts it, offered as something 'rather than words'.

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<sup>253</sup> Eliot, 'Little Gidding', *TCPaP*, p. 192.

<sup>254</sup> Larkin, 'High Windows', *CP*, p. 165.

For Eliot this is because the effect of history is far more authoritative, and the language of the past more significant (hence its being ‘tongued with fire’) than the writing of the living, which he sees as perpetuating the continuing ‘England and nowhere’ that he briefly encounters in the churchyard at Little Gidding.

For Larkin, the unreachable element of ‘the deep blue air’ is given an ironically physical, tantalising quality – ‘high windows’ being elevated beyond the reach of the pavement, but not entirely unachievable, if at least to the glaziers who put them there – but also a shared incomprehension, a moment of drawing a blank at the essentially incorporeal nature of the world. To Larkin, the ‘England and nowhere’ that Eliot describes is encased within the ‘deep blue air’, and so is both more ambivalent – showing ‘nothing’ – and more constant than the buildings it will erode and outlast.

Elsewhere in the collection *High Windows*, most notably in ‘Going, Going’, Larkin rejects Eliot’s ‘Never and always’, reflecting mournfully that ‘I thought it would last my time’ but that, in fact, ‘that will be England gone,’ and that ‘I just think it will happen, soon’. ‘Going, Going’ is filled with the physical changes to English society in the 1960s and 1970s, rather than ‘High Windows’s petering out, abstract air, but the point is the same. For Eliot, the church at Little Gidding, bolstered by his correlating religious faith, is proof that ‘England’ will remain. For Larkin, in ‘High Windows’ and ‘Going, Going’, the grim fact is that the unreachable is all that will remain, the air and the unknowable histories lost in it.

This transient difference, of how anchored the poems are to settings that will or will not change, is indicative of a wider difference, between the less-*Waste Land*-radical, Christian Eliot and the consistently secular Larkin, which states that these

... are decisive differences [between Larkin and Eliot's views of the past]: Eliot's view of history is essentially mythical; he conceives of time as a cycle, not as a linear sequence.<sup>255</sup>

This is of course an echoing of Davie's Yeats/Hardy point, but directly applied to Larkin and Eliot. It also nuances Larkin's objection to Eliot when compared to Hardy, as he had said in a radio broadcast in 1966:

I'm saying what I like about him [Hardy] primarily is his temperament and the way he sees life. He's not a transcendental writer, he's not a Yeats, he's not an Eliot; his subjects are men, the life of men, time and the passing of time, love and the fading of love.<sup>256</sup>

This comparison to Hardy was most obviously demonstrated in Larkin's selection of Hardy and Eliot for his *Oxford Book*. Eliot takes up 29 pages, while Hardy only 24, but there are only 9 poems on Eliot's pages, whereas there are 27 on Hardy's – making him the 'Major' poet of the anthology, as Motion points out

Eliot is represented in the anthology by only nine poems – and although two of them are long – 'Prufrock' and 'The Waste Land' – they still do not take up enough pages to make him seem a supremely

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<sup>255</sup> Hans Osterwalder, *British Poetry between the Movement and Modernism: Anthony Thwaite and Philip Larkin* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1991), p. 85.

<sup>256</sup> Larkin, 'A Man Who Noticed Things', originally broadcast on Radio 4 in 1966. *RW*, p. 175.

dominant figure. Only Hardy with twenty-seven poems could claim to be that<sup>257</sup>

I will consider the full inclusion of 'Prufrock' next, as I consider it among Eliot's early poems to be an undervalued and important formative influence on Larkin.

As well as the full text of *The Waste Land* in his *Oxford Book*, Larkin included the whole of Eliot's earlier poem 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'. The motives behind this could be threefold.

On the one hand he was highly critical of *The Waste Land*, so to preface Eliot's perhaps most seminal text with the awkward ditherings of Prufrock does take *The Waste Land* down a peg or two, or present the reader with a choice as to how seriously they take the second poem, in light of the blunderings and hand-wringing of Prufrock.

On the other hand, Larkin could be taking advantage of the fact that, given Eliot's total poetic output was so small, here he had the opportunity to show the 'full poet', as it were, demonstrating from 'Prufrock' to *Four Quartets* the full scale of his career and maturing, in order to give the reader a fair and full opportunity to grasp this important poet in his entirety.

However, I would contend that – as much as both of the above reasons are no doubt true to a certain extent – Larkin's inclusion of 'Prufrock' is partly down to what

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<sup>257</sup> Motion 1993, p. 431.

he sees in the character of Prufrock himself: the hand-wringing antihero. As well as this, 'Prufrock' was written while Eliot was still in America, prior to his move to England and the resulting creative friendship and partnership with Pound. Including 'Prufrock' has the advantage of separating Eliot from the 'Eliot and Pound' construct with which Larkin so often damned him, as it is hard to imagine Pound producing anything as awkward as 'Prufrock' in terms of tone (though Pound championed the poem, persuading his editor at *Poetry* (Chicago) to print it in full).

There is a certain amount of resetting the clock of history going on here, as well. While John Berryman had called 'Prufrock' 'the first modern poem', *The Waste Land* is most commonly held to represent the dramatic modern shift that Eliot and Pound enacted in 1920s poetry. It is both what Alvarez describes as the 'negative feedbacks' of the Forties and Fifties being against, and what Larkin partly claims he felt replaced what little of the 'English Tradition' or 'Line' survived the First World War. Pre-*Waste Land* Eliot is also pre-Pound Eliot, and Larkin would have known this – the facsimile and transcripts edition of *The Waste Land*, including Pound's annotations on the original drafts, was published at the same time (1971) as Larkin was compiling his *Oxford Book*. Reminding the reader that Prufrock came first was both a historically responsible representation of 'the full Eliot', but also lessens the impact of *The Waste Land* to a certain degree.

I would argue that the inclusion of 'Prufrock' also allows Larkin to announce a debt of influence that, though clearly identifiable in his work (as I show below), he never felt quite capable of admitting to outright.

Motion describes Donald Davie, in an intensely hostile review of *The Oxford Book*, accusing Larkin of having

[...]mistaken feebleness for modesty; he had denied experiment; he had made the book too much in what he considered to be (rather than what actually was) his own poetic image.<sup>258</sup>

Robert Lowell said something similar when he referred to *The Oxford Book* as ‘the longest Larkin poem’. While I would not entirely agree with either statement, there is in the book a secondary anthology that, can be traced, of Larkin’s own influences. It is also worth noting that Louis MacNeice was originally intended to compile the *Oxford Book*, but died in 1963, though Larkin’s inclusion of many Irish poets in his subsequent anthology may have been in deference to MacNeice. After the opening twenty-four pages of Hardy, I would argue that ‘Prufrock’ in its entirety is the next major influence that Larkin lays out for the reader to see it in full.

To a certain extent, Larkin’s debt to the Eliot of Prufrock is both obvious and almost predictable. An enormous amount of Larkin’s poetry, and his public persona, could be summed up in Eliot/Prufrock’s words

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;

Am an attendant lord, one that will do

To swell a progress, start a scene or two,

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<sup>258</sup> Motion 1993, p. 432.

Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,  
Deferential, glad to be of use,  
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;  
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;  
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous –  
Almost, at times, the Fool.<sup>259</sup>

(Which in turn brings to mind Seamus Heaney's description of Larkin's 'shade' in the underworld) This type of un or anti-glamorous everyman may not have been invented by Eliot – after all, Victorian fiction is full of them – but Prufrock would be the first dominant poetic figure of the century, and Larkin's protagonists frequently hark back to this 'attendant lord... at times, the Fool':

I know his habits – what time he came down,  
His preference for sauce to gravy, why  
He kept on plugging at the four aways –  
Likewise their yearly frame:

(‘Mr Bleaney’<sup>260</sup>)

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<sup>259</sup> Eliot, ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’, *TCPaP*, p. 16.

<sup>260</sup> Larkin, ‘Mr Bleaney’, *CP*, p. 102.

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

(‘Self’s the Man’<sup>261</sup>)

‘...One of those old-type *natural* fouled-up guys’

(‘Posterity’<sup>262</sup>)

In fact, Larkin includes himself, in this list of Prufrocks, in the opening stanzas of ‘Church Going’,

Hatless, I take off

My cycle-clips in awkward reverence,

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<sup>261</sup> Larkin, ‘Self’s the Man’, *CP*, p. 117.

<sup>262</sup> Larkin, ‘Posterity’, *CP*, p. 170.

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.<sup>263</sup>

Their awareness of their own plight places the antiheroes in the audience with the reader, and so makes them doubly representative of the flawed man as Larkin sees him. Eliot allows Larkin to write honestly about Bleaney, Self, himself and others in a way that Hardy would have required him to be far more dramatic or tragic about, and in which (perhaps) Lawrence would have required Larkin to link too much to class or sexual dysfunction (not that Larkin was averse to touching on either of those).

Whether or not this is what Larkin meant when he referred to Robert Conquest's invoking of 'the whole man'<sup>264</sup> (in terms of the writers of the poetry in *New Lines*) is unclear. Also, if Eliot was able to bury or write off his 'seedy, sexually expert "young man carbuncular"' through his later, more pious Christian verse, then Larkin's sticking with his own awkward, thwarted gallery of the frustrated is evidence – as if it were needed – of his firm belief in there being no redemption, and subsequently little hope of salvation from one's own inherent flaws. Though the poet admits that he doesn't know whether Mr Bleaney was 'pretty sure / he warranted no better', the implied similarity of their situations leaves the reader in little doubt that Bleaney's successor *does* know that he himself warrants no better.

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<sup>263</sup> Larkin, 'Church Going', *CP*, p. 97.

<sup>264</sup> Larkin to Conquest, 28/5/55. *SL*, p. 241.

Interestingly, Larkin's own entry in the *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry in English* has only one person to use as a comparative holder of lasting influence, while also dismissing Ackroyd's 'minor' assertions

Regarded for much of his career as a minor poet with a narrow range of subject matter, Larkin now seems to dominate the history of English poetry in the second half of the twentieth century much as Eliot dominated it in the first.<sup>265</sup>

Whether or not this goes some way to finally reject Alvarez' belief of Larkin having been part of a 'negative feedback' against Eliot's influence – it may, but it may also demonstrate that Larkin's effect has acted as an equivalent counter to that of Eliot – it does at least equalise their effect.

What is ironic is that part of the 'narrow range of subject matter' was Eliot's doing. In 'Prufrock' Eliot gave Larkin the everyman antihero that Larkin would turn into an embodiment of his worldview; flawed, frustrated but also self-aware and unflinchingly honest.

Eliot and Larkin offer the two forms of dealing with the twentieth century's wars, horrors and neuroses in their poetry. For Eliot, understanding and redemption (whether it was through medical recuperation, remarriage or religion) offered an alternative, widened subject matter that the early anxiety of Prufrock could not hope

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<sup>265</sup> Blake Morrison, 'Philip Larkin'(entry), *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry in English* ed. I. Hamilton. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 288.

to achieve. Yet Prufrock never voices the wider extent of worry that Eliot seems to have felt, and that is why *The Waste Land* appeared.

Larkin, however, knew there to be neither final understanding nor redemption. The sum of this knowledge led his more developed Prufrocks – Bleaney, Balokowsky – to voice, unflinchingly, what Eliot used transcendence to escape from. Larkin’s bleak, secular voice is representative not just of the cynicism of his Movement colleagues of the 1950s, but also of the wider feeling, in the late twentieth century, that honest pessimism was preferable to the unreliable promises of religion or ideology. Eliot could be no help with such a perspective, but another American poet, Robert Lowell, could be.

### **2.3 Lowell and Larkin**

If Larkin’s career is often characterised by way of his being ‘with’ certain writers (Kingsley Amis, Barbara Pym, Gavin Ewart) and ‘against’ others, then those whom he is ‘against’ must include Robert Lowell. In order to understand the forced combat that Lowell and Larkin were put into – against one another – it is important to understand the effect of Al Alvarez in the ‘60s, on the English poetry scene. He ‘occupied a role that is now virtually non-existent on the English poetry scene: he was a kingmaker. What he said in his column of *The Observer*, and the poems he selected to print in that paper, defined what was important on the literary map’<sup>266</sup>.

Alvarez must be credited with having been one of the few members of the English literary ‘scene’ of the 1950s and ‘60s to have really understood the value of

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<sup>266</sup> Feinstein 2001, p. 115.

Robert Lowell's poetry – both in itself, and the effect it would have on poetry in America and in England.

During the forties, however, when English poetry was at its nadir, there arose in the States a new generation of poets, the most important of whom were Robert Lowell and John Berryman. They had assimilated the lesson of Eliot and the critical thirties: they assumed that a poet, to earn his title, had to be very skilful, very original, and very intelligent. But they were no longer concerned with Eliot's rearguard action against the late Romantics; they were, I mean, no longer adherents of the cult of rigid impersonality.<sup>267</sup>

Citing Alvarez's influence, Ian Hamilton (twice Alvarez's successor as poetry editor, first at the *Times Literary Supplement* and then at *The Observer*) would also champion Lowell, much as he admired Larkin, but Alvarez saw Lowell as a combatant against Larkin, or at least against the bad effect that Alvarez saw the Movement, and Larkin in particular, as having upon the poetry of the day.

Alvarez saw Larkin and the Movement (quixotically, given Alvarez's almost-inclusion in the Movement's original roll-call<sup>268</sup>) as the latest in the a series of 'negative feedbacks' against the advances or progress of Eliot and Pound's Modernism – what Larkin himself referred to as their 'sharpening up [of] the language<sup>269</sup>'.

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<sup>267</sup> Alvarez 1962, p. 28.

<sup>268</sup> '[in 1956]... The poets of the group were Wain, Gunn, Davie and, funnily enough, Alvarez.' Larkin-Hamilton 1964, p. 20.

<sup>269</sup> Larkin in conversation with Anthony Thwaite 'The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse', *FR*, p. 96.

Subsequently, in his Introduction to *The New Poetry*, the anthology he edited seemingly as a rebuttal to *New Lines* (1956), Alvarez co-opts several people into standing against Larkin and the Movement. Those seen to stand ‘against’ the Movement’s ‘feedback’, Alvarez grouped as ‘with’ Robert Lowell and ‘The Americans’ (the name of their section at the start of the book) – his influence seeming to be the polar opposite to Larkin’s.

Alvarez’s criticisms above raise some concerns, about both the differences between and the achievements of Lowell and Larkin. Ironically, the literary transformation ‘of the seemingly private into a poetry central to all our anxieties’<sup>270</sup> is very close to what Larkin was both celebrated for in his lifetime and has been praised for since; namely his celebration and depictions of the day-to-day and mundane in a language understandable to all.

The matter of ‘cost’ to poetry that concerns confusion, demands and uproars, however, is where Larkin and Alvarez’s expectations of poetry most vividly divide. Alvarez championed Lowell, Sylvia Plath, John Berryman and Ted Hughes with what, at times, can be seen as a lurid delight in the physical and mental tolls which were either the cause of or caused by the visceral poetry they produced. Larkin’s attitude to the more harrowing ‘confessional’ poets was one of admiration subservient to concern: poetry, he clearly felt, is not worth killing yourself over.

Alvarez’s influence was undeniably effective, and was also felt in Ian Hamilton’s comments about the period:

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<sup>270</sup> As Larkin would describe Lowell’s work in *Life Studies*. Larkin, ‘Keeping up with the Graveses’, originally appeared in the *Manchester Guardian*, 15<sup>th</sup> May 1959. Reprinted in *FR*, pp. 203-206. Hereafter, Larkin 1959.

[Ian Hamilton] ...the impulse behind *The Review*<sup>271</sup> came from this discovery that much more interesting things were going on in America than here. Poets like Roethke, Berryman, Lowell and Plath all seemed to me to be much more exciting than anything being done in this country. These were, if you like, our exemplars.

[Dan Jacobson] Very much the Al Alvarez Line.

[I.H.] Yes, well, Al was a big influence. He shaped a lot of that terrain, at least for me.<sup>272</sup>

Hamilton also reflects – and so tacitly admits to the impression of – a supposed contention between Lowell and Larkin as ‘major poets’:

[D.J.] You have written amusingly about what a small-time English contender Larkin seemed to be, by comparison [with Lowell]. Some of the same kind of ambition, but so discreetly felt and so discreetly concealed.

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<sup>271</sup> The magazine Hamilton founded and edited between 1962 and 1972.

<sup>272</sup> Hamilton-Jacobson, p. 58.

[I.H.] You remember Lowell trying to cultivate Larkin, sending him a copy of *The Dolphin* or something? Larkin retaliated with *High Windows* and inscribed it ‘from a drought to a flood’.

[D.J.] What a put-down

[I.H.] Lowell took it as a compliment.

[D.J.] I’m sure he would, from this costive Englishman.

[I.H.] Yes, a tribute to his fertility.<sup>273</sup>

‘Costive’ meaning a focus on Larkin’s taciturnity. The language used here is undeniably competitive: ‘small-time contender’, Lowell’s trying ‘to cultivate’ Larkin (in the letter he sends Larkin he is doing no such thing, merely sending him a book, likewise when Larkin replies with his own book), ‘Larkin retaliated’ and ‘what a put-down’. To find Larkin’s actual put-downs of Lowell, one need look no further than his referring to Lowell, in a private letter, as ‘never looked like being a single iota of good in all his born days’<sup>274</sup>, but Larkin himself was respectful of Lowell – some run-of-the-mill moaning to his close friends aside – and greatly valued *Life Studies* in particular.

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<sup>273</sup> Hamilton-Jacobson, p. 72.

<sup>274</sup> Larkin to Conquest 5/3/66. *SL*, p. 382.

The importance of Alvarez's pronouncements on Lowell and Larkin – and their perpetuation by Hamilton, though not uncritically – does shape the evaluation of the influence they might have had on one another. By essentially appointing Lowell as head of one 'progressive' camp that Alvarez saw his favourite poets (Hughes and Plath, for example) as belonging to, and making Larkin the leader of the cult of rigid impersonality that he saw the Movement as representing, Alvarez created a critical climate whereby the notion of Lowell having had any kind of influence on Larkin would have been unthinkable.

Where the influence lies is in a particular type of poem – the aubade, or 'dawn song' – that had long been a staple of English poetry. After a hugely influential (on Larkin and his 'Movement' contemporaries) 'Aubade' by William Empson, it was Lowell, along with other American poets of the 1950s and 60s who would recast this traditionally erotic (or bed-mentioning) poem as a bleak, intensely personal arena for extremely lucid expression. It is clear, from a reading of Larkin's early and later work, that his reading of Lowell's *Life Studies* significantly changed his writing about dawn and the early hours, and I will demonstrate this change in the section below.

**aubade** / *n.* a poem or piece of music appropriate to the dawn or early morning.<sup>275</sup>

Where Lowell's influence is most telling, in Larkin's poems, is in the 'Morning Songs', or 'aubades' that both wrote.

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<sup>275</sup> Definition, *The Oxford English Reference Dictionary* ed. J. Pearsall and B. Trumble (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 88.

Here, Larkin's use of Lowell is twofold. Firstly, it allows Larkin to use Lowell as an – admittedly unwitting – filter for William Empson, and one which early 'Movement' writing had lacked, in its responses to 'Empsonianism'. Secondly, Larkin takes from Lowell an identifiably American setting, more specifically an American 'Confessional' setting, and, with little Anglicisation, uses it to convey an identifiably 'Larkinesque' set of expressions.

Just as Eliot had opened up a new way of writing in 'Prufrock', so too does Lowell. As with Eliot, what Larkin sees in and takes from Lowell is a rejection of Hardy's 'writing about the same old subjects in the same old ways', in that – just as *The Waste Land* replaces Wordsworth's 'Composed on Westminster Bridge' in how we think of London's bridges – Lowell's use of dawn to place events and relationships in contrasts that breed revelation (the unease of talking, post-coital disillusion, growing disenchantment with one's partner or suspicion of them, and the grimmer wonderings of 'Aubade') effectively allows Larkin to write 'morning songs' freed from the pastoral or spiritual concerns that earlier, English 'aubades' had been restricted by.

A literary definition of 'aubade' is as follows:

A dawn song, usually describing the regret of two lovers at their imminent separation. The form (which has no strict metrical pattern) flourished with the conventions of courtly love and survives in such modern examples as Empson's 'Aubade' (1940)<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> *The Oxford Concise Companion to English Literature* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., ed. M. Drabble and J. Stringer (Oxford: OUP, 2007), p. 34.

One of the effects of the form's intertwining with courtly love was to add a peculiarly English acceptability to these dawn songs. For the Christian reader and writer, the dawn could effectively close off the possibility of non-marital intercourse occurring in the poem, while its setting allowed for the likelihood that the night before had been thus concerned. Thomas Wyatt, in his 'If waker care, if sudden pale colour'<sup>277</sup> and 'And wilt thou leave me thus?'<sup>278</sup>, wrote aubades that sadly reflected on something lost while also knowing the dangerous ramifications of describing what was lost too clearly.

Perhaps the most famous aubade in English literature is Act 3, Scene 5 of *Romeo and Juliet*, which simultaneously adheres to the courtly-love definition while – through the secret, though still in-the-eyes-of-God valid, marriage – also rendering the aubade more palatable to Christian audiences. The effect of Shakespeare's more user-friendly aubade was to de-sensualise the dawn song, and so the form became open to interpretation; the reasoning no doubt being that, since talking about forbidden mornings-after was controversial, an aubade could actually concern any dawn activity.

William Empson's 'Aubade' is the only 'dawn song' in Larkin's *Oxford Book*, and one of five Empson inclusions. While five is no claim from Larkin of Empson as a hugely significant poet, it is more than many poets, and Larkin would have been aware of the old 'Movement' associations with Empson that such a selection would remind people of.

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<sup>277</sup> Thomas Wyatt, 'If waker care...', *Selected Poems* ed. H. Scott (Manchester: Carcanet, 1996), p. 23. Hereafter: Scott 1996.

<sup>278</sup> Wyatt, 'And wilt thou leave me thus', Scott 1996, p. 45.

Many Movement poets had, early on, taken Empson as a model and inspiration. This was due partly to the ‘intellectual precision and dense wit of his work’<sup>279</sup>, two factors that could be said to be defining characteristics of ‘Movement’ poetry, but also because of an article written by John Wain in 1950 that was included in *Penguin New Writing* and was, as Blake Morrison puts it,

[...]highly read and influential, particularly amongst young poets in Oxford. Wain’s article...was far from adulatory (he expressed doubts as to whether it was worth ‘trying to decipher’ Empson’s more obscure poems), but did serve to draw attention to a poet whose wit and erudition young poets could admire.<sup>280</sup>

Morrison goes on to demonstrate the effect particularly of Empson’s ‘Aubade’s refrain ‘It seemed the best thing to be up and go’ (again, a wry example of the polite nature of the English dawn song) in the poetry of – among others – Wain himself, Elizabeth Jennings and Thom Gunn, all of whom were included with Larkin in *New Lines*.

Empson’s ‘Aubade’ contains several elements that would go into Larkin’s work. The poem concerns an earthquake taking place ‘hours before dawn’, which wakes the poet and his Japanese lover. What is instantly recognisable as Larkinian, however, or

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<sup>279</sup> John Haffenden, ‘William Empson’ (entry) from *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry in English* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. I. Hamilton and J. Noel-Tod (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 173.

<sup>280</sup> Morrison 1980, p. 24.

what I would contend Larkin takes from the poem is the awkward wit and gloomy inevitability of deceit, as demonstrated here

It seemed quite safe til she got up and dressed.

The guarded tourist makes the guide the test.

Then I said The Garden? Laughing she said No.

Taxi for her and for me healthy rest.

It seemed the best thing to be up and go.

The language problem but you have to try.

Some solid ground for lying could she try?

The heart of standing is you cannot fly.<sup>281</sup>

The implied guilt of the night spent together is highlighted by the contrasting ‘healthy rest’ that he will have alone, while the fracture between the two worlds – that of the night together and the days apart – is played up by the ‘It seemed quite safe *til* she got up and dressed’ (my italics). ‘The guarded tourist makes the guide the test’ would find its echo in the way that it would inform ‘Sun destroys / The interest of what’s happening in the shade’ in ‘The Whitsun Weddings’, but it is ‘The language problem

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<sup>281</sup> William Empson, ‘Aubade’, *The Complete Poems* ed. J. Haffenden (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 69.

but you have to try', with its rueful tone and the implication of passion thwarted, is where Larkin's poetry can be most seen growing from Empson's poem.

As it was, 'Aubade's greatest influence on Larkin would not be in the latter's poem of the same name, but in a poem written slightly earlier, 'The Explosion', where Larkin describes another disaster, but with the same separation and sense of distance that Empson's 'bigger shake' becomes 'At noon, there came a tremor', but with the same concern to depict those apart from the event over the obvious victims.

Robert Lowell described Empson as the most intelligent poet writing in the English language, as well as being 'the king of the critics... even his shortest notes change the mind'<sup>282</sup>. However, Lowell's own aubades form part of a more contemporaneous trend for American poetry in the 1950s and 60s – the poetry that would come to be known as 'Confessional'. It is worth noting, however, that Lowell expressed himself to be uncomfortable with the term 'Confessional', and – in many ways like Larkin's association with 'The Movement',

It is a critical convenience to call much of their [Lowell, Berryman, Roethke, Schwartz and Jarrell] 'Confessional', a classification to which Berryman himself responded with 'rage and contempt'. 'The word doesn't mean anything,' he protested.<sup>283</sup>

There is some question as to whether dawn songs became the natural setting for many – or indeed most – 'Confessional' poetry. The implication of insomnia, the

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<sup>282</sup> Lowell, in 'A Conversation with Ian Hamilton', originally appeared in *The Review* (London), Summer 1971. Reprinted in *Collected Prose* ed. R. Giroux (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), p. 275.

<sup>283</sup> John Haffenden, *The Life of John Berryman* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1982), p. 2.

natural solitude of a time when most others are asleep, and the rejection of normal waking hours (which, of course, also rejects the things those hours order: a job, for example) all serve to make an aubade an instantly personal and probably troubled poem.

Berryman, having suffered from insomnia since his college days, often walked the streets until dawn, or wrote all night only to hate what he'd produced, in the cold light of day, and it's with some irony that his main 'Confessional' work is the *Dream Songs*, when dreaming was so often impossible. Sylvia Plath, too, was plagued by sleeplessness, but resolved this somewhat by sleeping for a few hours before rising before dawn to write solidly for several hours – thus rendering a large amount of her work dawn songs.

For Lowell, four of the poems in *Life Studies* (1959) – 'Waking in the Blue', 'Man and Wife', 'To Speak of Woe that is in Marriage' and 'Skunk Hour' – are written about the early hours, and I will focus on two from this group specifically in my consideration of Lowell's influence on Larkin.

Lowell's *Life Studies* is the work that can be most proved to have influenced Larkin, and it is one of the few causes for favourable comment, by Larkin, about Lowell. A simple before-and-after judgement can be made about *Life Studies* and Larkin's poetry, but Larkin's review of *Life Studies* itself is both complimentary and insightful of an important voice having registered with Larkin himself.

The most quoted comment Larkin made regarding non-UK poetry was in an interview with Ian Hamilton in which, when asked if he 'read much foreign poetry', he

replied '*Foreign* poetry? No!' <sup>284</sup> However, following this comment, what he then goes on to admit is less widely quoted, perhaps because it hints at a more rounded appreciation, at odds with both his image and the critical consensus regarding him:

[Larkin] [...]I don't mean I dislike everyone else, it's just that I don't know very much about them.

[Ian Hamilton] What about Americans?

[L] I find myself no more appreciative of Americans. I quite liked *Life Studies*... Occasionally one finds a poem by Donald Justice or Anthony Hecht, but I don't know enough about them to comment. Actually, I like the Beat poets, but again I don't know much about them. That's because I'm fond of Whitman; they seem to me debased Whitman, but debased Whitman is better than debased Ezra Pound. <sup>285</sup>

The matter of 'knowing much about' poets is important, as it perhaps demonstrates a wariness in Larkin of the autobiographical nature of much American poetry of the 'confessional' period. That he admits to liking *Life Studies* – Lowell's most accomplished and successful autobiographical work – is actually quite a forthright

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<sup>284</sup> Larkin-Hamilton 1964, p. 26.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid.

comment from Larkin: by the time of the interview Alvarez's use of Lowell and *Life Studies* against Larkin in *The New Poetry* would have been something both Hamilton and Larkin were aware of.

While it is unclear whether or not Larkin read *every* book of poetry published by Faber and Faber, by 1959 (the year of *Life Studies*' publication) he was a regular reviewer for his publisher (at the time George Hartley of The Marvell Press, which had published *The Less Deceived*)'s magazine *Listen*, which – along with his professional interest (as a Head Librarian) kept him up to date with new poetry.

Larkin's review of *Life Studies* (1959) is brief – it is part of a review of five books of poetry, including Berryman's *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, which Larkin is highly critical of, particularly in comparison to *Life Studies* – and perhaps reserved, but it is more positive than Alvarez would have liked Larkin the rival to post-Lowell/Hughesian poetry to be.

Larkin admittedly couches his admiration for *Life Studies* in the language of cultural familiarity, saying

Of the two American poets whose books are noticed here, English readers are more likely to feel at home with Mr Robert Lowell, whose work is liberally informed with European properties such as Italy and Ford Madox Ford.<sup>286</sup>

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<sup>286</sup> Larkin, 'Keeping Up with the Graveses', originally appeared in the *Manchester Guardian*, 15<sup>th</sup> May 1959. Reprinted in *Further Requirements*, p. 204-5. Hereafter, Larkin 1959.

Larkin enjoys *Life Studies* for precisely the reasons that Hamilton and Alvarez praise Lowell:

In *Life Studies*, however, his historical sense comes into its own with a series of autobiographical poems dealing with his American childhood and later life as a writer. These are curious, hurried, offhand vignettes, yet none the less accurate and original<sup>287</sup>

Larkin argues that Lowell offers a solution – or at least an alternative – to what he sees as the hijacking of European culture by Americans (Pound’s rewriting of *The Odyssey* at the start of the *Cantos*, Eliot’s Tiresias in *The Waste Land*).

If the closing comments of Larkin’s review seem to border on the condescending, then they are not without praise or admiration:

In spite of their tension, these poems have a lightness and almost flippant humour not common in Mr Lowell’s previous work, matched with a quicker attention to feeling which personally I welcome. If these qualities are products of the stresses recorded in the final few poems of this book, Mr Lowell will not have endured in vain.<sup>288</sup>

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<sup>287</sup> Larkin 1959, p. 204.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid.

Larkin's praise of Lowell is entirely correspondent with Hamilton's valuing of Lowell's being both 'interesting' and 'exciting', and also with Alvarez's view of Lowell as being 'very skilful, very original, very intelligent'.

What a reading of Larkin's comments – both regarding American poetry generally and Lowell in particular – show is a poet widely read in the recent poetry to come out of America, but unwilling to make an academic assessment or judgement of that poetry. This could have been because he knew the furore that such a judgement would cause among his friends (Amis, in particular) or because his unease at the autobiographical nature of some poetry always held him back from praising such 'confessions' too effusively. What is clear, however, is that Larkin's poetry was not designed as a 'negative feedback' against Lowell's poetry.

Any consideration of Lowell's influence on Larkin would be parenthetical at best, were it not able to demonstrate a marked change in the writing of the latter in response to his reading of the former.

Of the three American poets discussed in this chapter, Lowell is the only one of whom it could be said that he was Larkin's contemporary. Larkin read Eliot when young – as most writers at the time and since have done – as work such as *Prufrock* and *The Waste Land* were written either before his birth or at around the same time. With Sylvia Plath, her influence is most shown around the end of Larkin's writing life, so the change is more complicated – something more akin to Etherege's 'unlucky star, prognosticating ruin and despair<sup>289</sup>' – than the demonstrable shift in writing that

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<sup>289</sup> George Etherege, 'The Comical Revenge; or, Love in a Tub', A2S2. *The Dramatic Works of Sir George Etherege: Vol. 1* ed. H. F. B. Brett-Smith (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1927), p. 17.

Lowell can be proved to bring about. With Lowell there is, very much, a sense of 'before and after' when considering the effect of him upon Larkin's poetry.

Larkin had written aubades early in his career. In his first published book of poems, *The North Ship* (1945), a poem appears that prefigures poems that Larkin would later write, in his three mature collections:

To wake, and hear a cock  
Out of the distance crying,  
To pull the curtains back  
And see the clouds flying –  
How strange it is  
For the heart to be loveless, and as cold as these.<sup>290</sup>

A later poem of Larkin's would, interestingly, use near-identical imagery, particularly regarding the clouds' movement and the speaker's surprise at them:

Groping back to bed after a piss  
I part thick curtains, and am startled by  
The rapid clouds, the moon's cleanliness.<sup>291</sup>

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<sup>290</sup> Larkin, 'Dawn', *CP*, p. 284.

<sup>291</sup> Larkin, 'Sad Steps', *CP*, p. 169.

However, the real awakened decision of the earlier poem is a realisation of a form of failed romanticism that Larkin would refer back to in other poems – the naïve childhood scenes of ‘I Remember, I Remember’ particularly, but ‘Books are a load of crap’ in ‘A Study of Reading Habits’ as well). That the poet does actually feel ‘How strange it is’ for him not to be in love, or fired by the morning – so traditionally depicted with the cockcrow – is very unusual in Larkin.

Having read Lowell’s *Life Studies* – certainly in the months surrounding its release, as his review attests – Larkin dispenses with the failed romanticism of his earlier poem (‘Dawn’), for a more unsettling engagement with both the night and the dawn which, in turn, is matched with a new grimness in his reflections on life. If ‘Dawn’ is ‘before’ Lowell, then ‘Sad Steps’ but more importantly ‘Dockery and Son’, are ‘after’ Lowell, and ‘Skunk Hour’ in particular. The latter poem is particularly important, as it seeks to rewrite the ‘strange’ feeling of ‘Dawn’ as ‘quite natural’, when the speaker is moved to thought again by the sight of the moon, as he sees

the ranged

Joining and parting lines reflect a strong

Unhindered moon. To have no son, no wife,

No house or land still seemed quite natural.<sup>292</sup>

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<sup>292</sup> Larkin, ‘Dockery and Son’, *CP*, p. 152.

There are differences, of course. The moon appearing in 'Dockery...' is at the end of a day, not the start. Having a wife and son (or indeed house or land) is no demonstration of the heart not being loveless – indeed, Larkin with his later pronouncement in 'Dockery...' of 'adding' to him meaning 'dilution' might have said that love was almost anathema to marriage – but Larkin demonstrates a substantial shift from the younger poet of 'Dawn'. The use of the word 'still' in 'Dockery...' is an attempted rewriting of the history that includes 'Dawn', some twenty years earlier, and part of this rewriting sets the two ideas of what feels 'quite natural' against one another.

In 'Dawn', the rising at dawn to the sound of a cockcrow feels natural, it is only the speed of the clouds that, like the loveless life, seems to be moving too fast. In 'Dockery', the otherwise desolate image of the lone figure travelling home at night through Sheffield, is passed off as natural, and the influence of Lowell here is important, as it shows a new resolve in Larkin to dismiss the potential transcendence or romanticism that the moon, sky, clouds or night might offer. This is a new approach to aubades and night-poetry that a particular poem in *Life Studies* had gone some way to illuminating.

In 'Skunk Hour', Lowell demonstrates the moon showing up the truth of matters; animal behaviour, for instance,

...skunks, that search

In the moonlight

For a bite to eat.

They march on their soles up Main Street:

White stripes, moonstruck eyes' red fire<sup>293</sup>

In other words, the moonlight brings the outside world's concerns, but also the natural world, literally to light. However, the moonlight also prompts the kind of introspection that Larkin deals with in his moonlit poems, with Lowell's speaker realising that

I myself am hell,

Nobody's here – <sup>294</sup>

Just as Lowell's speaker's loneliness has prompted a realisation that whatever he is feeling is not externally imposed but natural to Lowell ('myself' – it is also a reference to Milton's Satan and his realisation that the absence of heaven is the definition of hell), Larkin's speaker's loneliness is 'quite natural'.

That it only 'still' feels quite natural can be explored in two ways. Having spent the day visiting his old college, the speaker of 'Dockery and Son' is obviously remembering younger days, so recognises the continuance of a feeling of isolation that the 'still' suggests was always there: he always has felt natural without attachments of any kind. However, the second way of looking at it, leading on from this first, is that the moonlight (or dark hours) shows up the truth of his state, in a

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<sup>293</sup> Robert Lowell, 'Skunk Hour', *Life Studies* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), p. 62. Hereafter: *LS*.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*

way that the daylight does not. In the daylight, his appearance is worth commenting on

Death-suited, visitant, I nod. 'And do

You keep in touch with –' Or remember how

Black-gowned, unbreakfasted,<sup>295</sup>

While the first description, of his present appearance, is meant to be in contrast to the second description's institutional facets (both the gown and breakfast tying him to the college), the 'death-suited' is meant to suggest the importance of appearance, namely how out of place he is, even somewhere he has real connection with, as evidenced by the Dean's memory of him. However, it being day, when he tries to reconnect with the place, he is barred from it

I try the door of where I used to live:

Locked. The lawn spreads dazzlingly wide.<sup>296</sup>

It is only later, under the moon, that his feeling 'natural' is defined by his disconnectedness, and it is a feeling entirely self-imposed. His disconnection from

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<sup>295</sup> Larkin, 'Dockery and Son', *CP*, p.152.

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*

his past during the day may be defined by a locked door, but there is nothing external about his feeling 'quite natural', even when it becomes 'a numbness' registering

the shock

Of finding out how much had gone of life,

How widely from the others.<sup>297</sup>

The lawn spreading 'dazzlingly wide' makes more sense – he had not remembered or noticed the wide distance separating where he 'used to live', from other places or people, before he was too old to reconnect with the place. Distances are suddenly made clear to the speaker; the wideness of the lawn, but also that the feeling of being unattached seeming 'quite natural' had not been a younger sense of freedom but the intimation of 'how widely from the others' he was and is different, or separate.

'Dockery...' then leads on to ruminations about life running out, ending with the terminal

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.<sup>298</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> Ibid.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

The irony being that that ‘something’ is no longer hidden: the single life was always going to be the speaker’s, but it is only with time that he notices and knows that, just as in ‘Skunk Hour’, the speaker’s sense of being in hell is revealed by the moon to be entirely self-created and preserved with the realisation that ‘Nobody’s here’.

Elucidations or revelations granted through the moon recur in post-Lowell Larkin, perhaps most clearly stated in ‘Vers de Société’:

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.<sup>299</sup>

While he is describing a clear night, he is also referring to the clarity granted by the moon, which is ‘repaying’ and helping the poet’s work ‘under a lamp’ – lunar clarity appearing as it did in ‘Dockery and Son’. Interestingly in Larkin, even when he talks about being drunk in the evening, the moon always appears as a sobering presence –

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<sup>299</sup> Larkin, ‘Vers de Société’, *CP*, p. 181.

both in the literal and metaphorical sense. It is from Lowell that he gets this lunar lucidity, and from 'Skunk Hour'.

The difference shown earlier, between the wide-eyed, romantic surprise of 'Dawn's strange feeling of unattachedness and the 'quite natural' feeling of solitude present in 'Dockery...', is significant in the maturing of Larkin's voice as a poet. The effect of Lowell's writing would go further, but for a clear-cut 'before-and-after' comparison, the change from 'Dawn' to 'Dockery...' – and the latter's attempted revisionism in regards to the former with the 'still' – is unmistakable. Lowell being an influence around this time (1959 onwards) also serves to illustrate the active reader in Larkin that is so often dismissed.

Robert Lowell is one of the few poets who has a clear transformative effect on Larkin that can be identified – namely, Larkin's reading of *Life Studies*. Perhaps it was *Life Studies*' 'lightness and almost flippant humour [that had] not [been] present in Mr Lowell's previous work, matched with a quicker attention to feeling which personally I welcome' that impressed Larkin about it (Larkin rating humour as an important asset to poetry). There is the possibility that Larkin saw Lowell as – like Dylan Thomas and Sylvia Plath – having found an utterly natural and accomplished voice in *Life Studies*, when he comments on the poems 'seeming too personal to be practised' – Larkin's admiration of raw talent or genius allowed for a lack of technical tutelage in those he felt good enough, including Thomas and Plath. There is even the hint of how impressed Larkin was by *Life Studies* in the strength of his disappointment in everything Lowell produced after it.

What is certain is that Lowell provided Larkin with both the means and the example to produce traditionally formed pieces, in his aubades, which nonetheless dealt with pressing, modern concerns. If 'Prufrock' provided Larkin with his anti-hero protagonists, then *Life Studies* gave the moonlit setting for those characters to reflect upon and within, about what was troubling them. The third and final Americanisation that Larkin would undergo would be in fully giving voice to his troubles, through his reading of and eventual emulation of a poet Lowell had taught and whom Larkin would refer to as the 'Horror Poet'.

#### **2.4 Larkin and Plath**

I note incidentally that professors of literature still assign these two poets [Mandleshtam and Blok] to different schools. There is only one school: that of talent.<sup>300</sup>

An unlikely writer for Larkin to warm to, but one who backs up the case for him agreeing with Nabokov's 'school of talent' was Sylvia Plath. In terms of literary 'movements', Larkin should have been firmly negative towards Plath. Most critical pieces concerning Plath's rise or writing place her, largely due to her personal and poetic connections to Ted Hughes, as an anti-Movement poet. This necessarily marks her out as a supposedly anti-Larkin poet, as he remains the first (and often only) point of reference when explaining the Movement or what it stood for. For example,

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<sup>300</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, in an interview with Herbert Gold in September 1966. From *Strong Opinions* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1973), p. 97.

This loose grouping of writers, Philip Larkin at its centre, has shadowed postwar British poetry ever since. It was their understated, self-consciously disciplined, 'academic administrative verse, polite, knowledgeable, efficient, polished, and, in its quiet way, even intelligent' which Al Alvarez's anthology *The New Poetry* was openly intended to counter. Alvarez's decision to include Plath in the 1966 second edition did much to underwrite her reputation. ...the anthology constructed Plath's distinctive poetics as influentially radical.<sup>301</sup>

This is a good example of the tenuous claims made about the Movement; admitting it was at best a 'loose grouping' rather than a school, committing to naming only Larkin as a 'Movement poet' due to both his fame and the easy contrast he makes when set against Hughes, say, or Plath.

With Plath, as with Dylan Thomas (to whom Larkin compares Plath in a letter), Larkin's opinion is often the opposite of the expected or official 'Movement' line. It is perhaps Larkin's fault that belief in such a line was allowed to take root in the first place, as with both Thomas and Plath he was unwilling to fight their corner, so to speak, in the way that he had no reservations about doing on behalf of Barbara Pym, or John Betjeman. It can be said of Larkin that while he didn't pursue the image of himself as withdrawn or conservative in his tastes, he did nothing to counter the suggestion that this was the case.

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<sup>301</sup> Alice Entwistle, 'Plath and contemporary British poetry', *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath* ed. Jo Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 63.

Nonetheless, as I shall demonstrate, Larkin's interest in Plath – while tempered with concern as to the use of her by others (Alvarez, for example, but also the wider 'Confessional' and feminist movements of the 1970s who claimed Plath as either icon or martyr for their cause) – and concerned by the extremity of some of her writing, was constant.

However, there are several points that make this an effectively concealed interest of Larkin's, and I will address these in order.

Firstly, the heliotropism of his letters always makes it difficult to tell when he has read something or what he actually thinks about it. Plath is one of the more difficult writers whose presence can be pinned down in Larkin's life. Both as a result of his 'Movement' friendships – specifically those with Robert Conquest and Kingsley Amis – and his part-voluntary and part-enforced (by critics such as Alvarez) rivalry with Ted Hughes, Larkin was rarely in a position to offer a clear personal reflection on Plath's work. As ever, there is some clue to his true feeling in his letters to Monica Jones, but other letters concerning Plath are harder to interpret. When Larkin does make his important statement about Plath – a review of her *Collected Poems* in 1981 – he seems to seek to nullify or distract from his review (and opinion) by claiming biographical ignorance of Plath and apparently possessing as many opinions of her and her work as he has correspondents, at this time, in his letters.

Secondly, an important element in Larkin's engagement with Plath is one of the harsher exchanges that occurs in both his and Amis's published letters. These letters demonstrate an unwillingness on Larkin's part to put his own views across more confidently. While it would be invidious to claim that Amis either bullied or browbeat Larkin into line with his own consistently reactionary opinions, Larkin's shyness is palpable in the letters between them, which mention Plath, with silence

being his most common response to the sometimes-vociferous anti-Plathisms of Amis.

In a wider sense – given that by the time Larkin’s review of the Collected Plath appeared, he was with Hughes the most famous and important poet in England – Larkin’s shyness also impacts on his willingness to praise Plath. Larkin was not one for official causes, and while this included refusing to speak at Conservative Party conferences, when invited to do so by and alongside Conquest and Amis, it also included his inherent shyness to engage with literary enthusiasms of the day. By this I mean to say that, had Larkin been more forceful in his praising of Plath, he could not have been sure of the reception that this would have had. Early on in her posthumous fame, Plath was claimed by the radical feminist cause, and it is hard to imagine either gratitude or comfort from that cause for the support of one of England’s more supposedly conservative poets. Larkin’s own nervousness about feminism – or any political cause, for that matter – would certainly have been a factor in his not being more fulsome in praise or support of Plath.

Finally, as far as the influence that Plath can be said have had on Larkin, the most obvious factor is – like Dylan Thomas before her – a sense of Plath as being willing to go to places and say things in such a way that Larkin simply found too forceful or blunt. Larkin’s later work is comparable to Plath’s final years’ work’s lucidity, though their styles are markedly different.

Sylvia Plath’s first book of poems, *The Colossus*, was published in 1960, to what could be termed mixed reviews. On the whole, reviewers judged it

...mannered and derivative – derivative, in part from her new husband Hughes, who at that time was already being lauded as a talent of some magnitude.<sup>302</sup>

There is no evidence – from his letters or from the Motion biography – that Larkin read *The Colossus* on its release. One reason for this is that it was published by Heinemann – as opposed to *Ariel*, in 1965, which was published by Larkin’s publisher, Faber – and Larkin’s reading of poets who are either American or who seem an adventurous or unusual choice for him (Lowell, for example, or John Berryman) do seem to be limited to those published by Faber.

Larkin was certainly aware of Plath, however, by the following year, because he mentions her in an offhand manner (though one that backs up the view of her as derivative from Hughes) in a letter:

Nice crack by V Scannel [Vernon Scannell’s poem ‘The Ruminant] about that cow looking as if it was planning to write a long poem about Ted Hughes.

Sylvia, perhaps...<sup>303</sup>

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<sup>302</sup> ‘Sylvia Plath’, Hamilton 2002, p. 301-2.

<sup>303</sup> Larkin to Conquest, 5/7/61, *SL*, p. 332.

This may not demonstrate any awareness that Larkin had of Plath's work, but it demonstrates that he did at least know that she was a poet, and not just Hughes's wife.

The next mention that Larkin's *Letters* makes of Plath is twenty years later, when Larkin reviews Plath's *Collected Poems* for *Poetry Review* at the request of Andrew Motion – then the magazine's editor. He is guarded in his letter to Motion, that accompanies his review, and when compared to the usual warmth that he shows towards Motion (as a friend), the letter is notable for it showing the 'public' Larkin (grumpy, reserved, the 'wilful philistine' of Donald Davie's contempt) in contrast to the 'private' Larkin who is so lacking from the letter:

Here is the Plath. It reads like J. C. Squire on 18 Poems (Parton Press). As I've said, she does remind me of Dylan Thomas more than anyone else, though I can't describe how; the earlier poems of both have an over-rigid formality, the later a profusion of disturbing imagery (later, well: *The Map of Love*) that is both gripping and incomprehensible. Change the title if you like ['Horror Poet']. I see her as a kind of Hammer Films poet, and don't suppose I shall open her book again. There must be an awful lot of biographical stuff I don't know – does anyone?<sup>304</sup>

Larkin implies two things here: his interest in Plath's poetry being an entirely professional matter (reviewing a book for a friend) that does not extend to a personal interest or reading of the poems, and a professed ignorance of Plath's life, death and

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<sup>304</sup> Larkin to Motion, 15/11/81, *SL*, p. 660.

the impact both had (or have since had) on the writing and the reading of that writing.

As if to back up this distancing of himself from Plath, two months later he writes to Kingsley Amis, commenting on the matter:

As for Plath<sup>305</sup>, you should realise that I don't read any new books except the ones I'm sent for review. I'VE NO DOUBT that the collected poems of Enright or *The Whipping of Winifred* would have been lots better, but I haven't read them, see? I've reviewed S. P. for Poetry Review (XT!), coerced by my chum Andrew Motion<sup>306</sup>

Larkin does two things here. He first of all paints himself as someone who doesn't read for pleasure, generally speaking ('Don't read much now...' as 'A Study of Reading Habits' says), which the rest of his correspondence, not to mention his job as a librarian and most people's recounted experience of him, demonstrates is not true.

Secondly, he seems almost angry at Amis (one of the very few times that this surfaces in a letter to rather than about Amis) for suggesting that Larkin should 'play safe' in sticking to the kind of books that the old ex-Movementers 'should' like: D. J. Enright, or the schoolgirl erotica of their younger correspondence. In a way, the second point further goes to show the disingenuous nature of the first.

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<sup>305</sup> Larkin is replying to a letter written him by Amis in late December 1981 – discussed later – that challenges his having picked Plath's *Collected Poems* as a Book of the Year.

<sup>306</sup> Larkin to Amis, 3/1/82, *SL*, p. 662.

It is also worth stating that while Larkin did often complain about his editor friends badgering him for writings, be they critical or poetic, he also viewed it as a source of quick income and he clearly enjoyed it, or he wouldn't have two volumes of sincere and perceptive criticism to his name. As well as this, Motion 'coercing' Larkin into reviewing the Plath did not mean that he expected a blindly positive review of it – Larkin's critical pen could be as savage as it could be kind, as the comparative judgements given (in the same review, in 1959) on Lowell and John Berryman attest.

Finally, being coerced into reviewing a book does not therefore render you incapable of choosing any other book as your Book of the Year when a newspaper asks you to do, as Larkin did when he chose the Plath *Collected Poems* as a book of the year at the end of 1981. This choice was to earn him a sustained attack from Amis, as we shall see.

Larkin's passing 1962 comment to *Conquest*, regarding Plath, is more important than it may seem. When Larkin's letters to his long-time girlfriend Monica Jones were published in 2010, a great deal of biographical material and personal reflections were made widely available for the first time (only a fraction of Larkin's letters to Jones, it turned out, had appeared in the *Selected Letters*).

One particular letter is remarkably telling, in regards to Plath, written as it was a month after Plath's suicide, when the facts of the death were more widely known.

Heard little of interest, except that [Donald] Mitchell [a music critic] contemplates leaving the D. T. [Daily Telegraph] – awgh! awgh! I give myself 7 days after he goes – and that S. Plath gassed herself. She had had a mental

breakdown once before, & is supposed to have feared another while, as far as I can see, making certain of it. Ted had cleared off, not enjoying the symptoms.<sup>307</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of Plath's death, a rumour circulated (bolstered, understandably, by her mother Aurelia) that she had died of pneumonia, and it wasn't for several weeks that the truth of the matter was widely known. Larkin, on the other hand, knew the details almost immediately. It is likely that, given Faber's imminent publication of Larkin (*The Whitsun Weddings*, as it would become, had already been promised to Faber), there were enough common acquaintances of Hughes, Plath and Larkin (Charles Monteith, for example) for Larkin to have ready access to London literary gossip.

Why then would Larkin often claim not to know 'the biographical details'? Was it in order not to blur his unexpected praise for her *Collected Poems*? Larkin's love for Wilfred Owen involves his reviews of Owen taking pains to separate the life and war from the poetry. Were his concerns about Owen, whom Larkin's review termed '*The 'War Poet'* (my italics), repeated in his concern about Plath, *the 'Horror Poet'*? For both, as evidenced by the reviews and their titles, Larkin clearly felt them definitive writers of their dark subjects, was his professed ignorance of Plath's life a defence against the life interfering with her poetic mastery?

It seems that another factor may have limited Larkin's options, in terms of expressing his affection for Plath. This was his correspondence with Kingsley Amis, which brings into the light a constant and clear succession of reasons – spread over

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<sup>307</sup> Larkin to Monica Jones, 10/3/63, *LTM*, p. 317.

several decades – for Larkin not to expose himself to the ridicule of one of his best friends. It was perhaps that fear of ridicule that further prevented him from speaking to others or the public about his views on Plath.

While elsewhere I would hope by now to have demonstrated the baseless nature of the idea of Larkin as anti-American (or anti- anything) by default, Plath's poetry's American 'character' does make it hard to imagine Larkin warming to her. She was unashamedly an 'American' poet, in the same way that Larkin described Eliot as 'American' in terms of style and influence<sup>308</sup>.

Yet, as we have seen, Plath's work was also viewed as 'derivative, in part, from her new husband [Ted] Hughes'<sup>309</sup>, for whom Larkin never relinquished his distaste as a poet, and as a result of whose influence, Larkin may have been wary of greater praise of Plath.

When considering the actual evidence, and not the supposed opinions suitable to established expectation, of Larkin's views on Plath, what is interesting is his unguarded awe; rare, for Larkin, even elsewhere in his appreciation of his favourite writers. In a letter to Kingsley Amis that is largely spent disparaging Hughes, Larkin wrote

No, of course Ted's no good at all. Not at all. Not a single solitary bit of good. I think his ex-wife, late wife, was *extraordinary*, though not necessarily likeable.<sup>310</sup>

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<sup>308</sup> Larkin-Thwaite 1973, p. 96.

<sup>309</sup> Hamilton 2002, p. 299.

<sup>310</sup> Larkin to Amis, 3/6/67, *SL*, p. 396.

This is unusual, in Larkin's letters, as he was well aware of the minuscule range of poetic appreciation practised by Amis, and elsewhere in their correspondence he rarely raises appreciation of a poet whom he does not already know Amis to like. In fact, in this case Larkin is directly rebutting Amis' own judgement of Plath, offered in the letter to which Larkin is replying:

Ted Hughes is as ABSOLUTELY DEVOID OF MERIT WHATSOEVER as his late wife was, isn't he?<sup>311</sup>

Amis doesn't respond to Larkin's 'extraordinary' valuation of Plath in his reply to Larkin's letter, but when Plath's *Collected Poems* were published in 1981, Larkin is mentioned in another letter, to Conquest:

Old Philip shook me by picking as a book-of-the-year Sylvia Plath's collected poems. I picked up the vol[ume] in a bookshop and was shaken again to find one that wasn't totally bad in every way. But she's no good really, is she?<sup>312</sup>

Despite knowing the answer to the question, Amis writes to Larkin (within a few days of the Conquest letter) to attempt to get a harsher judgement of Plath out of Larkin:

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<sup>311</sup> Amis to Larkin, 21/5/67, *TLoKA*, p. 680.

<sup>312</sup> Amis to Robert Conquest, 21/12/81, *TLoKA*, p. 932.

Didn't I see you picking old Sylvie, eh, Plath's stuff as a bloody book of the year? ... I thought we agreed she was no good years ago. But then I remember you saying she might be no good but she was extraordinary.<sup>313</sup>

Amis is projecting his own opinion here. Larkin's judgement that Plath was 'extraordinary though not necessarily likeable' is not him agreeing that 'she be no good' – Amis wants any interest or admiration Larkin may have for Plath to be consigned to her being unusual, literally extraordinary, and nothing to do with her skill as a writer. As is usual in their correspondence (when a disagreement is arrived at which Amis is not going to let go), Larkin simply does not allude to the subject again, even when Amis brings it up a few months later, when an anthology of 'Modern' verse included Larkin:

You're modern, I see, along with Ted HUGHES and Sylvia PLATH and John ASHBERRY Jesus Christ et al. but fortunately not Al ha-ha. But you're not really, are you? I think he, PP [Peter Porter], is just cravenly bowing to you being all the rage.<sup>314</sup>

Here is a conscious effort on Amis' part to get Larkin to distance himself from contemporary poetry, and so fulfil Al Alvarez' claim of the Movement having been a 'negative feedback' against the more innovative writing that preceded it. Larkin does

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<sup>313</sup> Amis to Larkin, late December 1981, *TLoKA*, p. 933.

<sup>314</sup> Amis to Larkin, 12/5/82, *TLoKA*, p. 944.

not respond to this, nor to Amis' final attempt, two years later, to get Larkin to respond to his dislike of Larkin's positive reviewing of several writers in his reviews:

I must say you've got terrifically tolerant IN YOUR OLD AGE. All these people you have time for, Ogden Nash, Barnes, Stevie Smith, Syvi syphi Sylvia Plath, especially her, nothing but a hyper acc. to me. You did know she didn't mean to kill herself?<sup>315</sup>

(Larkin was of course claiming, at this point, not to know about the details surrounding Plath's death, as he says in the letter accompanying his review of her *Collected Poems*: "There must be an awful lot of biographical stuff I don't know – does anyone?"<sup>316</sup>) This is not the last mention of Plath in the Amis-Larkin correspondence, but the short list of people Amis decries is evidence enough of Larkin's open-mindedness to writing, so long as it was of the school of talent.

Larkin came as close as he ever did to defending Plath to Amis, in the letter which defends his choice of the *Collected Poems* as his Book of the Year, when he plays down a point he had focussed on seriously elsewhere (in both his review of the *Collected Poems* and a letter to Motion):

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<sup>315</sup> Amis to Larkin, 3-5/12/83, *TLoKA*, p. 964.

<sup>316</sup> Larkin to Motion, 15/11/81, *SL*, p. 660.

...Of course, she could write, in a Yankish way, heavily aided by Rohget's [sic.] Thesaurus (like Dylan, oddly enough), but until sheg shag [she had] got onto the barmy stunt she hadn't anythin[g] to say.<sup>317</sup>

This is a little disingenuous of Larkin, as is his earlier claim in the letter to have been 'coerced' into reviewing Plath's *Collected Poems* by Motion. As we have seen before, it is something of a stretch to believe that Motion's (frankly unlikely) 'coercion' extended as far as forcing Larkin to choose the book as a book of the year. As we shall see in his review of Plath's *Collected Poems*, he took her engagement with depression and madness very seriously, but despite their closeness, Larkin rarely admitted to Amis any 'deeper' effect that writing might have had on him; their gruff, cartoonish manliness overriding any concerns of a more sensitive bent. He is a little more honest earlier in the letter, when he says

...she thought madness etc. w[oul]d pay, and found she could do it, and then fell face down into it.<sup>318</sup>

Whether or not Larkin is consciously echoing 'Lady Lazarus' ('Dying / Is an art, like everything else, / I do it exceptionally well'<sup>319</sup>) when he says 'she could do it', Larkin is here admitting to having realised the horror of Plath's breakdown and death – as shown in her poetry – even if he tries to be flippant with the 'face down into it'.

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<sup>317</sup> Larkin to Amis, 3/1/82, *SL*, p. 662.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>319</sup> Sylvia Plath, 'Lady Lazarus', *Collected Poems* ed. T. Hughes (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 245. Hereafter, *PCP*.

Larkin's review of Plath's *Collected Poems* is titled 'Horror Poet', and in it can be found Plath's real role to Larkin; that of a horrific view of where poetry's engagement with fear and death can take the poet. The view that Larkin effectively committed poetic suicide when he wrote 'Aubade' – once he had enunciated his fear of death, he found himself incapable of thinking or writing about anything else, and so stopped writing – is a largely unsubstantiated one, but in his review of Plath's *CP* there is more than a hint of Larkin's discomfort but almost terrified admiration at Plath's commitment to writing about the darker matters he himself thought were inexpressible (at least by him) or that he feared the consequences of expressing.

Another sense that pervades his review is that of pity and sadness at the loss of life; the idea that no poetry is worth killing yourself over; and this more compassionate side to Larkin was an aspect of his personality that, while vouched for by almost everyone who knew him, he was at pains to hide. Plath, then, it can be said made Larkin feel vulnerable on two accounts; firstly through a raw engagement with depression and fear that Larkin seemed to recognise only too well, and secondly through provoking in him the empathy and pity with which he was uneasy in poetry.

In some ways, Larkin's engagement with Plath is a re-run of his reaction to and evaluations of Dylan Thomas. That Larkin considered Thomas a 'dead end' did not detract from the importance that Thomas wielded in the poetry that surrounded and came after him<sup>320</sup>, and there is a similar judgement in his writing on Plath. With both poets Larkin's opinion is tinged with uneasiness as to the role of autobiography,

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<sup>320</sup> '...I can't believe D. T. is truly dead. It seems absurd. Three people [Auden and Eliot were the other two] who've altered the face of poetry & the youngest has to die.' Larkin in a letter to Patsy Strang (née Avis), 11/11/53, *SL*, p. 216.

legend-building and self-destruction in the work in question. By the time Larkin wrote his review of Plath's *Collected Poems* (1981/2), the waves of militant feminist writing about their new icon would have been making their effects known on the students at the University of Hull, not to mention in poetry in a wider sense.

All of this may have reminded Larkin of the furore surrounding Thomas' drink-fuelled death in 1953, and the extent to which the legend widened the latter's audience to those more interested in the man and the gossip than the work. Plath is one of the few poets of the last century whom many can express an opinion on without either making reference to or even having read the work; Thomas is another, his drinking being as famous as his writing. As we have seen, Larkin's interest in the details surrounding Plath's life and death was minimal, the work being terrifying enough for him, and his review does tap into his unease with gossip and 'the literary life'.

The discomfort at the celebrity role of a writer is a common theme in Larkin's letters – a large part of his relationship with Amis was spent either envying or pitying the latter's celebrity – and also in his poetry; 'Vers de Société', and 'Toads' comment that

something sufficiently toad-like

squats in me, too;

...And will never allow me to blarney

my way to getting

the fame and the girl and the money

all at one sitting<sup>321</sup>.

There was a more serious side to this, however. In Larkin's review of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (Lowell being a major influence on Plath, both in terms of subject matter and style and also having taught her in one of his writing classes at Boston University in the 1950s) Larkin was able to praise, or at least commend, Lowell's rendering of personal struggles (as poetry) because Lowell seemed to have come out of these relatively unscathed, or with something of a distance between him and the darker forces he had documented. With Plath's poetry (and, elsewhere, in Larkin's reviews of John Berryman's verse) there was no such distance, and Larkin is somewhat bewildered by the professional-sounding nature of her struggles:

...ambitious, competitive, compulsive, the girl most likely to succeed, ready to exploit her own traumas if they would make poems. Mad poets do not write about madness... Plath did: it was her subject, her *donnée* ('I do it exceptionally well'); together they played an increasingly reckless game of tag.<sup>322</sup>

The 'reckless' in that evaluation is important as it draws attention back to what Larkin thinks of emotionally raw poetry: here we have a poet whose over-sufficiency

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<sup>321</sup> Larkin, 'Toads', *CP*, p. 89.

<sup>322</sup> Larkin, 'Horror Poet'. Originally appeared in *Poetry Review*, April 1982. Reprinted in *RW*, pp. 278-281. Hereafter, 'Horror Poet'.

of communicated feeling makes up – perhaps too much – for a style which, in the poetry of Hughes, for example, Larkin found unconvincing and unskilled. However, the lack of distance between Plath and the suffering described leads Larkin to a conclusion that is as much a warning as anything

As poems, they are to the highest degree original and scarcely less effective. How valuable they are depends on how highly we rank the expression of experience with which we can in no sense identify, and from which we can only turn with shock and sorrow.<sup>323</sup>

Larkin's concern is that poetry isn't ever worth the insanity its perfecting could drive you to, but many have taken his referring to 'the expression of experience with which we can in no sense identify' as the cold, curmudgeonly Larkin parking his reactionary, conservative cart in front of Al Alvarez's *The New Poetry*. The mention of 'sorrow', however, betrays the Larkin rarely evident in his prose, the Larkin of emotional outpouring, as seen by so many with surprise in 'The Mower':

...we should be careful

Of each other, we should be kind

While there is still time.<sup>324</sup>

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<sup>323</sup> Ibid.

<sup>324</sup> Larkin, 'The Mower', *CP*, p. 214.

This from the poet of

Courage is no good:

It means not scaring others. Being brave

Lets no one off the grave.

Death is no different whined at than withstood.<sup>325</sup>

and

Beyond all this, the wish to be alone ...

Beyond it all, desire of oblivion runs.<sup>326</sup>

‘The Mower’ is important, as it shows a sorrowing Larkin, where before people had only suspected a grimly braced-up pessimist. These glimpses – largely posthumous, in the *Collected* Larkin – are the key to understanding Plath’s apparent influence on the poet.

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<sup>325</sup> Larkin, ‘Aubade’, *CP*, p. 208.

<sup>326</sup> Larkin, ‘Wants’, *CP*, p. 42.

Larkin's concern, or reservation, with Plath is the non-universal nature of her poetry; that it relates solely to her experience and is further isolated by the effect that the poems' subject matter played in her death. His concerns here are emotional ones as to the well-being of both reader and poet, the powerlessness of the latter to aid the former and the unimportance of such 'material' as poetry when life is threatened or ended.

It is not unlikely that it was Larkin's unusually caring tone in his review that so unsettled Amis; the studied philistine, whom Larkin considered incapable of being moved by art:

...and as you say he's not like us. The idea of Kingsley loving a book – or a book 'feeding' him, as K. M. wd say – is quite absurd. He doesn't like books. He doesn't like reading. And I wouldn't take his opinion on anything, books, people, places, anything. Probably he has been mistaken, to himself, about me.<sup>327</sup>

What is striking about Larkin's review of Plath is his unabashed praise, nervous though it is, of a form of poetry so completely different to Larkin's supposedly 'normal' tastes (Betjeman, Gavin Ewart). He is wary about the non-universality of Plath's portrayal of certain events, for instance after quoting from 'The Bee Meeting', Larkin questions

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<sup>327</sup> Larkin to Monica Jones, 15/2/55, *LTM*, pp. 146-147. 'K.M.' is Katherine Mansfield.

Brilliant as this is, as if Hitchcock had filmed the church fete at the beginning of Graham Greene's *The Ministry of Fear*, the reader does not agree that, yes, it must have been terrible; rather, he wonders whether Plath is wilfully hyping up this ordinary event to make a poem, or whether this is really how she saw it, in which case Plath and the reader are about to part company. For a time one inclines to the first view.<sup>328</sup>

The last sentence, which suggests that after a time one has to accept the latter view (that Plath really did see it like that), is an encapsulation of Larkin's view on Plath; the sense that, with many other poets of this type (dark, tending towards the melodramatic), Larkin is unconvinced by the honesty of their rhetoric, but Plath somehow has impressed or convinced him of the truth that exists in her writing. A telling comment appears earlier in the review:

...like many Americans, she had a psychiatrist, but, more individually, had also a scar across her cheek from an earlier suicide attempt. For her to exercise her unique talent for the distortions of horror and madness was to risk liberating these forces in herself.<sup>329</sup>

The scar grants Plath not just individuality (against the 'many Americans') but also authenticity in Larkin's eyes. It also, again, points out a level of autobiographical knowledge extending beyond just having read the book for reviewing, and highlights

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<sup>328</sup> 'Horror Poet', p. 280.

<sup>329</sup> 'Horror Poet', p. 279.

the inconsistency as regarding his professed ignorance as to Plath's life that is present in both the accompanying letter to the review, to Motion, and the defensive letter that follows to Amis.

The second sentence (above) is illuminating as well, as it is a rare example of Larkin having time for a personal life being closely linked to the value or effectiveness of poetry. Like Dylan Thomas, Plath's uniqueness but also her huge differences of style and language (from his own work) interest Larkin and have an effect on him that he is utterly convinced by:

She seems not to have gone through the apprenticeship of following different poets for their styles, unless there are models I do not recognise... [Upon finding 'her voice' in 1959] The shock is sudden, and the possibility that she is simply trying on another style is dispelled by the two following pieces.<sup>330</sup>

As with Thomas, Larkin is prepared to accept that Plath's work sprang entirely from pure talent; an allowance that he grants neither himself nor many other writers, being unconvinced by most who fail to demonstrate time spent honing their poetry. His reservation, however, time and again is the substance of that talent and where it will lead. While he celebrates the poetry, there is always a cautionary note:

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<sup>330</sup> 'Horror Poet', pp. 278-279.

The pleasurable excitement of watching a young writer gaining command of her predestined material is nullified by the nature of that material and her involvement with it.<sup>331</sup>

There is always a warning note to Larkin's review; the implication being that full or lasting engagement with this subject matter has only one end, because it will engulf the writer. Whether or not, by the time of writing, Larkin had felt certain poems of his to have gone dangerously close to that end is a matter for speculation, but if he had been worried beforehand about writing leading him over the edge, reading Plath seems to have confirmed his worst fears about the dangers of 'involvement' with 'material'.

There are obvious difficulties with proving Plath to have influenced Larkin's work.

First, she was ten years his junior, and while Larkin did not totally reject work done by writers younger than himself, it was rare, once saying that he felt alienated by writing done by 'Practically everyone under 50'<sup>332</sup>. There is no evidence in the letters that he read either of Plath's collections, *The Colossus* (1960) or *Ariel* (1965) when they were first published – that he shared a publisher with the second is of little relevance as he tried to avoid contact with 'fellow poets' who were not already his friends. The overwhelming impression of the review of her *Collected Poems* is that of Larkin coming to most of the book for the first time.

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<sup>331</sup> 'Horror Poet', p. 279.

<sup>332</sup> Larkin to Thwaite 17/10/81, *SL*, p. 659.

Another problem with Plath, for Larkin, would have been her marriage to (and so irremovable link to) Ted Hughes, and the then widely accepted opinion that Plath's poetry was encouraged, honed and finally championed by Hughes. Larkin mistrusted Hughes' influence on a number of poets and bemoans it in the letters; Seamus Heaney's talent was thought to be complicated or depreciated by Hughes' influence and Larkin thought Douglas Dunn similarly affected.

Larkin must, however, have read some Plath prior to 1981, if only for the comment to Amis in 1967 about Plath being 'extraordinary'. As with his admiration of Dylan Thomas, it is possible that Larkin felt that Plath's poetry was so far removed from his own, in both style and subject matter, that he could read and enjoy (if that is the word) it without any thought to it influencing or affecting his own writing.

There is also, however, with Plath the sense that she highlighted what Larkin didn't write about, to do with himself and the darker side of his impulses. Neither Larkin's domineering father nor his silent mother is addressed in his poetry, either because Larkin felt it would be disrespectful or perhaps

...it would have been difficult to accommodate Sydney in a standard Larkin poem, giving an account of his peculiar personality before rolling it up into a general statement in the way Larkin liked to do. Sylvia Plath had a stab at that kind of thing with her 'Daddy', though she had to pretend he was a Nazi, while Larkin's dad was the real thing.<sup>333</sup>

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<sup>333</sup> Alan Bennett, 'Alas! Deceived'. Regan 1997, p. 227.

Uniquely, Larkin seems to have recognised in Plath a writer who was able to write about experiences that he himself was acquainted with; jealousy, the unpredictable in the natural world, misery; but in a way and to an extent that he rarely allowed himself.

A late poem of Plath's, which bears a resemblance to one of Larkin's, is 'Winter Trees', the Larkin poem in question being 'Trees'. Both poems address the inevitable seasonal shifts shown in trees, but with both a lucid understanding of the ageing trees' fate and the almost contradictory transcendence to be found in the natural world. Plath's poem is, predictably, more concerned with the spiritual or mythological roles the trees offer than is Larkin's:

The wet dawn inks are doing their blue dissolve.

On their blotter of fog the trees

Seem a botanical drawing –

Memories growing, ring on ring,

A sense of weddings.

Knowing neither abortions nor bitchery,

Truer than women,

They seed so effortlessly!

Tasting the winds, that are footless,

Waist-deep in history –

Full of wings, otherworldliness.

In this, they are Ledas.

O mother of leaves and sweetness

Who are these pietas?

The shadows of ringdoves chanting, but easing nothing.<sup>334</sup>

A poem which Larkin would either not have written or written differently – certainly without the ‘Ledas’ or the first line’s use of ‘doing’ – as his ‘Trees’ demonstrates:

The trees are coming into leaf

Like something almost being said;

The recent buds relax and spread,

Their greenness is a kind of grief.

Is it that they are born again

And we grow old? No, they die too.

Their yearly trick of looking new

Is written down in rings of grain.

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<sup>334</sup> Sylvia Plath, ‘Winter Trees’, *PCP*, pp. 257-258.

Yet still the unresting castles thresh

In fullgrown thickness every May.

Last year is dead, they seem to say,

Begin afresh, afresh, afresh.<sup>335</sup>

As much as the question and answer in the second stanza sets up and then debunks the transcendent possibility suggested by ‘Their greenness is a kind of grief’, the poem is similar to Plath’s in that the ‘yearly tick of looking new’ is a similar sentiment as ‘They seed so effortlessly!’, while the ‘sense of weddings’ is as wistfully suggestive as ‘like something almost being said’. The imagery of ‘the unresting castles thresh’[ing] is similarly vivid to ‘tasting the winds’, and both employ the image of the trees as separate from but engaging with the rest of the natural world around them.

Both poems end with the chanting trees trying out a different ‘trick’ which Larkin knows to be false (as he has already pointed out that the trees will die), and which Plath also recognises as impotent. Both poems borrow somewhat from the 1895 version of ‘The Sorrow Of Love’ by Yeats, with its ‘loud chanting of the unquiet leaves’<sup>336</sup>, but Larkin’s similarity to Plath is more definable as a shared sense of the ‘otherworldliness’ of trees set against the ‘botanical drawing’ or ‘trick’ that brings more reasoned or biological knowledge to bear on any look at the natural world.

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<sup>335</sup> Larkin, ‘Trees’, *CP*, p. 166.

<sup>336</sup> W. B. Yeats, ‘The Sorrow of Love’ (1892 version), *The Oxford Book of English Verse* ed. C. Ricks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 524.

An influence that Plath could be said to have had on Larkin is one which he was himself uneasy about, in reference to her work. Larkin's reservations about poets' 'involvement' with their 'predestined material' is perhaps one of the reasons there are very few poems of his which address the most secret side of his life (or at least the side he kept very rigidly controlled and separate even from itself), his love life.

It is possible that Larkin felt it improper or inappropriate for an unmarried man to produce poetry of desire or love (and given the two and at one point three love affairs he was simultaneously maintaining, he might have felt it insensitive or confusing to write about such matters), and it is certainly true that the writers he publicly admired were not known for such poetry either.

With Plath, however, the concern about being engulfed in the darker material, if the poet gave it full rein in the poems, goes some way to describing the intensity of Larkin's emotions in certain situations and his awareness that a poem would either not be representative enough or too representative to properly communicate those emotions.

When he talks about how his fear of death 'rages out / in furnace-fear'<sup>337</sup> when he is alone, it is a rare example of him giving full voice to a very deeply held feeling, and it is one of the reasons that 'Aubade' is so powerful, but also perhaps why it seemed to mark almost the end of Larkin's writing poetry – as if so much energy had been expended or exposed in the poem that he either felt too weak or too vulnerable to try such emotive writing again.

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<sup>337</sup> Larkin, 'Aubade', *CP*, p. 209.

Larkin may have suspected (and proved, with 'Aubade' and the writer's block that followed) that, were he to give his emotions the same intensity and priority that Plath did, then they might engulf him, as they did her, and so he resisted.

There is one exception, however, which would seem to me a poem that would be hard if not impossible to write without having taken something from Plath, or a poet like Plath, but crucially not any of Larkin's 'accepted' influences or favourite writers.

When Larkin's *Collected Poems* was published in 1988, amid the controversy at Anthony Thwaite's chronological ordering of the poems, one poem in particular – unpublished by Larkin in his lifetime – was much discussed. 'Love Again' had been written by Larkin over several years (he mentions 'tinkering' with it in a letter in August 1978, but also that he'd 'abandoned [it] years ago'<sup>338</sup>), but he felt that it was

...intensely personal, with four-letter words for further orders, and not the sort of thing the sturdy burghers of Manchester would wish to read;<sup>339</sup>

The discomfort with which Larkin refers to the poem is unusual in his correspondence – he hardly ever complains about or even discusses the progress of work – and once the poem was published it certainly broke with the accepted image of Larkin as staid, reserved and 'proper'.

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<sup>338</sup> Larkin to Conquest, 17/7/78, *SL*, p. 588.

<sup>339</sup> Larkin to C. B. Cox, 22/12/83, *SL*, p. 705.

Love again, wanking at ten past three

(Surely he's taken her home by now?),

The bedroom hot as a bakery,

The drink gone dead, without showing how

To meet tomorrow, and afterwards,

And the usual pain, like dysentery.

Someone else touching her breasts and cunt,

Someone else drowned in that lash-wide stare,

And me supposed to be ignorant,

Or find it funny, or not to care,

Even... but why put it into words?

Isolate rather this element

That spreads through other lives like a tree

And sways them on in a sort of sense

And says why it never worked for me.

Something to do with violence

A long way back, and wrong rewards,

And arrogant eternity.<sup>340</sup>

It is a markedly different poem to perhaps any of Larkin's poems other than 'Aubade', because, as Ian Hamilton would say

None of Larkin's earlier unburdenings had had anything like the same unmerciful ferocity, the same screaming-point force of attack. There is no attempt here to mitigate the central emotion of the poem... If Larkin had lived, he probably would not have published 'Love Again'. On the other hand, one's guess is that he rather badly wanted us to see it.... the Larkin we admired was supposed to 'find it funny or not to care' or at any rate to have the gift of transmuting daily glooms into great haunting statements about love and death – ours as well as his. In 'Love Again' the unhappiness strictly belongs to him: our share in it is that of the pitying spectator.<sup>341</sup>

The unhappiness being only Larkin's was at odds with how he'd universalised troubles in the past: 'They fuck *you* up, *your* mum and dad', 'Life is first boredom, then fear / whether *we* use it, it goes' and 'like going to church / something that bores *us*, something *we* don't do well' (my italics). The utterly personal pain expressed in 'Love Again', is startling even when it tries to be flippant, as it does when parodying psychoanalysis by referring to 'violence, a long way back' (childhood trauma, in other words), which for Larkin is a shockingly personal admission.

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<sup>340</sup> Larkin, 'Love Again', *CP*, p. 215.

<sup>341</sup> Hamilton 1993, pp. 323-324.

'Love Again' is a poem that bears heavy traces of the 'horror poet' Larkin detects in Plath. The 'violence a long way back' is, while not as specific, similar to

Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.

The first time it happened I was ten.

It was an accident.<sup>342</sup>

In Plath's 'Lady Lazarus', the looming suicide of the poet is a manifestation of something that has lived with her since she was ten, with Larkin his inability to express love in anything other than the brutal language of sexual jealousy is also a manifestation of something from his past (the general critical view is that the 'violence' was the tyranny of his father over his mother, and this influenced Larkin's cynicism about marriage).

In Plath, the language of psychoanalysis and Freudian theory is not out of place; in Larkin it is very unusual – he half-ridicules the whole idea in 'Posterity' with Jake Balokowsky's 'That crummy textbook stuff from Freshman Psych'<sup>343</sup>. Larkin, unlike Amis, was an admirer of and influenced by D. H. Lawrence's use of psychology in literature, but it rarely surfaced in Larkin's work (perhaps because of Larkin's awareness of Amis' violent distaste for it).

If anything, 'Love Again' is the type of poem that Larkin was too nervous to write often, because its eventual hopeless 'but why put it into words' demonstrates

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<sup>342</sup> Plath, 'Lady Lazarus', *PCP*, p. 245.

<sup>343</sup> Larkin, 'Posterity', *CP*, p. 170.

the limit to which Larkin felt poetry could 'help' with his 'predestined material'. Plath, at the end of 'Daddy', was able to say 'Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through'<sup>344</sup>, which has the double meaning of either being through – as in, put through, connected – on the telephone, or the obvious meaning (when placed at the end of a poem) of the poet being 'through' as in done, finished. With either meaning, connection or termination, a clear result is achieved; either Plath's communication with 'Daddy' or her being done with 'Daddy'. Larkin's poem, however, demonstrates his inability to resolve 'why it never worked' for him, and it is the essential lack of an ending to the poem which gives it its un-Larkinesque character.

Sylvia Plath's effect on Larkin could best be described as that of a secret enabler, but also a warning. Larkin didn't need Plath in order to write work that was gloomy or concerning death, despair or depression; from Hardy to Ewart, he had enough 'dark' influences and favourites; but for poems like 'Aubade' or 'Love Again' he knew that to 'put it into words' was possible, but would be both exposing and exhausting, and he knew this partly because of Plath. Plath served as a secret knowledge to Larkin that, yes, it was possible to communicate the intensity of fear and misery with which he was often gripped, but the cost might be more than he was willing to contemplate.

In the end, Larkin would never have been able to champion Plath as he did Pym, partly because of his awareness of his role as the 'alternative' to Plath's actual champion, Hughes, but also because he tried to offer a universal language of suffering or difficulty. Reading his writing on Plath, it is possible to draw the conclusion that his need to universalise his own experience was driven by a fear of

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<sup>344</sup> Plath, 'Daddy', *PCP*, p. 224.

what might happen were he to personalise his experiences more, as she had done, and which 'Aubade' and 'Love Again' so graphically demonstrate. I find it hard to believe that without the example of personal pain and clear expression, which Larkin found in Plath, he would have been able or inspired to produce either of those poems.

Elsewhere, Plath and Larkin's similar mix of wonder and apprehension at the savagery and beauty of the natural world can be seen as the same expressions of feeling, but divided by style. Given Larkin's acceptance of Plath's talent, and his pessimism about his own, this stylistic difference was not as big a problem to Larkin as it has been tempting to believe in the past.

## **2.5 Conclusions**

In 1958, prior to his reading of either Lowell or Plath, Larkin spoke on the radio about his own poetry, saying two things of great interest to a consideration of his engagement with both the poets above and also with Eliot. After talking about his poetry being, in his eyes, 'the only possible reaction to a particular kind of experience, a feeling that you are the only one to have noticed something, something especially beautiful, sad or significant', he goes on to reflect

Does this mean my poetry is over-personal, in the sense of being narrow or shallow? Certainly the poems I write are bound up with the life I lead and the kind of person I am. But I don't think this makes them superficial; I think it improves them. ...I suppose the kind of response I am seeking from the reader is, Yes, I know what you mean, life is like that; and for readers to say it not

only now but in the future, and not only in England but anywhere in the world.<sup>345</sup>

Large ambitions and revealing honesty for a ‘minor talent’ of ‘narrow forms, narrow cadences’ and so on. Of course, 1958 is when Larkin is near the height of his creative powers – post *The Less Deceived*, prior *The Whitsun Weddings* – so perhaps he would have later reflected that he had failed to fulfil these ambitions, and so perhaps that was why the poetry had dried up.

He does not, here, deny that his poetry *is* over-personal, merely rejects the idea that such a quality would render his verse narrow, shallow or superficial. If the primary reason that people see for rejecting Larkin in favour of Lowell or Plath is his seeming austerity of passion, as opposed to their blunt confessionalism, then here is at least the intention of passion laid out as a clear aim of Larkin’s writing.

That Larkin would want the reaction he speaks of, and not just in England but anywhere in the world, is important, too. Several of his Movement colleagues were not interested in international appeal: Amis’s novels never strayed outside of English pastoral comedy, Elizabeth Jennings and John Wain were barely heard of outside of Britain. Even contemporary poets who were seen as different to Larkin – such as R. S. Thomas or Geoffrey Hill, even Betjeman – wrote of essentially local concerns, with no real eye to a world-wide audience. It is not a stretch to say that a poet who reads international writing and responds to it is more likely to want to add to that canon.

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<sup>345</sup> Larkin, ‘How or why I write poetry’, originally broadcast on the BBC Overseas Service, 20<sup>th</sup> August 1958. *FR*, p. 78.

Where with his early British influences – Wilfred Owen, Edward Thomas, Auden, Dylan Thomas – Larkin had sought the studied impersonality that he saw as the best and sharpest English poetry being made out of, from the three Americans he most read and admired – Eliot, Lowell and Plath – he took something else.

Eliot provided, through *Prufrock*, a form of semi-invertebrate, self-aware antihero who would provide not just a mouthpiece for Larkin but also a model for Larkin's stock of characters. Where Larkin and Eliot found different answers in their questions of eternity, they were still asking the same question, which was Modernist and progressive in definition.

While Lowell's contribution to Larkin comes down largely to one poem (though several others of Lowell's *Life Studies* poems are also built on the same key value) in 'Skunk Hour', the clarifying and refining presence of lunar light is frequently present and revelatory in Larkin's work after reading Lowell. Before Lowell, the moon was a semi-romantic piece of scene-setting, after Lowell it highlights and isolates the harsh and sheer observations of Larkin's increasingly dark and stark pronouncements.

Finally, with Plath, Larkin experienced a double-effect. He saw that certain important, and usually dark, parts of a poet's life have to be faced, and written about, even if they are not published. Yet he also saw a vast warning, in the extremity of her 'horror' and in her suicide, that both fascinated him and warned him off a too-forceful, too face-on confrontation of those darknesses. It may have been the reason he eventually stopped writing, in fear and trembling, but it was also an admission from him that these things *were* the subjects of poetry, when so many other poets of the time were rejecting them as cheap psychodramas.

## Chapter 3: the triple-headed creature; Larkin, Hughes and Gunn.

### 3.1 An unlikely trio

Monteith [Faber editor] has been broaching a tripartite paperback anthology of Thom, Thed [sic.] and Yours Thruly, but I don't expect the ponce will play ball. What's behind it? Do people actually buy them two? Honestly, I'm sure they're good chaps, and there's nothing personal about this, but I can't think of any two who affect me less. Enright, Lizzie, John – they're giants beside these two Cantabs.<sup>346</sup>

The Hughes-Gunn *Selected Poems* appeared in 1962, while Larkin preferred to absent himself from the volume, probably on the grounds that *The Whitsun Weddings* was accruing as a collection by this point, and he preferred to wait and publish alone (in 1964). Had Larkin also appeared in the *Selected*, then the perceived distance between him and the other two poets might have been lessened. Christopher Reid, in his notes to Hughes's *Letters*, comments that

The Faber volume of *Selected Poems* by Thom Gunn and Ted Hughes, published in May [1962], linked two poets who were in no sense allies, although they later grew friendly.<sup>347</sup>

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<sup>346</sup> Larkin to Robert Conquest, 11/7/61, *SL*, p. 331.

<sup>347</sup> Christopher Reid, *Letters of Ted Hughes* ed. C. Reid (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p. 201. Hereafter: *LoTH*.

Reid's observation of the linking power of anthologies is prescient – by 1962 it had been less than ten years since *New Lines* had linked Larkin and Gunn in the Movement, of which Larkin had commented that '...it certainly never occurred to me that I had anything in common with Thom Gunn'<sup>348</sup>. Further, in 1962 the first edition of Alvarez's *The New Poetry* sold over 10,000 copies in its first month, and contained all three of the poets above, though with a very deliberate placing of Larkin and Hughes in opposition to one another.

This intertwining may have given rise to Edward Lucie-Smith's comment that

Around 1960, it sometimes seemed as if all the poetry being written in England was being produced by a triple-headed creature called the 'Larkin-Hughes-Gunn'.<sup>349</sup>

By 1960, Larkin had published *The Less Deceived* (1955) to popular acclaim<sup>350</sup>, Hughes had published *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957) and *Lupercal* (1960), and Gunn *Fighting Terms* (1954) and *The Sense of Movement* (1957). Five books in six years is certainly a formidable presence, so Lucie-Smith's comment is understandable.

However, none of the three poets was ever of the opinion that they formed a school or were, as Reid puts it, 'allies' in any way. Larkin's Oxonian dismissal of Hughes and Gunn was born out of a genuine dislike of their poetry, and Hughes –

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<sup>348</sup> Larkin-Hamilton 1964. *FR* p. 20.

<sup>349</sup> Edward Lucie-Smith, 'Thom Gunn', Lucie-Smith 1970, p. 136.

<sup>350</sup> *The North Ship* had of course been published in 1945, but had gone largely unnoticed.

while liking Larkin's work – was ambivalent about Gunn's, saying of *My Sad Captains* [1961]:

Very good indeed. Nobody can praise it full-heartedly, because in a way it's an exercise in style. ...The worst thing about it, is that as he refines these predilections, the poems become less and less human – less profound psychologically, & so they begin to lose weight. They become less like statements & more like witticisms.<sup>351</sup>

This thoughtful consideration, it must be said, demonstrates a level of engagement with Gunn's poetry that is never evident in Larkin's dismissals of both Hughes and Gunn. In fact, Charles Monteith – the three poets' publisher at Faber – recalls a rhyme Larkin invented:

There was an old fellow of Kaber,  
Who published a volume with Faber:  
When they said 'Join the club?'  
He ran off to the pub –  
But Charles called, 'You must *love* your neighbour.'

The somewhat obscure third and fourth lines Philip explained as 'fillers' to be replaced more specifically as occasion demanded. For example:

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<sup>351</sup> Hughes to Olwyn Hughes, Autumn 1961, *LoTH*, pp. 187-8.

When they said 'Meet Ted Hughes',

He replied, 'I refuse',

When they said 'Meet Thom Gunn',

He cried, 'God, I must run',

And so on.<sup>352</sup>

It is perhaps naïve of Monteith to describe the third and fourth lines as 'obscure', when they are clearly meant to demonstrate Larkin's discomfort with literary society, or attempts to lionise him (arguably the same instinct that he expresses in 'Vers de Société', with its 'Funny how hard it is to be alone. / I could spend half my evenings, if I wanted, / Holding a glass of washing sherry...' <sup>353</sup>), but then as a publisher of all three poets, it would be invidious of him to accept Larkin's ill-disposed attitude to his fellow-poets.

What, then, did these three poets have in common, if anything? Did any of them view themselves as 'allies' or similar in their poetic aims? Gunn, when warily discussing Larkin and his own placing in the Movement went some way to identifying common ground between them:

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<sup>352</sup> Charles Monteith, 'Publishing Larkin'. Thwaite 1982, pp. 46-7.

<sup>353</sup> Larkin, 'Vers de Société', *CP*, p. 181.

What poets like Larkin, Davie, Elizabeth Jennings, and I had in common at that time was that we were deliberately eschewing Modernism, and turning back, though not very thoroughgoingly, to traditional resources in structure and method.<sup>354</sup>

This was, of course, what Alvarez would attack in *The New Poetry*, terming it ‘gentility’, while championing Hughes as the antidote to such ‘eschewing’ of Modernism (or, as he termed it, ‘negative feedback’). For Alvarez, Hughes (and, one assumes from his placing away from the Movement in *The New Poetry*, Gunn) was the continuation of Modernism’s advances.

Part of this continuation was seen as demonstrated by the dense nature of a lot of Hughes’s work, and the metaphysics and transcendence of Gunn’s. Larkin, in public at least, was wary if not highly critical of dense verse overly reliant on rhetoric, writing that

[...]it was Eliot who gave the modernist poetic movement its charter in the sentence ‘Poets in our civilisation, as it exists at present, must be difficult’,<sup>355</sup>

Larkin is here slightly misrepresenting an essay of Eliot’s which states that:

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<sup>354</sup> Gunn 1979, p. 174.

<sup>355</sup> Larkin 1971, p. 217.

It is not a permanent necessity that poets should be interested in philosophy, or in any other subject. We can only say it appears likely that poets in our civilisation, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*. Our civilisation comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results.<sup>356</sup>

Eliot's use of the word 'various' allows for all manner of poetry, actually, to be written and read, so long as it was good poetry, and the very obvious fact that Eliot's firm (Faber) was the publisher of Hughes, Gunn *and* Larkin backs up this 'catholic' approach. Larkin's discomfort with being labelled modern(ist) as a poet clearly also played a role in his rejection of Eliot's schema, when a good number of Larkin's poems *are* difficult; 'Toads' (the inspiration for which he attributed, in an interview, to his 'sheer genius'<sup>357</sup>), 'As Bad As A Mile', 'Sympathy in White Major' and 'The Explosion' all deal with metaphysical considerations in ways not immediately decipherable to the reader.

Larkin's concerns about 'difficult' poetry may be similar to those of Frank Kermode, in terms of the complications of Modernism and the breaking of a dialogue with the reader. Kermode attacked what he saw as the 'Dissociation of Sensibility' (actually an expression coined by Eliot in the essay above) in Modernist poetics, and championed the criticisms of Eliot levelled by Yvor Winters, commenting that the latter

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<sup>356</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets', *Selected Essays* 3<sup>rd</sup>. ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), p. 289.

<sup>357</sup> Paris Review 1982. *RW*, p. 74.

[...]leads us to an understanding of what is one of the main issues of modern poetics. This is the unformulated quarrel between the orthodoxy of Symbolism and the surviving elements of an empirical-utilitarian tradition which, we are assured, is characteristically English.<sup>358</sup>

Kermode's laying-out of the problems he sees Modern poetics as having brought to poetry ends with his praising a poet whom Larkin – but also Hughes and Gunn – viewed as the most acceptable face of modern poetry, Yeats:

But in the end, of course, these matters are solved by poets and not by critics. That is why, I think, Yeats is so important in what I have been saying. He had a matured poet's concern for the relation of symbol to discourse. He understood that one pole of Symbolist theory is sacramentalism, whether Catholic or theurgic:

Did God in portioning wine and bread  
Give man His thought, or his mere body?

and was willing to see in the discourse, whether of language or gesture, of the dedicated, symbolic values.<sup>359</sup>

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<sup>358</sup> Frank Kermode, "Dissociation of Sensibility", from *Romantic Image* (London: Routledge Paul, 1957), p. 152. Hereafter, Kermode 1957.

<sup>359</sup> Kermode 1957, p. 160.

Despite decrying him as ‘Celtic’ in order to make his effect on English poetry seem to be one of external application, Larkin always admitted to Yeats having had a great effect on English poetry. What Kermode (via Winters) is concerned about in his essay is a loss, with modernism, of a dialogue between the reader and the poet, which unavoidably leads to a loss of democratic values in modernist writing. This was demonstrated varyingly by the apparent incomprehensibility of *Finnegans Wake*, but also by the increasingly stubborn and dense *Cantos* of Ezra Pound, whose difficulty in a way mirrored their author’s involvement with fascism, which itself would tar the modernist movement he had worked so hard to propound.

Larkin, Hughes and Gunn were all aware of these dangers, where modernist writing was concerned. Gunn worked and studied under Winters in America and was profoundly influenced by him. Hughes’s long involvement with Eastern European and Hebrew poetry meant that the extremities of fascism were never far from his poetry (his love of Henry Williamson was understandably affected by the latter’s misplaced enthusiasm for Hitler), and Larkin’s own conservative leanings – while never being as extreme as Pound – meant that he tended to view Pound with a wary eye. As we shall see later in this chapter, Larkin and Hughes’s common admiration for D. H. Lawrence was unavoidably subject to the eco-fascism and fantasies of mass death and destruction that are present in Lawrence’s work.

How these three poets, then, worked to maintain a sense of dialogue with the reader while also utilising the more metaphysical and ‘difficult’ poetics of modernism, will be what I explore in this chapter. Further, I will demonstrate that far from being

three disparate and distant poets (from one another), Larkin, Hughes and Gunn were about the same task; namely, absorbing the best and most valuable lessons of modernism (particularly as demonstrated by American poets) into English poetry in a way that can also be seen as <sup>360</sup>an empirical-utilitarian tradition which, we are assured, is characteristically English.

### **3.2 Larkin and Ted Hughes**

#### **3.2 (i) Alternatives to one another**

In a letter to Charles Monteith, his and Ted Hughes's publisher at Faber, Larkin describes himself at a reading with Hughes as

...providing a sophisticated, insincere, effete, and gold-watch-chained  
alternative to his primitive forthright virile leather-jacketed  
*persona*<sup>361</sup>

This sense of him and Hughes being 'alternatives', even antitheses, to one another was something Larkin felt strongly. This was in part due to his dislike for the other poet's writing, but also because of his intensely private sense of his own emotions, which he would have been mortified to have become known about as widely as Hughes's entanglements and dramas were.

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<sup>360</sup> Kermode 1957, p. 152.

<sup>361</sup> Larkin to Charles Monteith, 2/6/75, *SL*, p. 525.

It is also worth stating, before all other considerations, that Hughes is one of the few poets whom Larkin is repeatedly and definitively on the record as strongly disliking, and the notion that any shared influence or similarity between their poetry exists is one that Larkin, and many others since, would barely have countenanced, let alone explored.

Yet share influences they did, however differently they allowed these to shape their work. They were both hugely affected by reading D. H. Lawrence when young, and the effect of both this and of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* is clearly visible in their work.

This being the case, however, there is an enormous amount of ground-clearing to be done. From the publication of Hughes's debut *The Hawk in the Rain* in 1957, critics seized upon him as a clear alternative to the Movement – and Larkin in particular – which had been set out definitively (or as near as it ever was) in *New Lines* the previous year. With the publication of *The Whitsun Weddings* in 1964, Larkin's supporters pushed back against the pro-Hughes lobby, and a clear sense of the two poets as rival poles in English poetry was established, and that sense continues to this day. Andrew Motion – both Larkin's executor and Hughes's successor as Poet Laureate – recently summed up the general feeling well:

In British poetry, the two great trees in the forest for the latter part of the twentieth century were Larkin and Ted Hughes, very interestingly unlike; complementary in some ways, adversarial in others.<sup>362</sup>

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<sup>362</sup> Motion 2008.

Motion is perhaps better placed than most to make such a judgement, given his personal and professional relationships with both of the older poets and their work, yet I wonder how much the above, popular, view of Larkin and Hughes is imposed through unchallenged claims, and how much is actually believed by people such as Motion. Motion's own writings on Larkin allow for a far wider consideration of influences (Symbolism, mainly) on Larkin's poetry than is generally accepted, so there is at least the 'complementary' consideration of Larkin and Hughes in Motion's statement.

Larkin once described a photograph of himself with Hughes (as well as Richard Murphy and Douglas Dunn) as 'a strange study of contrasting personalities'<sup>363</sup>, and after spending an afternoon (variously described in the letters as 'fearful' and 'extraordinary') judging the inaugural Arvon Poetry Competition with him (as well as Seamus Heaney and Charles Causley), remarked in a letter 'Funny crew we were. Ted the Incredible Hulk'<sup>364</sup>.

These mentions of 'contrast' and of Hughes's physicality (also the root of Larkin's letter to Monteith) are interesting because they suggest that Hughes's persona had at least something to do with the differences felt to lie between him and Larkin. Dylan Thomas aside, Larkin was greatly mistrustful of any poetic posturing, or bardic tendencies, in poets, and Hughes's esoteric wanderings, coupled with an

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<sup>363</sup> Larkin to Judy Egerton, 15/11/69, *SL*, p.421.

<sup>364</sup> Larkin to Kingsley Amis, 11/1/81, *SL*, p. 636.

intense and verbose style of vocal delivery, ensured that Larkin disliked his poetry almost automatically.

As ever (or so it seems) with Larkin and presupposed oppositions, the clearest early definition that we have, of the seeming opposition of Larkin to Hughes, is offered by Al Alvarez. In his introduction to *The New Poetry* in 1962, Alvarez placed the two poets squarely against one another in a comparison of poems concerned with horses: Larkin's 'At Grass' and Hughes's 'A Dream of Horses'.

Having already made up his mind as to which is the better poem – or more 'urgent', as he terms it – Alvarez dismisses Larkin's poem thus:

Larkin's poem, elegant and unpretentious and rather beautiful in its gentle way, is a nostalgic recreation of the Platonic (or *New Yorker*) idea of the English scene, part pastoral, part sporting. His horses are *social* creatures of fashionable race meetings and high style; emotionally they belong to the world of the R.S.P.C.A. It is more skilful but less urgent than 'A Dream of Horses'<sup>365</sup>

One of the problems with this criticism is that Alvarez ignores these poems being about different things. A dream is not the same as a view of racehorses resting. It is probably the fact that Larkin has denied the reader 'urgency', by writing a poem about horses that usually gallop, and having them 'At Grass' instead, that irks Alvarez, but his argument remains highly selective (as so often with his critical view of Larkin).

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<sup>365</sup> Alvarez 1962, p. 30.

His views on Hughes's poem are also selective. For all the energy of the poem, its first and seventh stanzas (below) remind the reader that such energy is only occurring in a dreamscape, and that the speaker/s is/are asleep:

We were born grooms, in stable-straw we slept still,  
All our wealth horse-dung and the combings of horses,  
And all we can talk about is what horses ail.

...

We must have fallen like drunkards into a dream  
Of listening, lulled by the thunder of the horses.  
We awoke stiff; broad day had come.<sup>366</sup>

'The thunder of the horses' is certainly urgent, but both Hughes and Larkin employ the slow, steady presence of horses to suggest something numinous. There are echoes of Hardy's 'old horse that stumbles and nods'<sup>367</sup> in the low, rumbling 'thunder' of Hughes's horses, which is similar to 'At Grass's 'the groom's boy / with bridles in the evening come'. Both poems also bear a slight resemblance to Edwin Muir's 'The Horses', which deals with the role of horses as helpers in the wake of a nuclear war,

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<sup>366</sup> Ted Hughes, 'A Dream of Horses', *Collected Poems* ed. P. Keegan (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), pp. 65-6. Hereafter: *THCP*.

<sup>367</sup> Thomas Hardy, from 'In Time of 'The Breaking of Nations''', *Selected Poems* ed. Tim Armstrong (Harlow: Longman, 1993), p. 238.

was a contemporary poem to both Hughes's and Larkin's, and like theirs deals with the relation of horses to humans.

In Hughes's poem, 'we slept still', 'listening' and 'awoke stiff' essentially render the grooms static. Of course, the 'urgency' of the poem is felt elsewhere – with the horses themselves – yet Alvarez is highly selective in not noticing the inertia in these stanzas; even the 'horse-dung' and 'combings of horses' are static products of the horse (so many fallings-off), and 'all we can talk about is what horses ail' again makes the animals slow, sickened.

Comparing these static properties with Larkin's own depictions, both poets grant the horses the speed they are capable of, even if Larkin's speed is without 'urgency':

...they

have slipped their names, and stand at ease,  
or gallop for what must be joy,<sup>368</sup>

Larkin obviously has the horses defined by their racing past to such an extent that they must have intentions or meaning to their galloping, or else be identifiably freed from it ('for what must be joy'), but that doesn't stop a gallop being a gallop. In fact, in

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<sup>368</sup> Larkin, 'At Grass', *CP*, pp. 29-30.

Hughes's poem, the grooms dream of a stampede of horses, but do not ascribe motive or definition to that stampede:

And we ran out, mice in our pockets and straw in our hair,

Into darkness that was avalanching to horses

And a quake of hooves...

...

Everything else this plunging of horses

To the rim of our eyes that strove for the shapes of the sound.

We crouched at our lantern, our bodies drank the din,

And we longed for a death trampled by such horses

As every grain of the earth had hooves and mane.<sup>369</sup>

All the grooms know is wonder at the horses' galloping, but Hughes never picks out *why* the horses are galloping in the dream, so the reader can reasonably assume that the creatures are doing it also 'for what must be joy', as the only 'urgency' is in the groom's suicidal thought of trampling.

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<sup>369</sup> 'A Dream of Horses', *THCP*, p. 66.

However, Alvarez clearly thinks that this is the antithesis of Larkin's horses, as he sums up the poem:

...it is unquestionably *about* something; it is a serious attempt to recreate and so clarify, unfalsified and in the strongest imaginative terms possible, a powerful complex of emotions and sensations. Unlike Larkin's Hughes's horses have a violent, impending presence. But through the sharp details which bring them so threateningly to life, they reach back, as in a dream, into a nexus of fear and sensation. Their brute world is part physical, part state of mind.<sup>370</sup>

Yet it is not 'as in a dream' but *in* a dream: it's there in the title. This is a crucial flaw in Alvarez's criticism, because he did not choose to analyse (nor include in the anthology that follows) Hughes's poem 'The Horses' (1955), which had already been published for nearly a decade. In the earlier poem, Hughes encounters horses in real life not dissimilar to Larkin's slow, grand creatures:

I passed: not one snorted or jerked its head.

Grey silent fragments

Of a grey silent world.

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<sup>370</sup> Alvarez 1962, p. 31.

...

But still they made no sound.

Not one snorted or stamped,

Their hung heads patient as the horizons,<sup>371</sup>

Silence is here reiterated again and again, not even a joyful gallop moves the horses. Of course, Alvarez's point with 'A Dream of Horses' is not the horses but the dream element, which prefers flux to stasis and imagery to realism. The 'urgency' he so longs for is his way of propounding what he saw was great in the imagery of Robert Lowell. All the same, it is odd that he chose Larkin to attack from the Movement poets whom he disliked, when the poems he includes (in the anthology) by Amis and John Wain would have made far better targets. The reason for this is that it is likely Alvarez recognised the important position Larkin occupied in the early 1960s, as a poet, and felt that he needed the most aggressive challenging.

### **3.2 (iii) The influence of D. H. Lawrence.**

The strongest and most consistent common factor in the reading and writing of Larkin and Hughes is the work of D. H. Lawrence. For Larkin, Lawrence was

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<sup>371</sup> Hughes, 'The Horses', *THCP*, pp. 22-3.

...a writer of such abounding creative energy, of such wilful assertions and counter-assertions, that, like his own St Mawr, he is liable to kick to pieces any critical stall we try and put him into. His genius thrived on self-contradiction<sup>372</sup>

It is worth noting that 'St Mawr' is another horse, from Lawrence's short story of the same name – clearly the power and presence of horses is a common factor in both Larkin and Hughes's reaction to Lawrence.

Larkin was introduced to Lawrence's work by his (Larkin's) father, and by the time he attended Oxford, Lawrence was an important influence in his life; even so far as dictating that he wore red trousers, after Lawrence's (via the character of Mellors) advice to do so in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*<sup>373</sup>. Writing to a friend when twenty, Larkin enthused that

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

...As Lawrence says, life is a question of what you thrill to. But there has been a change in [the] English psyche. The wind is blowing 'in a new direction of time,' and I feel that you and I, who will be if anyone the new artists, are onto it.<sup>374</sup>

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<sup>372</sup> Larkin, 'The Sanity of Lawrence', originally appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 13<sup>th</sup> June 1980. Reprinted in *FR*, pp. 42-6.

<sup>373</sup> 'An' I'd get my men to wear different clothes: 'appen close red trousers, bright red,'. D.H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), p. 219.

<sup>374</sup> L. to J. B. Sutton, 6/7/42, *SL*, pp. 34-5.

Predictably, Kingsley Amis had no time for Lawrence (largely on account of the latter's use of sexual psychology) so Larkin learned in his correspondence with Amis to keep his admiration for Lawrence largely quiet, but that did not lessen its importance for him.

Interestingly, Ted Hughes's phrasing when describing what he valued in Lawrence is remarkably similar to Larkin's statements above:

The real poverty of 20<sup>th</sup> century English writing has been masked by the presence of Eliot, Joyce and Yeats. Lawrence is really the only representative, and what an oddball he is. But at least he has psychological heft on a major scale.<sup>375</sup>

I've just been reading the big Phoenix Collection of Lawrence's pieces – straight oxygen. What is the great plastic megaphone mask of the English that gets jammed over the head of all English writers, & that he avoided? He is the only one quite free of it.<sup>376</sup>

There is no question, then, that both writers viewed Lawrence as a highly important writer, but also as one who was separate from the English literary tradition and movements of his time. It is probable that both poets saw something of themselves in

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<sup>375</sup> Hughes to Daniel Weissbort, 7/4/82, *LoTH*, p. 453.

<sup>376</sup> Hughes to Keith Sagar, 28/8/84, *LTH*, pp. 486-7.

the withdrawn, isolated nature of Lawrence as a man, but also as a writer. This was reflected in the seemingly private expressions of admiration for the man – Larkin restricted his talking about Lawrence to his letters, largely, to his school friend Jim Sutton and then, later, Monica Jones, while Hughes restricted his talk of Lawrence to his extended correspondence with the critic Keith Sagar, who had written of the similarities between Hughes and Lawrence.

None of this is to say that Larkin and Hughes took identical facets of Lawrence's work on board as influence. Hughes was mostly concerned with Lawrence's interest in animals and the natural world, as well as the fantasies of ecological genocide and human extinction that pepper Lawrence's work. When Clive James wrote that 'As for Hughes, it's as though the Nazis killed everybody and only the animals were left'<sup>377</sup>, he was being glib, but also drawing attention to that element of Lawrentian survival-isolation.

Larkin, on the other hand, was far more concerned with Lawrence's focus on human sexuality and psychology, and the effect that reading Lawrence had on him. Along with Dylan Thomas, Lawrence is the closest that Larkin comes in his letters and writings to hero-worship:

I am interested by your D. H. L. remarks: any judgements on him are to me like a stick poked incautiously into the cage of a tiger: I bound to savage it. Yet in these days I grow more & more unwilling to try to say anything about D. H. L.: he is so enormous, so shifty, so deceptive, fascinating, & evanescent – also I get the odd feeling that I am *inside* him, staggering helplessly from aspect to

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<sup>377</sup> James 1972, p. 44.

aspect... He has always meant so much more to me than any other writer. I have adopted his conclusions so uncritically<sup>378</sup>

No wonder that Larkin was unwilling to allow Amis to draw him on Lawrence; it would have been far too dangerous for him to admit how much Lawrence meant to him ('so much more than any other writer') when he knew how scornful Amis would be of such a feeling. That Larkin knew this is obvious from another letter to Jones:

...as you say he[Kingsley]'s not like us. The idea of Kingsley *loving* a book – or a book 'feeding' him, as K[atherine] M[ansfield] would say – is quite absurd. He doesn't *like* books, he doesn't *like* reading. And I wouldn't take his opinion on *anything*, books, people, places, anything.<sup>379</sup>

Amis even went so far as to have a character of his penultimate novel express (safely ten years after Larkin's death) the view that '...really, you know, all that sacredness-of-desire stuff was just queer propaganda'<sup>380</sup> which refers to both Lawrence and the psychologist John Layard, whose lectures at Oxford (in the 1940s) Larkin attended but Amis did not. Auden was also greatly interested in and admiring of Layard, and he and Larkin both seemed to have found Layard's lectures helpful in their readings of Lawrence.

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<sup>378</sup> Larkin to Monica Jones, 21/10/50, *LTM*.

<sup>379</sup> Larkin to Jones, 15<sup>th</sup> February 1955, *LTM*, p. 147.

<sup>380</sup> Kingsley Amis, *You Can't Do Both* (London: Hutchinson, 1994), p. 159.

When, in 1980, Larkin opened an exhibition on Lawrence at Nottingham University, Amis saw an opportunity to attack Larkin on the latter's love of Lawrence:

You really are potty about old DEL [D.H.L]. How the fuck do you GET THRU him? CAN'T YOU SEE he's just like Wagner and Pound, a self-solving mystery? Fellows say 'Here's a GRINDING SHIT who never did *anything* nice to or for *anybody*, and yet he's written all this stuff which is supposed to be frightfully good. Funny.' But then some of them look closely at the stuff and find that, instead of being frightfully good, it is in fact INSULTINGLY BAD IN EXACTLY THE KIND OF WAY YOU'D EXPECT FROM THE WAY HE BEHAVED. All of a piece. End of problem. Oh well. We all have our little foibles. Wouldn't do if we all thought the same OH YES IT FUCKING WELL WOU<sup>381</sup>

This is very similar to the attacks that Amis makes on Larkin's love of Dylan Thomas, also his interest in Sylvia Plath. Like those attacks, it is not responded to by Larkin in his reply to Amis<sup>382</sup>.

However, it cannot be claimed, that Larkin's love of Lawrence had anything like the demonstrable effect on his poetry that Hughes's engagement with the earlier writer did. Hughes's poetry is clearly influenced by and indebted to Lawrence's own, whereas Larkin's poetry never is. With most of Larkin's early literary loves – Auden,

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<sup>381</sup> Kingsley Amis to Larkin, 9/4/80, *TLoKA*, pp. 888-9.

<sup>382</sup> Larkin to Amis, 26/4/80, *SL*, pp. 618-9.

Yeats, even Eliot – there are obvious pieces of juvenilia and usually unpublished poems which wear their influences obviously, or are clear attempts to emulate or imitate the writer in question. With Lawrence, however, there are no such examples. It is interesting to note that Auden, too, had a youthful infatuation with Lawrence, but also never exhibited any of that admiration in his verse. Indeed, the long, rolling lines of Hughes's that Larkin so disliked are more similar to Lawrence's poetry than any of Larkin's approached being.

### **3.2 (iv) 'Naked' Lowell's effect on Larkin and Hughes, and the question of 'AutoBiography'**

Al Alvarez's main aim with *The New Poetry* was to stress the importance of Robert Lowell, cast Hughes as a form of heir to Lowell, and then use Hughes to attack Larkin, and poets like Amis, D. J. Enright and others who were supposedly like Larkin, or viewed as being in the Movement.

Alvarez saw Lowell (along with John Berryman) as being

able to write poetry of immense skill and intelligence which coped openly with the quick of their [his and Berryman's] experience, experience sometimes on the edge of disintegration and breakdown. ...Lowell's book *Life Studies*, for example, is a large step forward in this direction.<sup>383</sup>

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<sup>383</sup> Alvarez 1962, pp. 28-9.

Alvarez employs what is a recognisably Lawrencean term, when he talks about ‘the quick of their experience’, and it is a similar statement to Larkin’s agreeing with Lawrence about life being a question of ‘what you thrill to’.

Larkin too thought *Life Studies* skilful and intelligent – and I find it hard to believe that Alvarez would not have read Larkin’s review of *Life Studies* and so also known this – though Larkin was unconvinced by Berryman’s equivalent efforts.

Alvarez goes on to praise what he saw as the ‘large step forward’ that Lowell had taken, saying that

Where once Lowell tried to externalise his disturbances theologically in Catholicism and rhetorically in mannerisms of language and rhythm, he is now, I think, trying to cope with them nakedly, and without evasion.<sup>384</sup>

In his use of the word ‘nakedly’, Alvarez here makes a claim as to Lowell’s autobiographical bent, in his poetry, but also to the near-shocking clarity that has come from his dispensing with ‘mannerisms of language and rhythm’ – rhetoric itself, even.

This is a fair statement, particularly considering Lowell’s subsequent autobiographical blatancies in his poetry; turning private letters into sonnets, considering there to be nothing about his hectic personal life that the reader didn’t need to hear about in the plainest terms, and much else.

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<sup>384</sup> Ibid.

However, for Alvarez to attempt to use Lowell's 'naked' externalisations to divide Larkin and Hughes was a crude move. Indeed, when Alvarez wrote in such 'naked' detail about Sylvia Plath's breakdown and suicide for his book *The Savage God*<sup>385</sup> (1971), he drew a serious attack from Hughes, laid out in perhaps the most vitriolic of the latter's letters<sup>386</sup>. To get a measure of how similarly Hughes and Larkin felt towards both Lowell and his 'naked' methods, one need only look at their correspondence.

Lowell, Hughes and Larkin frequently appear in each other's correspondence. All three knew each other, slightly, in their capacity as fellow-poets, which colours their mentions of one another. Yet the letters of all three do reveal certain important facts, particularly in the varying influence that Lowell had on Larkin and Hughes.

Hughes, despite claims made on his behalf (by Alvarez, for example) as to him being the English heir to Lowell, is intensely critical of Lowell in his letters, remarking that

He published his main book in 1945 [*Lord Weary's Castle*, actually 1946] or so, which is fantastically good. He got the Pulitzer prize for it & was acclaimed great poet etc. 3 or so years later, his next book [*The Mills of the Kavanaughs* 1951] was an absolute dud – unreadable, feeble etc.<sup>387</sup>

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<sup>385</sup> A. Alvarez, *The Savage God* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971). Hereafter, Alvarez 1971.

<sup>386</sup> The letter expresses outrage and hurt over Alvarez's use of Plath's suicide, and demands that he do all he can to limit its publication. It ends 'You are false to the facts and you shame yourself in the way you insult the privacy & confidences of two people who regarded you as a friend. Please stop toting us around like a flea circus, and do what you can to change what you have written.' Hughes to Alvarez November 1971, *LoTH*, pp. 321-6.

<sup>387</sup> Ted Hughes to Olwyn Hughes, April 1959. *LoTH*, p. 141.

This is on the eve of *Life Studies* (1959) being published, which both Hughes and Larkin would admire, but Hughes maintained a critical view of Lowell, remarking of him, almost twenty years later, that

The only interesting moments are when he forgets the effort to be nakedly true with himself, & writes a formal impersonal poem about something else altogether.<sup>388</sup>

The use of the word 'nakedly' is interesting, as it shows Hughes's desire to step apart from Lowell. After all, in *The New Poetry's* introduction, as Blake Morrison says,

Alvarez praised Lowell, Hughes, *et al.* for dealing with their experience 'nakedly', and he presented language as a mere instrument in a therapeutic transaction between writer and reader.<sup>389</sup>

So clearly, by 1976, Hughes saw there being little *et al* about Lowell and himself. In fact, at the time of his earlier letter, he wrote another, which showed his judgements on Lowell to be part of a wider concern about American poetry, and which are strikingly different to Larkin's interests in the same area:

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<sup>388</sup> Hughes to Daniel Weissbort, Undated 1976. *LoTH*, p. 372.

<sup>389</sup> Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion, introduction to *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* ed. B. Morrison and A. Motion (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p. 13.

[Lowell's poems]...are mainly Autobiographical. AutoBiography is the only subject matter really left to Americans. The only thing an American really has to himself, & really belongs to, is his family. Never a locality, or a community, or an organisation of ideas, or a private imagination.

...American & English poetry are already as far apart as French & English. I think poetry is either cultivated or perverted or extinguished by national character, & in countries of the wrong character the hugest and most excitable geniuses come to nothing. It's my belief that American character is now entering a phase about as favourable to poets as, say, Norway's is. I think England is in such a phase too, but the small artists there are pretty individual. In America, they're all the same.<sup>390</sup>

This surprisingly general, sweeping judgement is worth considering, when criticism argues for the supposed cultural eclecticism and openness of Hughes in comparison to Larkin's clichéd 'little-Englander' stance.

Larkin never spoke or wrote about the autobiographical nature of his work, but he also never strove to cut autobiography off entirely from whatever other subject matter Hughes – in the letter above – insinuates non-American poets can take for use in their poems. It's a point made often enough that Hughes objected to Sylvia Plath using autobiographical details about their marriage in her poetry, and also that

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<sup>390</sup> Hughes to Weissbort, 21/3/59, *LoTH*, pp. 140-1.

his putting off writing about Plath until near the end of his life became a presence in his work that even he found difficult to deny.

What is interesting about the dismissal of, or at least distancing of himself from, 'AutoBiography' on Hughes's part, is that the book of Lowell's that he alludes to earlier in the letter – 'He has a new book coming out in April, from Fabers' – is *Life Studies*, which both he and Larkin admired, almost alone of Lowell's work for both of them. Interesting because there is no question that it is Lowell's first major autobiographical collection, and so Hughes and Larkin's admiration of it is confusing. While Larkin never denied the presence of 'AutoBiography' in his work, subjects of a specifically autobiographical nature were rarely published, or not embellished in order to render the described experiences more universal.

There are two specific exceptions to this avoidance of 'AutoBiography', as Hughes puts it, in Larkin's poems, which are both alluded to in the letters. The first<sup>391</sup> concerns an unpublished (until the *Collected Poems* in 1988) poem that Larkin was writing during the late 1950s:

I've just been looking at my *Letter to a Friend* & I don't feel happy about it – the whole idea is too complicated a trap to spring, and the actual stanza and form and rhyme scheme is dull and unhelpful. It won't reveal anything, in point of fact, except my inability to write poetry.<sup>392</sup>

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<sup>391</sup> The other exception is the poem 'Love Again', which I have discussed elsewhere, in the context of Larkin's engagement with Sylvia Plath.

<sup>392</sup> Larkin to Judy Egerton, 28/11/59, *SL*, p. 311.

The poem being referred to here is 'Letter to a Friend about Girls'<sup>393</sup>, which Larkin would in fact complete the following month (December 1959), but then remain uncertain about.

In 1970, he sends it to Anthony Thwaite, asking him if he can

[...] enlist your aid as a literary critic? I have had the enclosed poem knocking around for ten years now, [...] let me have your opinion?<sup>394</sup>

Clearly, Larkin is proud of the poem, yet he is nervous about its personal nature, worrying that

...what it was *meant* to do was postulate a situation where, in the eyes of the author, his friend got all the straightforward easy girls and he got all the neurotic ones, leaving the reader to see that in fact the girls were all the same and simply responded to the way they were treated.<sup>395</sup>

He had inscribed the copy he had made for Thwaite 'For Anthony, not the friend in this case...' <sup>396</sup>, and given the above gossipy description of the 'Friend', it clearly didn't take Thwaite very long to work out that the addressee of the poem was Kingsley Amis. Given the very open nature of the poem – openness of an autobiographical

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<sup>393</sup> *CP*, pp. 122-3.

<sup>394</sup> Larkin to Thwaite, 19/3/70, *SL*, pp. 428-9.

<sup>395</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid.*

type unusual for Larkin – Thwaite clearly realised that he was meant to advise Larkin against publishing the poem. This he did, and the seemingly relieved Larkin wrote back to him much later, saying:

You were dead right with the Hamlet one.<sup>397</sup>

This is an example of Larkin both wanting and needing to be forbidden or prevented from anything untypical. Thwaite clearly admired the poem, but (in 1970) knew what he was required to advise as a friend. His writing to Larkin evidences this several years later, requesting to publish ‘Letter...’ in a magazine. Larkin replies

Many thanks for the letter with *Letter*. I read the latter with some interest, not having seen it for some years. My reaction was that in the first place it wasn’t at all funny: very sad and true; in the second, that the ‘joke’ was either too obvious or too subtle to be seen; thirdly, that it could do with a bit of polishing up. But fourthly, I’m afraid, that it would hurt too many feelings for me to publish it. If it were a simply marvellous poem, perhaps I might be callous, but it’s not sufficiently good to be worth causing pain. Do you mind? We’ll have to leave it until the posthumous volume, edited Andrew Motion...<sup>398</sup>

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<sup>397</sup> Larkin to Thwaite, 10/12/73, *SL*, pp. 494-5.

<sup>398</sup> Larkin to Thwaite, 29/1/78, *SL*, pp. 576-7.

That final comment is enormously telling, particularly given the unclear nature of Larkin's will as regarding unpublished work, and the criticism levelled against Thwaite for publishing 'Letter...' among other pieces in the *Collected* volume which he (rather than Motion) eventually edited.

However, what is interesting about this series of letters is the timing and the dates. Larkin first mentions the poem – to Egerton – shortly after the publication (by Faber) of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, which Larkin greatly admired, reviewing it warmly:

These [the poems in *Life Studies*] are curious, hurried, offhand vignettes, seeming too personal to be practised, yet none the less accurate and original.

...

in spite of their tension, these poems have a lightness and almost flippant humour not common in Mr Lowell's previous work, matched with a quicker attention to feeling which personally I welcome.<sup>399</sup>

This demonstrates that Lowell's ability to produce 'accurate and original' poetry, which was also clearly autobiographical, impressed Larkin.

In fact, 'Letter...' had been through a number of drafts from 1957 onwards (though 'The text at this stage [prior to 1959] only slightly resembles the finished

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<sup>399</sup> Larkin 1959. *FR* pp. 201-206.

poem'<sup>400</sup>), but it is only in late 1959 – after reading *Life Studies* – that the poem is finished enough for Larkin to have the misgivings that he writes to Egerton about.

It's worth pointing out that, in a letter to Monica Jones the previous year, Larkin had included the following couplet:

Get Kingsley Amis to sleep with your wife,

You'll find it will give you a bunk up in life<sup>401</sup>

While it is true that Larkin is far more open (particularly about his relationship with Amis) in his letters to Jones, this poem, as well as 'Letter...', was written during Amis's first marriage, which was punctuated by infidelity on his (and his wife Hilary's) part, and which Amis and Larkin discussed in their letters. It is a measure of Larkin's friendship-based tact – once the matter of his sending the poem at all is discounted – that he essentially suggests that Thwaite prevent him from printing the poem while Amis was still married to Hilary.

The above goes to show that, while Larkin was enlivened by the poems of Lowell's that combined the personal with the accurate and the original (and also humour), he generally agreed with Hughes's discomfort as to 'naked' AutoBiography. This shared discomfort would go quite some distance to disproving Alvarez's notion of Hughes dealing with his experience 'nakedly'. As Clive James has pointed out, it also proves Alvarez to be wilfully ignoring Larkin's achievement:

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<sup>400</sup> Archie Burnett, commentary on 'Letter to a Friend about Girls'. Burnett, 2012, pp. 625-6.

<sup>401</sup> Larkin to Jones 29/1/58, *LTM*, p. 235.

...for Alvarez as a critic the move [of art closer in relation to reality] had damaging consequences, not the least of which was a permanent ability to undervalue Larkin, who had never been ‘immortalising the securities and complacencies of life in the suburbs’ (in *The Savage God* Alvarez is still saying that the Movement poets were doing that) but had been projecting a personal despair which fulfilled every one of Alvarez’s requirements except for an adequate supply of global apocalyptic referents.<sup>402</sup>

Indeed, as Alvarez discovered when Hughes wrote to him in 1972 (see footnote 25), he had hugely misjudged the influence of Lowell on Hughes, as well as refusing to believe there could be any such influence at all on Larkin.

### **3.2 (v) Empire and War in Larkin and Hughes**

Hughes was evasive as to his thoughts on the British Empire, but, for Simon Armitage, he had a ‘near obsessional fixation with the First World War’<sup>403</sup>. As we have seen, Larkin was concerned that a Hardy-esque ‘English tradition’ that he so longed for might have been partly ‘killed off’<sup>404</sup> by the First World War, but because his father (born in 1884, but serving as an accountant and city treasurer through the First World War) had had no involvement with the war, always seemed oddly ambivalent towards it. Hughes’s father – as well as several relations on both sides of his family –

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<sup>402</sup> James 1972, p. 45.

<sup>403</sup> Simon Armitage, from the introduction to *Ted Hughes: Selected Poems* ed. S. Armitage (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), p. xiii.

<sup>404</sup> Larkin-Thwaite 1973. *FR*, p. 96.

had served with distinction in the war, but was left silent and shell-shocked by the experience, so much so that Hughes would eventually write

Meanwhile

The horrors were doled out, everybody

Had his appalling tale.

But what alarmed me most

Was your silence. Your refusal to tell.

I had to hear from others

What you survived and what you did.

Maybe you didn't want to frighten me.

Now it's too late.

Now I'd ask you shamelessly.

But then I felt ashamed.

What was my shame? Why couldn't I have borne

To hear you telling what you underwent?

Why was your war so much more unbearable

Than anybody else's? As if nobody else

Knew how to remember.<sup>405</sup>

The last line of this is almost Hughes feeling challenged by his father's traumatised silence, and it's arguable that Hughes's many poems about the First World War are an attempt to construct a replacement narrative or collection of stories for those that his father never shared. Hughes also underwent National Service before going up to Cambridge, so his involvement with military life and its mechanics was very real to him.

Larkin, like his father, did not serve in a war, being classified as medically unfit for service in 1942 on account of poor eyesight. If he was gloomy about the Second World War in his letters, it is simply because (a) he is gloomy in his letters, and (b) that War involved the bombing of non-combatants, including the heavy bombing of Coventry – where his parents lived – and so was harder to ignore than the First must have been for his father.

However, James Fenton has written illuminatingly about Larkin as being more affected by the Second World War than perhaps is acknowledged, inventing the word 'unshrapnel' to describe a slowly emerging, buried trauma:

Larkin seems to have been wounded by unshrapnel, and in later life little pieces of unshrapnel began to emerge in his poems, squibs, letters and reviews.<sup>406</sup>

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<sup>405</sup> Hughes, 'For the Duration', *THCP*, pp. 760-1.

<sup>406</sup> James Fenton, 'Philip Larkin: Wounded by Unshrapnel', *The Strength of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 57.

The poem that Fenton then quotes as evidence for this returning trauma is ‘Homage to a Government’, Larkin’s sad criticism of the first Wilson government (1964-70)’s decision to close the British base in Aden. As Motion points out in his biography,

It was not the simple fact that soldiers were coming home from their outpost of Empire that offended him; it was because they were being recalled for ‘lack of money’.<sup>407</sup>

This might seem strange for a man widely regarded as something of a skinflint or miser, but it is a rare show of national feeling from Larkin, or feeling towards something other than what he saw as the ridiculous push-me-pull-you swap-overs of the Wilson and Heath years, in terms of national identity.

‘Homage...’ is a strange poem, as in amongst its sadness or shame at the ‘money’ issue, there is the awareness that – however wryly he expresses it – Larkin knew that the Empire was a faintly ridiculous or at least ineffective institution:

Next year we are to bring the soldiers home

For lack of money, and it is all right.

Places they guarded, or kept orderly,

Must guard themselves, and keep themselves orderly.

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<sup>407</sup> Motion 1993, p. 389.

We want the money for ourselves at home

Instead of working. And this is all right.

It's hard to say who wanted it to happen,

But now it's been decided nobody minds.

The places are a long way off, not here,

Which is all right, and from what we hear

The soldiers there only made trouble happen.

Next year we shall be easier in our minds.<sup>408</sup>

It is true that, through the repeated use of the neutral 'all right' and 'nobody minds', and the gossipy 'from what we hear', Larkin is attempting to articulate something of the gossiping housewife – possibly also what he saw as the 'soft' tone of left-wing intellectuals – but the mention of the soldiers only making 'trouble happen', with the memory of Suez not too far away, is an admission of Empire's impotence.

Fenton argues that this poem is a reappearance of 'unshrapnel', some deeper, festering wound caused by the violence of the Second World War, which made Larkin sensitive to any apparent diminishing of Great Britain. However, I would argue that there is more the sense of historical inevitability about this poem. Whether that inevitability is the election of a post-war Labour government, which will wish to cut the defence budget (as was Larkin's opinion), or the inevitable fall of all empires is

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<sup>408</sup> Larkin, 'Homage to a Government', *CP*, p. 171.

largely irrelevant. Larkin's visions of 'Next year...' in the poem (both above and in the following example) suggest a form of linear progression that is both unstoppable, and unremarkable:

Next year we shall be living in a country  
That brought its soldiers home for lack of money.  
The statues will be standing in the same  
Tree-muffled squares, and look nearly the same.  
Our children will not know it's a different country.  
All we can hope to leave them now is money.<sup>409</sup>

The statues will look 'nearly the same' because time has passed, though whether Larkin is alluding to the recalling of troops or the erosion of stone is not indisputable. That the place is 'a different country' is as much about the passing of time, from one generation to 'our children', as it is about the implied weakening that it is budget-cuts that have led things to this pass. There might even be a hint of 'I Vow to Thee, My Country' in 'a different country's wistful thoughts of the past as a better (or at least other) country.

There is an equivalent poem to 'Homage...' written by Ted Hughes, and published around the time that Larkin was writing his poem, which bears marked similarities to Larkin's sentiments:

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<sup>409</sup> Ibid.

Empire has rotted back,

Like a man-eater

After its aeon of terror, to one fang.

Apes on their last legs –

Rearguard of insolence –

Snapping at peanuts and defecating.

The heirloom's garrison's sold as a curio

With a flare of Spanish hands

And a two-way smile, wafer of insult,

Served in carefully-chipped English.

The taxi-driver talking broken American

Has this rock in his palm.

When the next Empire noses this way

Let it sniff here.<sup>410</sup>

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<sup>410</sup> Hughes, 'Gibraltar', *THCP*, p. 112. Originally appeared in the *New Statesman*, 8<sup>th</sup> April 1966.

There are the obvious differences of style between Larkin's and Hughes's poem, but the sentiment is the same. That the Empire has 'rotted back' implies exactly the same sense of shame at dwindling power and wealth as 'Homage...' and the mention of 'Apes on their last legs / Rearguard of insolence' is a comparable implication to Larkin's soldiers only causing trouble in the provinces. Time passing is here as well, with the shift from 'carefully-chipped English' to 'broken American', as 'the next Empire noses this way'. The next Empire clearly being America is as much an allusion to America's rise to dominance as Larkin's scorn of the Empire being wound down because of 'money' is a dislike for economic factors – usually associated (by Larkin and Amis) with American consumerist culture – superseding national pride.

The similarity between these two poets is in the sense of time passing inevitably, but also under the watchful eye of an unchanging natural world. There is certainly no political difference between the two poets – in fact, there was little of any such difference between the two, a fact which is rarely admitted – as both see the passing of Empire as inevitable and due to either its impotence or its outdated state.

The same sensibilities as inform these two poems are also to be found in poetry by the two that concerns the First World War.

Larkin's 'MCMXIV' is often seen as a forlorn nostalgia for the Edwardian period, which is certainly suggested in a reading of the poem with that in mind. However, I would contend that, as with Hughes, the cold eye of nature and the inevitability of history passing is a far stronger presence:

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;  
  
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;

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.<sup>411</sup>

Larkin does several things to de-romanticise what might otherwise be taken to be nostalgia.

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<sup>411</sup> Larkin, 'MCMXIV', *CP*, pp. 127-8.

He repeatedly refers to human behaviour – when seen in the context of history – as largely frivolous or leisure-based: ‘The Oval or Villa Park’, the ‘children at play’ (who are twice the players, being ‘called after kings and queens’, in a traditional and ceremonial way), ‘the pubs wide open all day’ and ‘the men leaving the gardens tidy’. All of these are pastimes: the shops are shut, so neither work nor shopping is taking place. This adds to Larkin’s insistence on the ‘innocence’ of the moment, but as we shall see, that ‘innocence’ is not as clear-cut as some would believe.

Where action and work is mentioned, it is of a timeless nature: ‘the differently dressed servants’ of the time would have been dressed mainly in black and a little white, and their role is a timeless one – servitude stretching back to the Bible. The action or movement of the limousines might imply people of importance, but ‘the dust behind’ more likely suggests funeral corteges. That dust also reminds us ‘to what base uses we may return’, just as ‘the place-names [are] all hazed over’ – decay and decline has already set in.

‘The countryside not caring’ is perhaps the most chilling line, with Larkin referencing *The Domesday Book* in order to remind the reader that nearly a millennium before 1914 an army had attempted to impose order upon the countryside, and it had not cared then. ‘Wheat’s restless silence’ also reminds the reader of nature’s beginning ‘afresh, afresh’, but of the one unrenewable nature of human existence. That the marriages last ‘a little while longer’ is indeed Larkin the anti-marriage bachelor, but it could also imply the bonding experience of the war prolonging (through trauma, perhaps) the unhappy returning soldier and his wife’s marriage.

As for that most-quoted part of the poem ‘Never such innocence, never before or since, As changed itself to past without a word’ limits any nostalgia the poem might

be accused of. It is tempting to focus on the ‘since’ and mourn the death of Edwardian England (à la *Downton Abbey*), but that ‘before’ is irrefutable. It is a reminder that this is a poem about one moment in time; the one time that Larkin thinks ‘innocence’ – which can also be read as naivety or even stupidity – led thousands to volunteer for slaughter. Larkin does not place them in a grand tradition (Agincourt, Blenheim, Trafalgar, Waterloo), because that ‘before’ prevents such a tradition. It is also a poem that implies the cold knowledge of nature – ‘the countryside not caring’ – that such innocence is transitory, as indeed is all human activity.

Larkin composed ‘MCMXIV’ between October 1956 and October 1960, and it was published on 10<sup>th</sup> October 1960<sup>412</sup>. In summer 1957<sup>413</sup>, around the time of his debut collection *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957) being published, Ted Hughes published the poem ‘Six Young Men’ in *Delta* magazine.

The poem is similar to Larkin’s in several of the ways that I have discussed above. Both poems concern photographs; ‘MCMXIV’ those pictures of the volunteering men and the world around, Hughes’s ‘Six Young Men’ concentrating on one picture:

The celluloid of a photograph holds them well –

Six young men, familiar to their friends.

Four decades that have faded and ochre-tinged

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<sup>412</sup> ‘MCMXIV’, ‘Dates of Composition’, Burnett 2012, p. 699.

<sup>413</sup> ‘Notes on the Text: Six Young Men’, *THCP*, p. 1243.

This photograph have not wrinkled the faces or the hands.

Though their cocked hats are not now fashionable,

Their shoes shine. One imparts an intimate smile,

One chews a grass, one lowers an eye, bashful,

One is ridiculous with cocky pride –

Six months after this picture they were all dead.

All are trimmed for a Sunday jaunt.<sup>414</sup>

Hughes's poem, like Larkin's, is based in the particular moment that is caught in photographs, but that time is passed. 'Though their cocked hats are not now fashionable, their shoes shine' is similar to Larkin's 'moustached archaic faces'; both the hats and the moustaches dating the picture and demonstrating the fickleness of fashion – though it must be said that Hughes allows for one link of fashion in the smartly-polished shoes, that shine.

While Hughes allows four of the men at least a modicum of individuality in their poses and expressions, they are all united in what Alan Bennett termed 'the magnificent equality of death', which ties in to Larkin's marriages 'lasting a little while longer', as separation (or in this case, a small gathering of friends) does not stop the inevitable – i.e. death – from occurring.

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<sup>414</sup> Hughes, 'Six Young Men', *THCP*, pp. 45-6.

Like Larkin, Hughes concentrates on the frivolities of these soon-to-be dead men, having them all ‘trimmed for a Sunday jaunt’, just as the volunteers of ‘MCMXIV’ think themselves off on a ‘Bank Holiday lark’.

Where the poem bears the most similarity to Larkin’s, however, is in the unchanging permanence of nature; immune to even the most dramatic of human affairs:

I know

That bilberried bank, that thick tree, that black wall,

Which are there yet and not changed. From where these sit,

You hear the water of seven streams fall

To the roarer in the bottom, and through all

The leafy valley a rumouring of air go.

Pictured here, their expressions listen yet,

And still that valley has not changed its sound

Though their faces are four decades under the ground.<sup>415</sup>

It’s more than simple rhyme that moves Hughes to reiterate the unchanging resistance of the natural world, just as ‘MCMXIV’ continually repeats the constant, enduring countryside.

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<sup>415</sup> Ibid.

There are slight differences between the poems. For one, Larkin is general – the lines are ‘long’ and big as sporting crowds – while Hughes is so local that he knows ‘that bilberried bank, that thick tree...’ Further, as Alvarez suggests in his comparison of the two poets, Hughes imbues his countryside with ‘urgency’ and action: the fall of ‘seven streams’ to ‘the roarer in the bottom’, rather than ‘wheat’s restless silence’. Yet the sentiment of both poems is similar as both endow nature with a ‘restless’ endurance that ‘has not changed’, no matter the human sacrifice that has been made; whether Larkin’s described crowds, or Hughes’s small group of friends.

### **3.2 (vi) Divergent paths**

As we have seen, Larkin and Hughes are clear examples of common influence and subject matter not necessarily guaranteeing similar poetry. What is clear is that the idea put forward by Alvarez of Hughes and Larkin existing at separate ends of English poetry – Motion’s ‘two trees’ as opposite poles – was clearly a simplification, hence its rejection by both poets. That both poets shared closer interests in recognised Modernist writers such as Lawrence, Eliot and the Lowell of *Life Studies* is undeniable – not that it seems to have stopped such a consensus from having been developed.

The prime difference between Hughes and Larkin is one of psychogeography. They are both concerned with the natural world and animals, but place them differently in their poems.

‘At Grass’ defines everything from the ex-racing horses to the ordered field that they gallop in by way of human interference. Hughes, on the other hand, shows in ‘A

Dream of Horses' what he sees as the essential impossibility of man ever taming nature.

In 'MCMXIV' Larkin allows that the countryside is 'not caring' about the First World War, but the things that will survive the volunteers are both natural and manmade; shops, children, servants, limousines, even the fields are restricted by their manmade 'Domesday lines'. In 'Six Young Men', the poet allows that traumatised veterans may survive (if survival you term it) and the poet himself has survived (how else would he know 'that bilberried bank?') but it is largely the roaring stream and landscape that is seen to have outlasted the soldiers.

These are differences of psychogeography that can be explained quite simply. Larkin was born, brought up, attended university and lived for his entire life in cities. Hughes, with a few, brief exceptions, lived in the countryside of Yorkshire and Devon. Larkin's concerns, though touched by the rural imagery of Edward Thomas and Hardy, are essentially urban, while Hughes's are almost entirely rural.

The two poets' shared love of D. H. Lawrence represents a focus on where the wilder aspects of nature are reflected in human behaviour, often striving against the confines of society, expectation and obligation. The 'two trees in the forest', therefore, are not as far apart as Alvarez and others would have them seem.

### 3.3 Larkin and Thom Gunn

#### (i) Movementeers

Philip Larkin and Thom Gunn were both bemused to be described as members of the Movement. As I have said before, the Movement was far from having either a coherent set of defining characteristics, or indeed many members who described themselves as belonging to it, but the grouping of Larkin and Gunn together can be seen as evidence of how ill-defined the group was.

Larkin remarked once that ‘...it certainly never occurred to me that I had anything in common with Thom Gunn’<sup>416</sup>, and his letters are littered with attempts to distance himself from his younger (by seven years) contemporary:

I have never even met Elizabeth Jennings, Thom Gunn, John Holloway or Iris Murdoch.<sup>417</sup>

Monteith [Faber editor] has been broaching a tripartite paperback anthology of Thom, Thed [sic.] and Yours Thruly, but I don’t expect the ponce will play ball. What’s behind it? Do people actually buy them two? Honestly, I’m sure they’re good chaps, and there’s nothing personal about this, but I can’t think of any two who affect me less. Enright, Lizzie, John – they’re giants beside these two Cantabs.<sup>418</sup>

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<sup>416</sup> Larkin-Hamilton 1964. *FR*, p. 20.

<sup>417</sup> Larkin to William Van O’Connor, 2/4/58, *SL*, p. 285.

<sup>418</sup> Larkin to Robert Conquest, 11/7/61, *SL*, p. 331.

That last comment about Gunn and Hughes having both been to Cambridge – as opposed to Larkin and others such as Conquest having gone to Oxford – aside, Larkin’s bemusement at being, as he saw it, pigeonholed in first the same movement and then the same *Selected Poems* (as he eventually wasn’t) as Gunn does seem sincere. Indeed, in his conversation with Ian Hamilton, he goes so far as to describe the Movement thus:

...in fact I wasn’t mentioned at the beginning. The poets of the group were Wain, Gunn, Davie and, funnily enough, Alvarez.<sup>419</sup>

This may be Larkin wishing – almost a decade on from *New Lines* (1956) – to finally sever his Movement connections, but it is also possible that, by 1964, Gunn’s increasingly different poetry (from those pieces of his included in *New Lines*) was so distasteful to Larkin that he needed to state clearly his separation from Gunn.

A popular view on Gunn – and also of his apparent moving away from English poetry – is that of Lucie-Smith:

Of this triumvirate [the ‘Larkin-Hughes-Gunn’], it is Gunn whose reputation has worn least well. The youngest of the Movement poets, he established himself with his first volume *Fighting Terms*, which appeared in 1954. A mixture of the literary and the violent, this appealed to both restless youth and academic middle age (it is also a book which has since caused Gunn a great

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<sup>419</sup> ‘Larkin-Hamilton 1964. *FR*, p. 20.

deal of unease, and he has made drastic revisions to the poems it contains). Afterwards Gunn went to America, and much of his work seems to be an attempt to come to terms with the nihilism of American life. Gunn's development has been a matter of fits and starts. His best poems have a compact philosophical elegance: 'The Annihilation of Nothing' is both influenced by, and worthy of, Rochester. Others seem strained and hollow, and his later collections show him to be a very uneven writer.<sup>420</sup>

This captures the general view of Gunn's career well: solid, recognisably English debut, then he moves to America and the poetry becomes loose, wild and is dismissed by the English literary establishment. Larkin and others would have seen echoes of Auden in Gunn's going to America, and such transatlantic emigration is almost always blamed for the change in any poet's work. Indeed, the Auden comparison is a helpful one when considering Larkin and Gunn, as Auden also made 'drastic revisions' to his earlier work, once his 'American' verse started to be published. The move towards a colder, more impersonal 'I' is present in both Gunn and Auden's 'American' work, and this is similar to the studied impersonality that Larkin valued so much in Edward Thomas, Wilfred Owen and Auden himself.

Gunn's 'development' was indeed dramatic, and took place within the equally dramatic context of the San Francisco Bay area of the late 1960s and 1970s, where Gunn experienced the full weight of 'the nihilism of American life' namely; Acid and other drug use, gay promiscuity and the eventual 'plague' of AIDS and its aftermath.

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<sup>420</sup> Lucie-Smith 1970, p. 136.

A resuscitation, of a kind, of Gunn's reputation was undertaken by August Kleinzahler, in his 2007 selection of Gunn's verse for Faber. In his insightful introduction to the book, Kleinzahler draws attention to Gunn's own views on the Movement, and any relation he felt towards his contemporaries:

To my surprise, I also learned that I was a member of it [the Movement]... It originated as a half-joke by Anthony Hartley in *The Spectator* and then was perpetuated as a kind of journalistic convenience. What poets like Larkin, Davie, Elizabeth Jennings, and I had in common at that time was that we were deliberately eschewing Modernism, and turning back, though not very thoroughgoingly, to traditional resources in structure and method.<sup>421</sup>

While adding to the overriding impression of the Movement indeed being nothing more than 'a kind of journalistic convenience', this also supports the view of Al Alvarez that the poetry of the 1950s was indeed a 'negative feedback' against Modernism. It is interesting to note, however, that while Alvarez groups Larkin and the other *New Lines* poets in one section of his *The New Poetry* (1962), Gunn is separated from them, and placed alongside Christopher Middleton and Peter Porter; two poets who, while not overtly Modernist in the style of Lowell or Hughes, were also not as fastidious and touched with the 'gentility' that Alvarez ascribes the Movement as a whole.

Gunn's point about 'turning back...to traditional resources in structure and method' is one picked up by Kleinzahler in his Introduction to the *Selected Gunn*,

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<sup>421</sup> Gunn 1979, p. 174.

and one which suggests an almost immediate link with Larkin's formation and received influences:

These young poets [writing in the 1950s] were aiming for a poetry that was tough, lean, smart and up-to-date. The inclination was strongly nativist, which for Gunn meant the Elizabethans and the ballads, and out of the ballads, Hardy. Of the older living poets, Gunn was strongly attracted to Auden, for his wit (in the older sense of the word), mastery of forms, and the fact that he was accessible and of his time.<sup>422</sup>

Larkin, too, was attracted to Auden for the mastery of forms, his accessibility and his being 'of his time', but it was his reading of Hardy in 1946 that is generally (if simplistically) felt to have been the making of Larkin's 'mature voice'. For Gunn, it was perhaps less simple; the structures and methods often disappearing for whole books as *his* mature voice took shape in San Francisco. Yet they never left entirely, and can actually be seen as a resource he turned to for the subjects that were closest to him. Kleinzahler remarks that when, towards the end of his life, Gunn came to write 'The Gas-poker', his only poem concerning his mother's suicide (he was fifteen when it happened, seventy when he wrote about it):

Predictably, he chose meter and rhyme to contain this most difficult and troubling episode of his life. The tone of it, as ever, is dispassionate, the voice

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<sup>422</sup> August Kleinzahler, introduction to *Thom Gunn: Selected Poems* ed. A. Kleinzahler (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p. x. Hereafter: Kleinzahler 2007.

anonymous, and the pathos of the event all the more powerful on account of it.<sup>423</sup>

In terms of important and 'late' engagements with deeply felt and troubling subject matter, Larkin's later poems – largely concerning death – like 'Aubade', 'Femmes Damneés', 'The Mower', are all written in strict rhyme and metre and are also 'dispassionate, the voice anonymous,' in order to more fully render the pathos of the event.

Gunn's own thoughts about metre demonstrate an impatience with those who would make poets choose between either permanently employing it or not:

[...]I have not abandoned metre, and in trying to write in both free verse and metre I think I am different from a lot of my contemporaries... There are things I can do in one form that I can't do in the other, and I wouldn't gladly relinquish either.<sup>424</sup>

This admission that form and structure are constantly available resources separate from a single poet's 'voice', is similar to a view put forward by Larkin when asked about his poetry:

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<sup>423</sup> Kleinzahler 2007, p. xx.

<sup>424</sup> Gunn 1979, p. 179.

I think one would have to be very sure of oneself to dispense with the help that metre and rhyme give and I doubt really if I could operate without them. I have occasionally, some of my favourite poems have not rhymed or had any metre, but it's rarely been premeditated.<sup>425</sup>

The notion of 'help' is one that Gunn was to echo when considering poetry of experiences that he saw as 'unstructured'; LSD trips, for example:

Metre seemed to be the proper form for the LSD-related poems, though at first I didn't understand why. Later I rationalised it thus. The acid trip is unstructured, it opens you up to countless possibilities, you hanker after the infinite. The only way I could give myself any control over the presentation of these experiences, and so could be true to them, was by trying to render the infinite through the finite, the unstructured through the structured. Otherwise there was the danger of the experiences becoming so distended that it would simply unravel like fog before wind in the unpremeditated movement of free verse.<sup>426</sup>

'Unpremeditated' being a source of concern for Gunn, much as it is for 'some' of Larkin's favourite poems. What these two statements (Larkin and Gunn's) show, are two poets aware of their predisposition towards metre, but uncomfortable with the all-or-nothing choice that they felt was being demanded of them. It is telling that in

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<sup>425</sup> Larkin-Hamilton 1964. *FR*, p. 21.

<sup>426</sup> Gunn 1979, p. 182.

both Larkin and Gunn, when the ‘big’ or ‘serious’ themes and subjects appear (death, illness, love), both poets – as we shall see – turn to metre and often rhyme first; in order to render ‘the unstructured through the structured’.

### **3.3 (ii) Impersonality in Larkin and Gunn**

As we have seen, it was in his writing about Wilfred Owen that Larkin phrased what he valued in writing about certain extreme experiences<sup>427</sup>, when he remarked on Owen’s ‘Strange Meeting’ that

‘It seemed that out of battle I escaped...’ It was less an escape than a contrived withdrawal into mythopoeic impersonality that so far from muffling his words lent them extraordinary resonance.<sup>428</sup>

Larkin’s valuing of Owen here as having ‘contrived’ a ‘withdrawal’, is the same sentiment as put forward, in an interview, by Gunn when considering his own ‘voice’:

People do have difficulties with my poetry, difficulties in locating the central voice or central personality. But I’m not aiming for central voice and I’m not aiming for central personality. I want to be an Elizabethan poet. I want to

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<sup>427</sup> I say ‘certain’ because this was writing that Larkin felt he could respond to, learn from and write poetry similar to. With poets such as Owen, Edward Thomas and Hardy he felt able to do this, but with poets such as Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath, their ‘extreme’ writing – though admired by Larkin – was of a personal style he felt unable to equal or imitate.

<sup>428</sup> Larkin 1963. *RW*, p. 161.

write with the same anonymity, that you get in the Elizabethans and I want to move around between forms in the same way someone like Ben Jonson did. At the same time I want to write in my own century.<sup>429</sup>

Gunn's wish to 'move around between forms in the same way that Ben Jonson did' is a subtly telling comment about how much he clearly feels that – post-Jonson – British poetry can suffer from poets being held to or in one form or another. Gunn's wanting to write with 'the same anonymity' as the Elizabethan poets he admires, is the same as Larkin seeing in Owen a 'contrived withdrawal into mythopoeic impersonality' (Gunn's more Ovidian poems combining these two elements brilliantly), and this conscious move is summed up well by Kleinzahler:

This absence of personality is by design in Gunn's poetry. The 'I' in the poems is the disinterested 'I' of the Elizabethans, and back further still, the 'I' of the ballads, and out of the ballads the 'I' in Hardy's poetry. One can also encounter it in Bunting's 'Briggflatts', a poem of major importance to Gunn later on in his career.<sup>430</sup>

Here, there is being described an English line of the kind that Edna Longley decried Larkin for not concentrating on in his Oxford book (rather than getting bogged down in Georgianism as he did). The passing of 'the disinterested 'I'' from the ballads to

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<sup>429</sup> Gunn, quoted in Kleinzahler, 2007. Source: *Thom Gunn in Conversation with James Campbell* (London: Between the Lines, 2000).

<sup>430</sup> Kleinzahler 2007, pp. xiv-v.

Hardy, from Hardy (as we have seen) to Owen, Edward Thomas and Auden, and then to Gunn and Larkin.

There is a question as to how much damage – in terms of acknowledging and admitting both his reading of poetry and admitting its influence – Larkin’s English degree (combined with the cynical and aggressively philistine personality of Kingsley Amis) had upon him. Gunn enjoyed his time reading English at Cambridge, and would go on to teach others in universities, while Larkin retained academic surroundings without a sense of intellectual engagement (by working only in university libraries). Amis was to claim at one point that

I have no recollection of ever hearing Philip admit to having enjoyed, or again to being ready to tolerate, any author or book he studied, with the possible exception of Shakespeare.<sup>431</sup>

Only to be gently rebuked (one of the very few examples of Larkin doing this to Amis in their letters) and told

It was a strange experience, reading it [Amis’s piece for *Larkin at Sixty*]. A bit like looking at yourself in a distorting mirror. My principal impression is that the character you have described is more like you than me! Surely you hated literature more than I did.

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<sup>431</sup> Kingsley Amis, ‘Oxford and After’. Thwaite 1982, p. 25.

You make me sound much tougher than I was, and I don't generally agree with all you say,<sup>432</sup>

While this is certainly Larkin wishing to separate himself from the philistinism that Amis would craft for himself (and attempt to graft onto Larkin's posthumous reputation), it is unfortunate that we have no record of Larkin's thoughts on any writers that he either studied at Oxford or read later who date from before the Romantic generation. As with many of Larkin's concerns, the actions of his contemporaries may have led him to believe that his hand had been forced; Gunn praising the Elizabethans, Hughes likewise with Spenser and the Metaphysicals of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, Larkin may have felt that Hardy was as far back as he should admit to.

The question of studied impersonality and a 'disinterested 'I' is central to understanding the relationship between Gunn and Larkin's poetry, and is also crucial in separating them from the third head in their supposed triumvirate; Hughes. With Hughes, the impersonality isn't just that, it's very often non-personality. In the words of one critic, 'As for Hughes, it's as though the Nazis killed everybody and only the animals were left'<sup>433</sup>, and while Larkin shared with Hughes an occasional fascination with D. H. Lawrence's fantasies of a world empty of humans, his relationship (unaware and uncredited though it may be) is of a different type.

Neither 'impersonality' nor a 'disinterested 'I' indicates a lack of self, nor a reliance on observations or poetry written outside of the human perspective. They

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<sup>432</sup> Larkin to Amis, 16/1/81, *SL*, pp. 637-8.

<sup>433</sup> James 1972, p. 44.

are best summed up by Owen's great dismitter W. B. Yeats, with his 'cast a cold eye / on life, on death.'

### 3.3 (iii) Larkin and Gunn in *The New Poetry*

As with Larkin and Hughes, it is illuminating to consider the poetry of Larkin and Gunn as presented in Al Alvarez's 1962 anthology, *The New Poetry*. One reason for this is that, like Hughes (though not as effusively, given his ties to *New Lines*), Gunn was held up by Alvarez as a different, indeed *alternative* poet to Larkin. This can be proven largely through Alvarez's placing of Gunn away from his *New Lines* colleagues, and with the group of British poets – including Christopher Middleton, Hughes, Geoffrey Hill and Ian Hamilton – that Alvarez felt were receiving and transmitting the American poetry he valued (that of Lowell and John Berryman) more than the Movement had been seen to do.

'Wants', a poem of Larkin's, considers the overarching, darker thoughts, that the poet finds eternally – and universally – present:

Beyond all this, the wish to be alone:

However, the sky grows dark with invitation-cards

However we follow the printed directions of sex

However the family is photographed under the flagstaff –

Beyond all this, the wish to be alone.

Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs:  
  
Despite the artful tensions of the calendar,  
  
The life insurance, the tabled fertility rites,  
  
The costly aversion of the eyes from death –  
  
Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs.<sup>434</sup>

This poem, with its cold dismissal of all but loneliness and the death-drive, certainly fits Alvarez's ideal of lingering threat, but perhaps it is delivered too coldly, with Larkin's impersonal 'we' and separating 'the family', for Alvarez. That coldness can largely be attributed to its owing a good deal to Auden, whose icy presence is certainly felt in the 'life insurance', 'tabled fertility rites' and 'costly aversion'. Ian Hamilton's comment on Larkin's younger, 'Auden-poems', highlights this cold focus, albeit in a negative manner, commenting that they are

[...] fairly stiff and dull and, because of their enslavement to the icy Master, we have no way of guessing what their author might or might not do should he ever manage to break free: it could be everything and nothing.<sup>435</sup>

While the supposed 'Auden-Yeats-Hardy' metamorphosis in Larkin's development as a writer is inaccurate, he certainly took important facets of each poet's work on his way towards his mature voice, and while he may have stopped writing 'fairly stiff and

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<sup>434</sup> Larkin, 'Wants'. Alvarez 1962, p. 102.

<sup>435</sup> Hamilton 1988, pp. 307-313.

dull' 'Auden-poems', he maintained the coldness of 'the icy Master', just as Gunn found a similar 'impersonal 'I' in the Elizabethans.

It is a measure of Alvarez's disdain for Larkin that he also included 'Wants' in his study of suicide, *The Savage God*, saying of it:

That ['Wants'] is by Philip Larkin, a poet whose constant theme is that of *not* succumbing to the pleasure principle, of avoiding the confusions and demands and uproar of life in order to maintain a certain austere inviolability, however starved and haunted, and at whatever cost.<sup>436</sup>

In identifying Larkin's coldness as 'austere inviolability', Alvarez does seem to confirm the sense of studied impersonality and indifference that I see as linking Gunn and Larkin, even if Alvarez didn't.

The poem of Gunn's that Alvarez includes, which I would contend mirrors Larkin's 'haunted' and 'disinterested' eye, perhaps passed the editor's test for extremity in both subject matter and inference:

Nothing in this bright region melts or shifts.

The local names are concepts: the Ravine,

Pemmican Ridge, North Col, Death Camp, they mean

The streetless rise, the dazzling abstract drifts,

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<sup>436</sup> Alvarez 1971, p. 99.

To which particular names adhere by chance,

From custom lightly, not from character.

We stand on a white terrace and confer;

This is the last camp of experience.

What is that sudden yelp upon the air?

And whose are these cold droppings? Whose malformed

Purposeless tracks about the slope? We know.

The abominable endures, existing where

Nothing else can: it is – unfed, unwarmed –

Born of rejection, of the boundless snow.<sup>437</sup>

Like Larkin's, this is a poem of limits and grim awareness of what lies beyond those limits. Just as 'Wants' documents the endless minutiae, both personal and social, that in the end do not fulfil the greatest urges, so too does this poem essentially state how far people can go. Larkin's metaphorically cold eye is matched by Gunn's metaphysical cold – 'existing where / nothing else can' – as well as his actual snow.

Both poems exist to remind the reader of what cannot be shaken off, but also of that thing being unseen. In Larkin it runs 'Beyond' and 'Beneath' everything – either unreachable or invisible, in other words – so is known of and unchallengeable,

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<sup>437</sup> Thom Gunn, 'From the Highest Camp'. Alvarez 1964, p. 164.

but also oddly elusive. It is the cold acceptance of the desire for solitude and also of escape (oblivion meaning everything from drunkenness to death – a fact Alvarez avoids admitting) that gives Larkin's poem its impersonal register.

Likewise, Gunn's hardy boys-own imagery does not remove the indisputable 'We know. / The abominable endures, existing where / Nothing else can'. Yet that unchallengeable presence and threat is also elusive – the nearest we get is a 'yelp on the air', some (c)old droppings and vague tracks. The disinterested tone is the same as Larkin's, with grim awareness rendering the poem even colder than the snow it is set in.

Perhaps what Alvarez disliked (for certain with Larkin, less so with Gunn) was the unchangeable nature of the dark certainties in both poems, but it is that unchanging state that lends the poems their coldness. What Kleinzahler termed the 'absence of personality' in Gunn's poetry is present in this of Larkin's, too, as both poets manage to use 'we' but somehow stand apart from the implied universal experience. They are, like the unchanging truths of 'oblivion' and 'the abominable', elusive and unseen. This is a key factor in the similarity between their work, and while Gunn would certainly 'move around between forms' perhaps more than Larkin, both would maintain their impersonal distance, until certain experiences – the AIDS 'plague' for Gunn, sexual jealousy and fear of death for Larkin – came suddenly close.

### **3.3 (iv) The impersonal in bed.**

While on the surface Larkin and Gunn led very different lives in terms of sexuality; the quiet heterosexual bachelor of Hull and the acid-taking homosexual of San Francisco, they both suffered from tremendous anxieties about sex, appearances of

which recur in in their poetry. The bed, for both of them, is both the scene of awkwardness and of an overriding, cold impersonality. It would be easy to combine these two elements into a disenchanted, post-coital cliché, but both Larkin and Gunn have far more specific concerns, usually to do with the conflict between the intimacy of the shared bed and incommunicability between the people in that bed.

Gunn's first collection of poems, *Fighting Terms* (1954) was published while he was still an undergraduate, and so often captures the bodily confusion that is a hangover of adolescence and puberty. Added to this is the confusion of Gunn's slowly coming to terms with his homosexuality, and so in these poems we see the start of an uncurling, as it were, which continues throughout his career, the poet's body extending and adapting, shifting and metamorphosing as he becomes more and more realised about himself. In the early work, however, the bed is the space where the poet is most aware of his body, and least aware of how to communicate his concerns as to the situation. The combined effect of this is the icy, 'impersonal 'I'.

In the early poem, 'Carnal Knowledge', the poet depicts a night spent in bed with a girl who may suspect the inner cause for the poet's impotence: self-denied homosexuality. The arresting impression of the poem, however, is not simply a missing erection but an entire body missing:

Even in bed I pose: desire may grow

More circumstantial and less circumspect

Each night, but an acute girl would suspect

That my self is not like my body, bare.

I wonder if you know, or, knowing, care?

You know I know you know I know you know.

I am not what I seem, believe me, so

For the magnanimous pagan I pretend

Substitute a forked creature as your friend.

When darkness lies without a roll or stir

Flaccid, you want a competent poseur.

I know you know I know you know I know.<sup>438</sup>

The separation between mind – or, indeed, inclination – and body has never been clearer. The body is weirdly lifeless without desire, and even the poet's claim to be sexually inexperienced or inept rings hollow.

The double dishonesty, then, is revealed in the poet's suspicion that the girl is more than aware that he is gay. That, in itself, does not seem to be the problem. The body is the problem, as it lies 'without a roll or stir flaccid', and is unable to mimic the rueful regret and apologies of the poet's words or thoughts. At the minimum, the girl wants 'a competent poseur', someone who at least can make his body *seem* regretful for its lack of desire.

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<sup>438</sup> Thom Gunn, 'Carnal Knowledge', *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 15. Hereafter, *TGCP*.

That comment, ‘my self is not like my body, bare’ is a neat summing-up of the central contradiction of incommunicability that is going on. Surely, the poet is asking, if we are naked together then honesty and freedom of speech is not going to be a problem? As it is, the nudity only seems to amplify the silence that holds both the man and the woman – even if she knows why what has (not) happened has happened.

This same concern is operating in Larkin’s ‘Talking in Bed’. While the title to this poem makes no promise or offer of a big reveal – ‘Talking in Bed’ not being the same thing as ‘What is Said in Bed’ – it does at least offer an insight into a very intimate moment, surely? Yet, in fact, the poem’s slow realisation is one of an inherent flaw:

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

Yet more and more time passes silently.  
Outside, the wind’s incomplete unrest  
Builds and disperses clouds about the sky,

And dark towns heap up on the horizon.  
None of this cares for us. Nothing shows why  
At this unique distance from isolation

It becomes still more difficult to find

Words at once true and kind,

Or not untrue and not unkind.<sup>439</sup>

‘...this unique distance from isolation’ might as well be the definition of the flaw revealed in the poem: Larkin’s being able to communicate a moment of incommunicability means only that he can talk ‘here’ (in the poem), not in the bed.

Like Gunn, Larkin’s impersonality in this poem allows him to inhabit the minds of both people in the bed. Gunn’s ‘You know I know you know I know you know’ is not suspicion, after all, it is a poet’s knowledge of his subject. Likewise, Larkin’s bedfellows are united in their finding it ‘difficult to find’ things to say to one another, even though they share the goal of not being unkind or dishonest. Both poems exist at the ‘unique distance’ from the isolation – shared though it is – that they are describing. The irony – which is also the source of the tension in the poem – being that having stepped back to look at the situation, they have stepped out of it, and so their rendering of it will be detached and therefore, inevitably, cold.

### **3.3 (v) Decaying and destructive metamorphoses**

Both Larkin and Gunn suffered from career crises – in terms of subject matter – with Larkin’s appearing in the mid to late 1970s, and Gunn’s emerging a decade

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<sup>439</sup> Larkin, ‘Talking in Bed’, *CP*, p. 129.

later. Larkin's crisis is largely thought of as merely one of intense and morbid *todesangst*, leading to the slow writing of 'Aubade' and then the stopping of writing altogether as he awaited death. This is partly true, but there was also an almost vicious outpouring of anger and disillusion at sex during this period, which created poems that were unseen until after his death. The poem 'Letter to a Friend about Girls' had gone some way to expressing his frustration at what he saw as the easy sex-life of his friends, but Larkin's sexual jealousy was to have a far more brazen airing.

In the posthumously-published 'Love Again', Larkin forces the reader to, for once, not identify with his general observations but watch appalled as his words finally corrupt the last refuge of joy in the corporeal – sex.

Love again: wanking at ten past three

(Surely he's taken her home by now?),

The bedroom hot as a bakery,

The drink gone dead, without showing how

To meet tomorrow, and afterwards,

And the usual pain, like dysentery.

Someone else touching her breasts and cunt,

Someone else drowned in that lash-wide stare,

And me supposed to be ignorant,

Or find it funny, or not to care,

Even ...but why put it into words?

Isolate rather this element

That spreads through other lives like a tree

And sways them on in a sort of sense

And say why it never worked for me.

Something to do with violence

A long way back, and wrong rewards,

And arrogant eternity.<sup>440</sup>

All joy is gone from the body. The heat of sexual action – both the jealousy thought of and the masturbation being done – has turned the room hot and oppressive (‘bakery’ is not ‘sunshine’ in terms of heating similes). And the brute physicality of ‘her breasts and cunt’ is horribly dislocated from the ‘wanking at ten past three’ (after all, he might have been thinking about her) with that ‘someone else’. Larkin was an admirer of the Beat poets, Allen Ginsberg especially, but you couldn’t find a more physically different setting of the vagina from *Howl*’s blissful ‘vision of ultimate cunt<sup>441</sup>’ than the one found here.

The poem does not recover from the shocking corporeality of the ‘wanking’, ‘breasts and cunt’ and the absent woman’s body. The sexually ideal and pure has gone, and there is no stopping the body only bringing horrors in its changes. The

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<sup>440</sup> Larkin, ‘Love Again’, *CP* p. 215.

<sup>441</sup> Allen Ginsberg, ‘Howl: I.’, *Howl, Kaddish and Other Poems*, (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 4.

horrified metamorphosis on show here is notable with Larkin, as it is about as hot as his usually cold descriptions get. As with Gunn's writing about his crisis, Larkin had discovered that studied impersonality would not work when the subject was so close to home – gone is the 'unique distance from isolation'.

Gunn's poetry about the gay scene in 1960s and 70s California was harshly followed by his work about the AIDS crisis, 'the plague' and its aftermath, all of which amounted to being 'his' crisis. In 'Lament', he depicts the slow change of sexual energy, which so enlivened and changed the body in the past, into the business of dying – a change no poetry can render good, as even Ovid repeatedly proved.

Your dying was a difficult enterprise.

First, petty things took up your energies,

The small but clustering duties of the sick,

Irritant as the cough's dry rhetoric.<sup>442</sup>

Here, the metre mirrors the slow unromantic decay of the body – the rhyming couplets shrinking the register of the poem. The body can no longer change and turn to the searching and finding that previously concerned Gunn's writing. If anything, the knowledge of what is happening to the body is to be fled from, but Gunn cannot do that either.

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<sup>442</sup> Gunn, 'Lament', *TGCP* pp. 465-8.

Throughout this poem, as well, is the constant struggle for the poet's voice to remain impersonal, cold and observational, in the face of the horribly personal bodily metamorphosis that is happening. As Larkin finds with 'Love Again', Gunn discovers that the 'impersonal 'I' is no good when the poet cares so much. The rhetoric may be dry, but the 'cough' itself keeps breaking up the cold surface descriptions. Dullness, and then scary novelty are the order of business, now:

...when night came

I heard you wake up from the same bad dream

Every half hour with the same short cry

....and on the fifth we drove you down

to the Emergency Room. That frown, that frown:

I'd never seen such rage in you before

As when they wheeled you through the swinging door.<sup>443</sup>

Change has stopped. Now there's only the repetition – the same bad dream, the same short cry. And when new developments occur, they are tailored for death, as the body reacts with unforeseen anger at its own decay.

The frightening conclusion is sadly noted by Gunn

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<sup>443</sup> Ibid.

And so you slept, and died, your skin gone grey,

Achieving your completeness, in a way.<sup>444</sup>

The final bodily change completes the metamorphoses that have unfolded throughout Gunn's career, but the final bodily change is death, and so there is no wonder, only horror.

Both Larkin and Gunn, then, discovered that the studied impersonality or 'impersonal 'I' that they had each perfected engaged far more with the subject-matter of the poems than perhaps either realised. Ironically, it often seems as though both secretly thought that they were simply writing about more abstract images, and it is a shock to them just how much they care – or how much that caring comes across – when the crises happen and the poems must document them.

### **3.3 (vi) The cold 'I' and studied impersonality**

What Larkin and Gunn had in common was, as Gunn correctly identified, a return to what both clearly saw as a more traditional form of writing: Gunn thought it was the Elizabethans, Larkin tended more towards Hardy. What their later work shows, however, particularly in their handlings of crisis, is a far more engaged impersonality than perhaps either had expected.

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<sup>444</sup> Ibid.

The cold 'I' certainly never wavers, in either Larkin or Gunn, but they are both undone by their talent and achievement, surprising themselves at how much they firstly care about their subjects and, perhaps more importantly, how much this caring has influenced their poetry to outdo the older examples they seek to follow. As we shall see in the final section of this chapter, they – and Hughes – incorporated and reinvigorated not the 'traditional' models that they praised, but the more recent advances of Modernism as demonstrated by Eliot and others. The studied impersonality and cold 'I' were not merely the archaisms of Ben Jonson and Hardy, but instead of Eliot, early Auden and other far more recent poets.

### **3.4 Larkin, Hughes and Gunn**

#### **(i) Casting off insularity**

In his contribution to *Larkin at Sixty*, Larkin's friend and sometime editor Robert Conquest – much as he had nearly thirty years previously with his introduction to *New Lines* (1956) – sought to limit both Larkin's aims and achievements by saying that

...insularity is one of the strengths of Larkin's poetry, signifying a resolve to base himself firmly upon the experience, the language, the culture which have formed him, in which he is rooted.<sup>445</sup>

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<sup>445</sup> Robert Conquest, 'A Proper Sport'. Thwaite 1982, p. 32.

When I say that Conquest sought to limit Larkin with this statement, clearly it was not in a manner that Conquest himself saw as at all negative or detrimental to Larkin. Thirty or so years down the line from the controversies and infighting that had surrounded the Movement, *New Lines* and the backlash of *The New Poetry* (1964), Conquest was well-placed to draw certain conclusions about how poetry had turned out. Larkin's achievement was undeniable, though by 1982 Conquest (as a frequent correspondent of both Larkin and Kingsley Amis) would have gathered that Larkin had effectively stopped writing poetry. It was eight years since *High Windows* (1974), five since 'Aubade's small print-run (250 copies) of that single poem (in 1980), and while elsewhere in *Larkin at Sixty* Larkin's publisher joked about knowing 'better now than to ask when a new collection is likely to arrive'<sup>446</sup>, there was the general feeling (and several clear statements by Larkin himself) that his body of work was complete.

Conquest must have winced to reflect that, in contrast to this slow drying-up of poetry, Larkin's chief rival Ted Hughes had – since 1974 – produced eight full-length collections in addition to many other smaller publications. When this is realised – regardless of the quality of Hughes's output – then Larkin's supposed 'insularity' can be seen as an excuse: the output is small because the experience too is small. Having restricted himself, as Conquest puts it, to 'the experience, 'the language [and] the culture which have formed him', Larkin can only write the poems that spring from those sources. Hughes, on the other hand, had the experience of tormented clergy (*Gaudete*, 1977), the natural landscape (*Season Songs*, 1976; *Remains of Elmet*, 1979; *Moortown Diary*, 1979) and, as ever, birds (*Cave Birds*,

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<sup>446</sup> Charles Monteith, 'Publishing Larkin'. Thwaite 1982, p. 47.

1978) to draw from. Insularity, then, must be the chief difference between these two poets, Conquest is suggesting.

In between the limited, 'insular' experience of Larkin and the imagined experience of Hughes, there is also what we might term the 'expanded' experience of Thom Gunn – the effect of LSD and acid on his poetry combining the imaginative/and hallucinatory while being, at the same time, undeniably a poetry of personal experience. It was largely felt by the English literary establishment that Gunn had lost the plot, so to speak, over a decade before 1982 with the publication of *Moly* (1970), in which the transcribed accounts of LSD were used to pursue Ovidian flights of metamorphosis. *Jack Straw's Castle* (1976) and *The Passages of Joy* (1982) seemed to confirm this gloomy view of Gunn, as he surfed the last wave of gay-liberation euphoria prior to the AIDS crisis, and his later considerations of that in *My Sad Captains* (1992). To a certain extent, Gunn had developed an extrovert-insularity, in which the poetry was certainly not as insular as Larkin's, but neither was it as concerned with imagined or extra-realities as Hughes's.

Certainly, if the three poets' collections of the 1950s – Gunn's *Fighting Terms* (1954), Larkin's *The Less Deceived* (1955), Hughes's *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957) – could be said to have certain things in common, by 1982 it would be difficult to find three poets who were at least seen to be more radically different from each other. Part of this was to do with their being seen to almost represent different poetic nationalities: Larkin the little Englander, Hughes's work in translation seen as him being a conduit for European and Eastern poetry, and Gunn the American.

Given these apparently irreconcilable differences among the three, Conquest's talk of Larkin's insularity being a strength seems an understandable piece of literary housekeeping. Surely, the three poets once described by Edward Lucie-Smith as the

three-headed Larkin-Hughes-Gunn were now each faced either so far away from one another or were so inwardly-looking that any comparison among them (past sales) would be meaningless?

By the mid to late-1970s – each of these three poets had not only ‘found’ but written a large body of work in ‘their voice’. Indeed, Clive James said of the Larkin of *High Windows* that

Larkin has never liked the idea of the artist Developing. Nor has he himself done so. But he has managed to go on clarifying what he was sent to say.<sup>447</sup>

‘Clarifying what he was sent to say’ is certainly a more helpful and perceptive way of terming what is elsewhere called ‘voice’. Whether for good or bad – and one does wonder if Hughes’s prolific output around this time was either good or helpful – it is certainly true that, by 1982, all three of the poets above were ‘Clarifying’.

‘Clarifying’ itself, though, would not be enough to link them. Other writers by this point were also clarifying what they were sent to say (Seamus Heaney was in the middle of his Troubles trilogy of *North* (1975), *Field Work* (1979) and *Station Island* (1984), for example). What links Larkin, Hughes and Gunn in their work of the mid to late-1970s and early 1980s is *what* they were clarifying. Their achievement during this time was to engage with certain key figures of Modernism (and its subsequent manifestations) and to incorporate that engagement into their work, the result of

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<sup>447</sup> James 1974, p. 51.

which was a remaking – subtle though at times it was – of English poetry, and, in Larkin’s case, the ‘lost line’ of the English ‘tradition’.

Conquest seems not to have been aware of this, when he quoted Gunn in his piece for *Larkin at Sixty*:

To be fair to myself, I did say in that introduction [to *New Lines*] that all we [the poets included] had in common was no more than a wish to avoid certain bad principles. As Thom Gunn put it later, all we shared was what had been the practice of all English poets from Chaucer to Hardy.<sup>448</sup>

The inference being here that after Hardy came Eliot and that Modernism obscured ‘what had been the practice of all English poets’ prior to that. This is similar to what Gunn said when he talked about the Movement poets (in particular him and Larkin)

...eschewing Modernism, and turning back, though not very thoroughgoingly, to traditional resources in structure and method<sup>449</sup>.

However, crucially, neither comment is the *same* as Hardy’s rejection of the Modernism of Eliot and Pound, when he said that

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<sup>448</sup> Conquest, *A Proper Sport*. Thwaite 1982, p. 33.

<sup>449</sup> Gunn 1979, p. 184.

*Vers libre* can come to nothing in England. All we can do is write on the old themes in the old styles, but try to do a little better than those who went before us.<sup>450</sup>

Gunn's referring to 'traditional' English forms of structure and method as 'resources' is probably the most helpful phrasing of the clarification that Larkin, Hughes and he effected in the period 1971-82. Importantly, all three were to cast off what others had termed a form of insularity, with the intent of reaching outside of their own experience and effectively outdoing Hardy's prescribed 'old themes' and 'old styles'.

### **3.4 (ii) Modes of clarification**

In this section I will consider three poems: 'Rites of Passage' by Gunn, an extract from *Gaudete* by Hughes, and 'The Explosion' by Larkin. All of these poems deal with subjects outside of the poets' experience, and yet engage both reader and poet in an active change that therefore makes the poems – as cold and distant as they may be rendered – automatically a part of that experience.

What these three poems have in common is threefold. Firstly, on the surface they seem to be very 'typical' pieces of the individual three poets: Larkin's is rhapsodic and bound up in English pastoral imagery, Hughes's is concerned with brute physicality and threat, Gunn's with a hyper-real sense of transformation. Each poem can also be seen not only to utilise what Gunn referred to as 'traditional resources in

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<sup>450</sup> Thomas Hardy, quoted in Robert Graves' *Goodbye To All That* (London: Penguin, 2000 ed.) [1929], p. 51.

structure and method, but also to combine these with identifiably Modernist aspects of poetry; in effect, bringing the two older forms together to create a new, multi-faceted poetry.

One of the ways in which the three poets achieve the last of these modes of clarification is through adoption and adaptation of 'The Plain Style', in a sense invoked by August Kleinzahler. This is most clearly – and widely accepted to be present – in the work of Gunn, but Hughes and Larkin also engage with it.

Kleinzahler's definition of The Plain Style can be read as follows:

The Plain Style is what it sounds to be: unembellished, clear; in diction and movement inclining towards the way people speak. It doesn't call attention to itself but serves the material of the poem.

[...] The Plain Style, however, is not to be confused with the colloquial. ...The metre and rhyme of most of the poetry [written in The Plain Style] notwithstanding, the voice tends to feel anachronistic; the *I* of the poetry carrying almost no discernible personality.<sup>451</sup>

Obviously, there are poems written by Larkin, Hughes and Gunn which do not fit this description. One thinks of the 'I know you know I know you know I know' in Gunn's 'Carnal Knowledge'<sup>452</sup>, of Hughes's 'Life tries. / Death tries. /The stone tries. /Only the rain never tires.'<sup>453</sup>, and Larkin's '...nothing to think with, /Nothing to love or link

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<sup>451</sup> Kleinzahler 2007, p. xiv.

<sup>452</sup> Thom Gunn, 'Carnal Knowledge', *TGCP*, p. 15.

<sup>453</sup> Ted Hughes, 'Heptonstall', *THCP*, pp. 170-1.

with,<sup>454</sup> all of which draw attention to the craft or structure of the poem, often (particularly with Larkin's 'think/link' rhyme) in clumsy or inelegant ways<sup>455</sup>. All of these poems deal with subjects outside of the poets' experience, and yet engage both reader and poet in an active change that therefore makes the poems – as cold and distant as they may be rendered – automatically a part of that experience.

What the three poems that I have chosen demonstrate is a very precise form of poetic transmission. Gunn's poem is deceptive in several ways, and seemingly simple in others:

Something is taking place.

Horns bud bright in my hair.

My feet are turning hoof.

And Father, see my face

– Skin that was damp and fair

Is barklike and, feel, rough.

See Greytop how I shine.

I rear, break loose, I neigh

Snuffing the air, and harden

Towards a completion, mine.

And next I make my way

Adventuring through your garden.

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<sup>454</sup> Larkin, 'Aubade', *CP*, pp. 208-9.

<sup>455</sup> Kingsley Amis refers to that rhyme as when Larkin's 'skill deserts him for a moment', (Amis, 1991, p. 62), and Ian Hamilton – unusually – supports Amis's point, saying that 'Amis is dead right to pick up on that dreadful 'think with/link with' rhyme' (Hamilton 1988, p. 349).

My play is earnest now.  
I canter to and fro.  
My blood, it is like light.  
Behind an almond bough,  
Horns gaudy with its snow,  
I wait live, out of sight.

All planned before my birth  
For you, Old Man, no other,  
Whom your groin's trembling warns.  
I stamp upon the earth  
A message to my mother.  
And then I lower my horns.<sup>456</sup>

On the surface, this is a retelling of Ovid – a man (possibly a saved version of Actaeon, or Actaeon just prior to his death) turned into a stag, and its rhyme scheme is of a piece with Gunn's beloved Elizabethans; Jonson's *The Forest* sequence, or the poems of Fulke Greville's *Caelica* collection<sup>457</sup>. However, it is a clear exemplar of the plain style both in terms of its use of speech patterns not often found in Gunn's poetry before now – particularly that '...and, feel, rough.' – but also in the largely absent personality, despite the repeated 'I'. This absence is partly to do with the transformation that is going on, but it is also achieved through the misdirection that

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<sup>456</sup> Gunn, 'Rites of Passage', *TGCP*, p. 185.

<sup>457</sup> Gunn identifies this influence on him in the introduction to his *Selected Works of Fulke Greville* ed. T. Gunn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

points the poem at formative or influential figures – ‘Father’, ‘Greytop’ and ‘Old Man’, and ‘Mother’ – who nonetheless have no power over the transformation itself: ‘All planned before my birth’. Hindsight may lead the reader to speculate on the ‘stamp upon the earth’s message to the mother being defined by Gunn’s mother’s suicide and burial, but the poem does not rely on such understanding. What Gunn achieves here is a combination of the ‘English’ facets of his writing – the ‘traditional resources in structure and method’ which include both the Elizabethans but also his Movement credentials (rhyme, most prominently) – with the freer, more transcendent tendencies of his ‘American’ and Modernist influences; most clearly in ‘My blood, it is like light’, an obvious reference to LSD.

Gunn was not always as successful as this – ‘Moly’, the poem that follows ‘Rites...’ in *Moly* fails at the same task – but in this poem he produces a poem that fits into the ‘English tradition’ of Hardy, but that could not have been written without Eliot and other, American, cultural influences.

*Gaudete* (1977) is a book-long sequence of Ted Hughes’s concerning the Reverend Lumb, a minister who is abducted by demons, who make a changeling version of him, who wreaks havoc in Lumb’s parish, until the original Lumb returns, changed. It was neither a critical nor commercial success when placed in the context of Hughes’s early successes (*The Hawk in the Rain, Crow*) nor his later efforts (*Tales from Ovid, Birthday Letters*).

What I see as important about *Gaudete*, and what it has in common with the efforts of Gunn and Larkin that I am also considering, is its remarkably clear, unembellished language, which serves the poem’s subject matter ideally, while at the

same time remaining at an impersonal register which both guides the reader and distances them from the poet. The extract I have chosen is an example of these qualities. It is from the 'Epilogue' poems, in which the returned, original Lumb writes his thoughts down, understandably changed from his time in the spirit-world:

I know well

You are not infallible

I know how your huge your unmanageable

Mass of bronze hair shrank to a twist

As thin as a silk scarf, on your skull,

And how your pony's eye darkened larger

Holding too lucidly the deep glimpse

After the humane killer

And I had to lift your hand for you

While your chin sank to your chest

With the sheer weariness

Of taking away from everybody

Your envied beauty, your much-desired beauty

Your hardly-used beauty

Of lifting away yourself

From yourself

And weeping with the ache of the effort<sup>458</sup>

For Hughes, this is very clear, unembellished language, largely because it is deliberately seeking to sound as people speak. On the surface, this poem owes more to Modernist influences than apparently anything else; the unpunctuated ‘I know how your huge your unmanageable / Mass of bronze hair’ is reminiscent of Eliot’s pub-talk ‘If you don’t like it then you can get on with it’<sup>459</sup> in *The Waste Land* in its attempt to render an ornate phrase demotic, and the ‘silk scarf’ comparison is remarkably restrained for Hughes, perhaps because he is straining for a universal comparison.

However, the coldness and impersonality anchors the poem, through its appearance in the centre: ‘And I had to lift your hand for you’ clearly demonstrates the involuntary nature of this action, as well as the detached location of the narrator, suddenly stepping in to brusquely quicken the action before retreating again.

Like Gunn, Hughes has here managed to combine the Modernist elements of Eliot’s speech-patterns with the more traditional-seeming imagery of Hardy and others (‘the deep glimpse / After the humane killer’ would seem to be a Lawrentian bridging between Hardy and Eliot), while maintaining the studied impersonality, that cold ‘I’, which seems to be the common factor in both the ‘English Tradition’ and Modernism. Again, that constant desire to change dominates, with the poet’s voice

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<sup>458</sup> Hughes, from *Gaudete*, *THCP*, p. 368.

<sup>459</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ‘II. A Game of Chess’, *TCPaP*, p. 66.

literally reaching into the poem and altering the subject, as much as describing the change.

Larkin's 'The Explosion' is an unusual piece, but one which maximises the coldness of observation with the human detail effected by change in the poem; and of the poem.

On the day of the explosion  
Shadows pointed towards the pithead:  
In the sun the slagheap slept.

Down the lane came men in pitboots  
Coughing oath-edged talk and pipe-smoke,  
Shouldering off the freshened silence.

One chased after rabbits; lost them;  
Came back with a nest of lark's eggs;  
Showed them; lodged them in the grasses.

So they passed in beards and moleskins,  
Fathers, brothers, nicknames, laughter,  
Through the tall gates standing open.

At noon, there came a tremor; cows

Stopped chewing for a second; sun,  
Scarfed as in a heat-haze, dimmed.

*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

Larger than in life they managed –  
Gold as on a coin, or walking  
Somehow from the sun towards them,

One showing the eggs unbroken.<sup>460</sup>

The poem's trochaic metre is reminiscent of Yeats and Auden (though Larkin admitted to it being most reminiscent of Longfellow's 'Hiawatha'), and the quasi-resurrection imagery at the end is a rare example ('Water' is another) of Larkin's more metaphysical leanings, where religion is concerned. Yes, it's 'that vast moth-eaten musical brocade', but just as 'Water' talks of religion being a place 'Where any-angled light / Would congregate endlessly', so too does 'The Explosion's sense of the eternal register through 'the eggs unbroken', even if the men being 'Larger than in

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<sup>460</sup> Larkin, 'The Explosion', *CP*, p. 175.

life they managed' reminds us that this eternity is in the poem, or memory, first, rather than a guaranteed heaven.

The poem would seem largely impersonal anyway – no 'I' or presence of the poet at any point, but then there is a further, colder touch. The first half of the piece describes the detailed miners who will shortly be dead. The second half allows some visionary apprehension to gild the memories of those who have died. What divides the poem, and also chills it – remarkably, given the imagery of warmth that is employed – is the 'At noon there came a tremor; cows / Stopped chewing for a second; sun, / Scarfed as in a heat-haze, dimmed.' The violent nature of the poem's title is reduced to 'a tremor', the dramatic setting of noon (when the sun is at its highest) is muffled by the sun being both 'scarfed' and 'dimmed'. There may have been an explosion that has killed many, but the 'cows stopped chewing for a second' – Larkin chooses the most stationary of farm animals to register (literally) bovine indifference to the events of man. All of the offered condolence and comfort of Christianity, and the quick nostalgia of the survivors cannot warm up the poem after that central stanza.

Clearly, Larkin owes more than a little to Auden's reflection that suffering and important events happen 'while someone is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along'<sup>461</sup>, and that even tragedies are not 'important failure[s]', but in itself that is an admission by Larkin of the importance of Modernist perspectives on at-first-glance traditional subject matter.

The achievement of Larkin here is to have taken what could be viewed as a traditional disaster-commemorative subject, similar to Hopkins' 'The Wreck of the

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<sup>461</sup> W. H. Auden, 'Musée des Beaux Artes', *TEA*, p.237.

Deutschland', for example, but to place that central, impersonal lucidity at the centre of the poem, and utilise only the language of the everyday – and that includes the liturgy, that most contemporary readers would have easily recognised. What gives the poem its Modernist edge, but also an indication that Larkin was consciously adding that edge, is the absence of the narrator, entirely, from the poem. Larkin's remark on both Wilfred Owen and Hopkins is useful in understanding this absence:

However well he [Owen] does it, however much we agree that the war happened and ought to be written about, there is still a tendency for us to withhold our highest praise on the grounds that a poet's choice of subject should seem an action, not a reaction. 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', we feel, would have been markedly inferior if Hopkins had been a survivor from the passenger list.<sup>462</sup>

Aside from the fact that, seven years before writing 'The Explosion', Larkin presupposes that any such poem – writing about a disaster from an impersonal distance – carries more weight than a poem of simple autobiography or confession, his concern here is very similar to those of Hughes and Gunn. After all, Gunn – no matter what the LSD was telling him – didn't actually turn into a stag, and Hughes (as much as his subconscious was tortured by his fears about killing women) was not personally to blame for his fictionalised woman's beauty actually leaving. What unites the three is a concern to render change, of traditional subjects but through Modernist means, with cold impersonality and studied distance.

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<sup>462</sup> Larkin 1963, p. 159.

The use of liturgy in the poem acts in a similar way to Larkin's dropping of 'Here endeth...' into the middle of 'Church Going', only to hear the 'echoes snicker, briefly'. Much as Eliot had done in *The Waste Land* with 'Those are pearls that were his eyes / 'Are you alive or not?'"<sup>463</sup>, which demonstrates the failure of beautiful language to actually offer a solution or sense of transcendence to real life, Larkin uses liturgical extracts in his poems as if to demonstrate their failure to spark into life. The women see their dead men as a result of the conciliatory liturgy, but the 'eggs unbroken', with their Hardy-esque 'un' (meaning the eggs go from being broken to whole once more) remind the reader that such conciliation is brief and false. Unlike later Eliot, who crams his post-conversion poetry with liturgy in order to vivify the language, Larkin uses the quotation to maintain the cold observation, but also to place the harsh Modernist reality in a traditional or comforting setting.

Rather than opting for a pre-Hardy set of traditional resources, in order to achieve an Elizabethan impersonal 'I', or instead adopting an entirely Modernist, detached perspective, Larkin, Hughes and Gunn combine the two modes of approach above in order to incorporate Modernism into the English tradition and demonstrate that, in fact, such an incorporation and modification of that tradition is entirely logical. This is partly to do with the skill of the poets in question, but also proof that Edna Longley's reading of Larkin's genealogy<sup>464</sup>, owing more to the studied impersonality of Edward Thomas than to the quainter concerns of Georganism, was correct. Larkin, Hughes and Gunn, through their debts to Hardy, Thomas and Owen, but also to Eliot and Auden, continue not the destruction or splitting of the English line that Larkin hinted at the First World War and Modernism as having effected, but

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<sup>463</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 'IV. Death by Water', *TCPaP*, p. 71.

<sup>464</sup> Longley 1986, pp. 113-39.

instead the development of that line, with the incorporation of Modernism, and the modernising of traditional resources.

### **3.5 Conclusions – poets alongside one another**

Any serious consideration of Larkin, Hughes and Gunn – both separately and in comparison with one another – needs to progress beyond both Hardy's comment to Graves (the 'same old' subjects in the 'same old ways') and the equally simplistic assertions of Alvarez's 'negative feedbacks'. The poets must be allowed to be seen as equivalent writers, not three disparate ex-carnations of the triple-headed creature that Lucie-Smith described. It is undeniable that their circumstances and practices were different from one another. However, in the past this has been allowed to present the three poets as so different to be almost in different centuries: Kleinzahler and Lucie-Smith's descriptions of Gunn's varying fortunes in America; Alvarez's blind championing of the at times deeply uncertain and insecure Hughes, of Conquest and Amis's rewriting of Larkin's literary history and progress. Between the early 1950s and the late 1970s, Larkin, Hughes and Gunn each produced bodies of work that disproved first Hardy's assertion and then Alvarez's. As Edna Longley has pointed out, there was – in Edward Thomas and Wilfred Owen – a poetic genealogy directed towards a more observational, colder poetry that both survived or outlived Georgianism, and predated *The Waste Land*, and it is simplistic to argue – as Alvarez and others did – that all poetry following 1922 exists either in close continuation of or violent reaction against the achievements of Eliot and Pound.

It is in combining the lessons of Eliot with the earlier work of Thomas, Owen, Hardy and Yeats – as well as the more recent efforts of Auden and others – that

Larkin, Hughes and Gunn were able to assimilate and develop the most vital strands of Modernism into English poetry. They did this in, eventually, radically different ways – when compared to each other – but the combined effect of their achievement means that later poets such as James Fenton or Hugo Williams are able to cite all three as influences, with no apparent conflict of poetic interest.

While only Gunn stated so plainly that what he looked for was a clearly recognisable style (be it ‘Plain’ or cold), what Larkin had identified in Thomas and Owen as studied impersonality became with each of the three poets a central tenet and defining characteristic of their work. Clive James’s observation that Hughes’s writing seemed to speak in an unpeopled world finds its equal in Larkin’s awareness of ‘that sure extinction we all travel to’, and Gunn’s ‘achieving [...] completeness, in a way’. It is a cold, detached voice – though each poet manifested it differently – that not only continued the ‘tightening up’ of language Larkin saw Eliot as having achieved, but also transmitted the clearest, least-cluttered aspects of English poetry through the centuries. In a word, each poet removed the sentimentality, or ‘gentility’ that Alvarez saw as such an opponent to modernism, but without losing the genuine, feelingful humanity that they each saw as key to poetry.

## **Conclusion - a move towards unanimity?**

At the beginning of this project I considered what I termed the ‘unanimity principle’, whereby the extremist or less savoury tendencies of an author, once revealed, would not necessarily obscure the achievement or reputation of his or her work as long as that work was equally extreme in its innovation or effect. Modernists such as Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf are ‘allowed’ their anti-Semitism or racism through the unanimity principle because the effect that their writing had upon literature was dramatic, controversial and important. I noted that the reason that the unanimity principle did not ‘save’ Philip Larkin’s work, in the immediate aftermath of certain prejudices coming to light in the 1990s, was that his work – though respected – was not seen as being as equally forceful and extreme as the prejudices so suddenly aired. His public admiration for figures such as John Betjeman, Kingsley Amis and Thomas Hardy made the ‘little Englander’ prejudices all too explicable; as Anthony Thwaite later said, they were the prejudices one expected a middle-class white man born in the midlands in 1922 to have.

One of the effects of the failure of the unanimity principle to come to Larkin’s rescue was to further isolate him as a figure. He had always been seen as separate from the poetry world, the London literary world, and largely from other poets. As we have seen, in the wake of the *Selected Letters* and Andrew Motion’s biography of Larkin, those poets wishing to defend Larkin did so with either meek apologetics for the life, or with bizarre defences of Larkin to be allowed to be as prejudiced as he wanted. Both of these approaches moved him apart from other poets – even poets such as Betjeman, whom he had previously been seen as close to – so a consideration of him as being far more widely influenced than had previously been allowed became even harder.

The case for the unanimity principle working in Larkin's case is partly to be found in the letters. In the letters that I have considered in this project, the breadth of Larkin's reading and enthusiasm for a wide range of poets points to a force of feeling not previously assumed in the poetry of 'the hermit of Hull'. The rest of the case is to be found in the *Collected Poems* of 1988, which, when read alongside the letters, demonstrate the application of that force of feeling in Larkin's poetry, both published and unpublished. The shaping of Larkin's voice can be seen, through such a synoptic reading, to have been done not just by predictable or sequential (the Auden-Yeats-Hardy misconception) older poets, but often through the writing of contemporaries, and as such places Larkin among the poets at last.

Whether it was an influence, like that of W. H. Auden, that Larkin struggled with but maintained through the older poet's significant changes (of form and subject-matter), or one – like that of Robert Lowell – which made only a small impact (in his case, the lunar nightscapes that Larkin adopted), or even one that merely enabled Larkin to write private, forceful poetry that he would never publish (this was the influence of Sylvia Plath, and, to a lesser extent, Dylan Thomas), the poems and letters taken together reveal a poet of wide reading and influence, aware of those contemporary writers he had (in life) seemed so distant from.

While an understanding of Larkin among the poets has its precedents – Andrew Motion, Stephen Regan and John Osborne have long propounded such an approach – it is still not without opponents. In 2011, Faber and Faber released the only – at the time of writing – *Selected Poems* of Philip Larkin to be published, the selection made and introduced by Martin Amis. The timing of this is odd, as Archie Burnett's *The Complete Poems* (2012) was less than a year away from publication by Faber, though the difference in size and price between the books probably explains

this timing; not everyone would want a £40 complete volume, and the £14.99 *Selected* could serve as an introduction to some. It is odd, however, when considering the poems that Amis selected, that Faber did not feel Anthony Thwaite's second edition of the *Collected Poems* (2003) had already provided the kind of book (at a slightly cheaper price: £13.99) that was published in 2011. Perhaps they felt that Amis's critical writing would lead to an illuminating introduction.

The introduction generally continues the narrative of anti-Political Correctness rhetoric that defines all of Amis Jr.'s writing on Larkin (though his insistence on biography being irrelevant in considerations of Larkin surely removes his own credentials for editing the volume – he is neither a poet nor a critic of poetry, he is merely Larkin's friend's son), but it makes a further, odd claim:

It is important to understand that Philip Larkin is very far from being a poet's poet: he is something much rarer than that. True, Auden was a known admirer of Larkin's technique; and Eliot, early on, genially conceded, 'Yes – he often makes words do what he wants.' But the strong impression remains that the poets, in general, 'demote' Larkin on a number of grounds: provinciality, lack of ambition, a corpus both crabbed and cramped. Seamus Heaney's misgivings are probably representative: Larkin is 'daunted' by both life and death; he is 'anti-poetic' in spirit; he 'demoralises the affirmative impulse'. Well, these preference-synonyms are more resonant than most, perhaps; but preference-synonyms they remain (still, Heaney is getting somewhere in 'The Journey Back', where the imagined Larkin describes himself as a 'nine-to-five man who had seen poetry'). No: Larkin is not a poet's poet. He is of course a

people's poet, which is what he would have wanted. But he is also, definingly, a novelist's poet. It is the novelists who revere him.<sup>465</sup>

The wilful misrepresentation of Heaney (whose essays, lectures and interviews speak about Larkin from a position of undoubted, though not uncritical admiration) aside, not to mention Amis's commandeering of Larkin for 'the novelists' (understandable given his being one of them and, unlike his father, not even being a poet on the side), this does at least enunciate the continuing problem in considerations of Larkin.

Amis is certainly over-simplifying the matter of what a 'poet's poet' is by making a claim (about Larkin not being one) that is impossible to substantiate. As we have seen, even when a poet such as Fiona Sampson wishes to express<sup>466</sup> reservations or ambivalence about the line of poets that she sees Larkin (along with Edward Thomas) as belonging to, she is clear that Larkin is (a) *among* the poets, and (b) a poet admired *alongside* other poets. There is something perhaps comforting in the outlandishness of Amis's claims to speak for 'the poets', because it demonstrates how unrealistic his assertions sound in 2011 – as opposed to the degree of support that they received in his 'defence' of Larkin in the 1990s. A good comparison is with the poet Hugo Williams's introduction for Faber and Faber's *Selected John Betjeman*<sup>467</sup>, where Williams is able to illustrate the challenges facing a poet's admiration for Betjeman – his relation to Modernism, his 'cosiness' – but is also able (as a poet) to place Betjeman safely *with* 'the poets'.

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<sup>465</sup> Amis 2011, p. xiv.

<sup>466</sup> Sampson 2013.

<sup>467</sup> *John Betjeman: Selected Poems* ed. Hugo Williams (London: Faber and Faber, 2006).

The placing of Larkin among the poets, then, faces certain similar challenges as Williams found there to be with Betjeman, but it also possesses certain advantages which have too often been overlooked. Repeatedly, throughout his career, Larkin chose to make public pronouncements designed, as Andrew Motion has pointed out, to cement his reputation as the little-Englander which would prove such a problem when coupled with the posthumous revelations of prejudice.

However, in the published letters, criticism and *Collected Poems* (1988), Larkin left clear enough statements concerning his debts of influence, and his intensities of feeling towards certain writers whom he was continually defined against or in opposition to.

The shy, horrified fascination that defined his interest in Sylvia Plath is as controversial a revelation as the 1988 publication of poems that seem to have only existed because her work enabled him to glance towards darker subject-matter; 'The Winter Palace's' grim 'It'll be worth it, if in the end I manage / To blank out whatever it is that is doing the damage', and the 'violence / a long way back' of 'Love Again'. Ian Hamilton and others were clearly shaken in their reaction to these poems, but had Larkin been able to exist as a poet amongst poets, then the sudden extremity of these unpublished – yet privately circulated – poems might not have come as such a shock.

Amis considered that the 1990s backlash against Larkin was due to the period being 'the high period of Political Correctness', and that this was the cause of Larkin's life being so inseparable from his work after the publications of the poems, letters and life. A more useful and probably more accurate view of the situation would be to see

the 1980s-onwards as the period of serious biography, which meant that the handling of literary estates and legacies was far more public and important than perhaps it had been before.

In *Keepers of the Flame*, Hamilton – a year before Motion’s biography of Larkin was published – draws attention to a review Larkin wrote, the year before he died, of Peter Ackroyd’s biography of T. S. Eliot<sup>468</sup>. Ackroyd’s biography was ‘unofficial’, as the Eliot estate refused to co-operate with his research or allow him to quote from Eliot’s work – both published and unpublished – and correspondence, except within the context of fair criticism. Larkin, in his review, saw a continuance of the intensely private life of Eliot in the estate’s behaviour, and declared that Eliot had a right to a quiet life. Hamilton detects in Larkin’s plea for privacy here a sense of self-aware disingenuousness, pointing out that

Larkin was here toying with a fancy: he knew very well that, in the case of Eliot – and in the case of Larkin – biography would never ‘let it go at that’.<sup>469</sup>

This is where what I term, at the start of this project, the unanimity principle reappears. Eliot had been alive when, in the 1960s, he had been attacked for anti-Semitic sentiments in his poetry, though he had declined to comment on it at the time, letting others (Stephen Spender, notably) make his defences for him. It is possible that the memory of that debate played a role in the Eliot estate’s refusal to co-operate with Ackroyd, though they later allowed Christopher Ricks access to the

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<sup>468</sup> Peter Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984).

<sup>469</sup> *KotF*, p. 304.

Eliot archive when he was writing his *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice*<sup>470</sup>. Ricks's own review of Ackroyd's book makes a valuable point about the changing state of literary biography in the 1980s when he writes that

Literary biography these days (Lowell, Berryman) is bad news that stays news.<sup>471</sup>

Ricks is here referring to the publication in 1982 of Ian Hamilton's *Robert Lowell: A Biography*<sup>472</sup> and John Haffenden's *The Life of John Berryman*<sup>473</sup> both of which had made unsparing observations about their subjects' lives, but which had also drawn attention to the steady fall in quality of both poets' work towards the end of their lives. Both Hamilton and Haffenden were attacked for their efforts, with the unanimity principle reasoning that the worst aspects of Lowell and Berryman's lives were no secret – as both published increasingly large books to document those aspects. Likewise, the silence of Eliot's poetic output post-*Four Quartets* (so between 1945 and his death in 1965), as well as the general assumption that his work shied away from documenting events in his life, meant that Ackroyd's generally respectful work seemed to equalise the life with the work (Eliot's stormy first marriage to Vivien correlates with the stormy output from *The Waste Land* to *The Hollow Men*).

There is no evidence that Larkin read either Hamilton or Haffenden's biographies – though he knew and was interviewed by both men – but it can be

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<sup>470</sup> Christopher Ricks, *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994).

<sup>471</sup> Christopher Ricks, 'The Braver Thing', *The London Review of Books*, Vol. 6 No. 20, 1<sup>st</sup> November 1984, pp. 3-5.

<sup>472</sup> Hamilton 1982.

<sup>473</sup> John Haffenden, *The Life of John Berryman* (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1982).

drawn from both his distaste for Lowell's later work and his admiration of Plath's prolific final stage of writing, that he was aware of what I am referring to when I talk about the unanimity principle bestowing a balance, of sorts, between the work and the life. He would have been aware that his life would be looked back on with an almost decade-long absence of writing at its end, and having left those two haunting clues as to what had first fired and then denuded his creativity – 'whatever it is that is doing the damage' and 'violence a long way back' – he chose two seemingly opposing paths for literary biography to decide what to make of him, and therefore prevented the unanimity principle first of all from protecting him, and, which was far more destructive, from being able to place him *amongst* the poets. By ordering that his diaries – which numbered over thirty volumes – be destroyed, which by all accounts 'showed Larkin at his most intimate, and at his worst'<sup>474</sup>, Larkin removed the closest thing a biographer might have had to answering the clues of 'The Winter Palace' and 'Love Again'.

However, fully-aware of their content, he gave no such order concerning his neatly ordered and preserved letters. He would have been aware, then, that the driest period of his creative life would be picked over by critics and biographers, but that they would find only letters that seemed to hint at the edges of something terrible, and often did so in a manner far from acceptable or easy to read. Unanimity would be impossible to achieve between the life and the work, because the letters demonstrated that his falling silent in poetry was accompanied by no such hush in what drove and pushed him. The lack of poetry probably accounted for a good deal of the rage in those letters, but not all of it, so there are periods when it seems that the

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<sup>474</sup> *KotF*, p. 308.

anger, fear and misery simply blocked out everything else. Again, this is not unanimity – there is no such balance.

When Larkin died, Motion points out, ‘Reporters quoted him incessantly, making his remoteness synonymous with his integrity’<sup>475</sup>, which at least demonstrates an assumption on the part of literary biography that the unanimity principle would – for Larkin – be similar in its application to him to how it had been applied to Eliot; a respectful hush, in other words. It is telling that the vociferous attacks on Larkin emerged not instantly (particularly in the case of Ackroyd’s attack on him) after the letters were published, but largely in the wake of the biography. One of the things that the biography did was point out that – some juvenilia, workbooks and essays aside – there was no big revelation waiting in the wings. No diaries, in other words. One detects not only shock at the letters’ tendencies, in Larkin’s attackers, but also chagrin (after the biography had revealed the destruction of the diaries) at the fact that ‘whatever it is that is doing the damage’ was not going to be laid out plainly.

Why this is as damaging as it is for Larkin’s being considered alongside other poets, is that an obvious decision of both his literary executors (Thwaite and Motion), which stems from what seem to have been Larkin’s secret purposes, has been ignored. Larkin’s Will being as ‘repugnant’ as the Courts eventually declared it (and as time passes, it seems less and less likely that Larkin was unaware of this when he died), his executors were left with a legacy entirely in their hands; poems, letters, and life. It is hard, though not impossible, to see the option that could have been taken; i.e. an Eliotian silence. To a certain extent, this is what Thwaite and Motion’s detractors seem to have wanted, their wish to (to paraphrase Clive James) know less

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<sup>475</sup> Motion 1993, p. 522.

about Larkin, and Thwaite's 2003 edition of the *Collected Poems* was the eventual peace-offering to this school of thought. The damage done by this school of thought, however, is to separate Larkin from other poets, along the lines wryly laid out by the poet himself during his life. The published poems of Larkin's life were so few in number that they were easy to place apart from (a) his Movement contemporaries, because of his and not their enduring success poetically, and (b) the other 'major' poets of the time; Lowell, Berryman, Geoffrey Hill, R. S. Thomas, and most of all Hughes.

The matter of his views on other poets – in both interviews and criticism – was also seemingly contradictory. The famous '*Foreign poets? No!*' exclamation to Ian Hamilton was as we have seen followed by a less-often-quoted list of foreign poets whom Larkin *did* read, but it was also not an interview he chose to publish in *Required Writing* – the only book of literary essays and interviews he published in his lifetime. That being said, he did choose to include in that volume his essay on Plath, after all those claims to Amis about having been forced by Motion to write it, which demonstrates his wish to preserve an admiration that would not have been thought predictable of him.

Added to all this were the carefully organised shoeboxes of letters in his house, which he knew would contain not just the prejudiced or bigoted remarks sure to offend many, but also the evidence of his love for Dylan Thomas, D. H. Lawrence, Plath and others, that had been such private loves – particularly in awareness of Kingsley Amis's derision. It is telling that the letter of Larkin's to Monica Jones, in which he describes Amis as 'not like us', and points out that 'the idea of Kingsley *loving* a book – or a book 'feeding' him, as K. M. would say – is quite absurd. He

doesn't *like* books. He doesn't *like* reading. And I wouldn't take his opinion on *anything*'<sup>476</sup>, was not published by Thwaite until after Amis's death in 1995.

Finally, there were the unpublished poems, some of which had been privately circulated or shown to friends. Of those poems that critics (Hamilton, Amis Jr.) would view as shocking or controversial – and therefore imply that they should not have been included in the *Collected Poems* – both 'Love Again' and 'Letter to a friend about girls' were regularly singled out. Yet, as we have seen, these two poems in particular were sent by Larkin to friends, redrafted on their advice, sent out again, until finally Larkin seems to have felt that enough had been said about them, and didn't publish them. His comment to Thwaite about 'Letter...' is prophetic:

...it's not sufficiently good to be worth causing pain. Do you mind? We'll have to leave it until the posthumous volume, edited Andrew Motion<sup>477</sup>

This may have been intended as a joke, but even then it would have been a joke aware of literary estates and biography. It was also a joke made to one of his literary executors; and, tellingly, the executor closest to him in age, whom (his death-anxiety aside) he had no guarantee of pre-deceasing, as opposed to Motion, who would almost certainly survive him. As it turned out, of course, Thwaite edited the 'posthumous volume' and clearly felt – with justification – that Larkin had authorised him to publish 'Letter...' and other poems.

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<sup>476</sup> Larkin to Jones, 15/2/55. *LTM*, pp. 146-7.

<sup>477</sup> Larkin to Thwaite, 29/1/78. *SL*, pp. 576-7.

What we are faced with, then, in determining Larkin's engagement with other writers – particularly those like Eliot, Dylan Thomas, Lowell or Plath, whom he is so regularly defined against – is that the evidence for that engagement is found in the letters, unpublished poems, and in the life; or, rather, people's recollections of the life. Set against the four slim volumes of poetry, the two novels, and the two books of essays (*Required Writing* and *All What Jazz*) that the poet oversaw publication of, the unpublished evidence is made – by detractors like Lisa Jardine and 'defenders' like Amis Jr. – to seem underhand, or not what Larkin would have wanted.

Assimilation of influences, which is what I am concerned with, is deceptively difficult to prove, and so is regularly over-simplified by commentators. The often-raised 'Auden-Yeats-Hardy' evolution of Larkin is popular because Larkin is on record (in interviews and letters) not only as having read certain books by those three poets at certain times, but by having written poetry concurrent to or resultant from that reading which resembles (or at least bears comparison with) the older poets' work.

What the 'isolated Larkin' school of thought diminishes at best, and at worst wilfully ignores, is assimilation not immediately expressed but important nonetheless. Larkin read *Four Quartets* on its publication (as one volume) in 1945, but it is not until 1965 that 'Little Gidding's '...England and nowhere. Never and always' makes itself felt in 'High Windows's 'the deep blue air. That shows / nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless'.

Larkin may have been aware of this, when he commented to Hamilton that he had, at one point, written 'far inferior Dylan Thomas poems'<sup>478</sup> in the 1940s – despite

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<sup>478</sup> Larkin-Hamilton 1964, p. 21.

there being very little evidence of this, either in the 1988 *Collected Poems* or the 2012 *Complete Poems*. Larkin seemed aware that a literary apprenticeship of sorts was expected of a writer, but was coy about straying outside of the Auden-Yeats-Hardy sequence. This is unfortunate, as it furthered the mission of those such as Ackroyd (later) and Amis Sr. (both while Larkin was alive and after Larkin was dead) whose defence or attacks relied on the notion of Larkin as not reading either widely or regularly. This was never true – as Larkin pointed out to Amis, when he commented that a memoir of Larkin that the other had written made Larkin sound more like Amis than had actually been the case.

An example of the odd disparity between how Larkin is viewed, compared to others, is his interest in sexual psychology and the writings of D. H. Lawrence. Like Auden before him, Larkin found Lawrence's writing immensely stirring, and the teachings of John Layard were similarly important to him. Also like Auden, Lawrence made no representative appearance in the poetry written after the poet had read him. Poems of Larkin's that deal with the harsher sides to the natural world, or sexual jealousy and desire, clearly owe a considered debt to the assimilation of Lawrence and Layard, even if there is no formal or stylistic debt obvious. This is different, of course, to a writer like Hughes, whose debt to Lawrence is more identifiable in the length of his lines, use of violent animalistic imagery, and the similarities between him and Lawrence personally; both being working class, and both being concerned with nature's more violent and sexual sides.

If assimilation and influence are only assigned through emulation and rewriting, however, then most of the writers that I have considered in this project are rarely mentioned in the same breath as Larkin, unless it is to illustrate difference. David Harsent has recently stated that

One of the problems to do with Post-Modernism is that the lessons of Modernism were never really quite absorbed or learned properly, it seems to me, or taken on or drawn on properly. So there was a kind of faux-freedom, and it was odd to see, because of that freedom, poets writing through the 1950s and 1960s, and now, edge back towards a form of Georgianism – well-behaved poems that tell a story, and are mysteriously but distressingly satisfying in a certain kind of way.<sup>479</sup>

This would seem to suggest that we are still – in 2014 – coping with Alvarez’s negative feedbacks, but later in the talk (which I have quoted from, above), Harsent makes a telling and helpful point when he writes (of his own poetic formation) ‘Eliot was a huge influence on me, but not in terms of writing’<sup>480</sup>. By making the distinction, a consideration outside of the instant-influence (as an easily-identifiable formal or stylistic influence might be termed) is possible.

Larkin’s legacy is defined not by the relatively ‘normal’ posthumous rulings of a Will (as with Eliot) or publication of diaries (as with Plath), but by a body of work made up of poetry (whether published, unpublished but circulated, uncirculated) with an accompanying commentary provided by organised and preserved (by Larkin, while alive) letters, criticism and interviews. The irony of this, for a man who regularly railed against the annotated poetry of *The Waste Land* or that of Hugh MacDiarmid, is that the tracing of his influences, and of his assimilation of what he

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<sup>479</sup> In a conversation with Harrison Birtwistle and Fiona Sampson at the School of Advanced Study, University of London Chancellor’s Hall, 1/7/2013. Archived at <http://www.sas.ac.uk/videos-and-podcasts/music/sir-harrison-birtwistle-and-david-harsent>

<sup>480</sup> Ibid.

saw as the best of the first part of the twentieth century, is through a close reading of the poems with the letters and other writings (and, to a certain extent, the life) as lifelong annotations.

His move towards the studied impersonality that he so craved was as much informed by his fear of death as by his reading of other, colder, poets. Therefore the influence of Lowell, for example, in terms of the lunar landscapes of *Life Studies* lighting 'Sad Steps' or 'Dockery and Son'; of Plath in enabling his private poetry to face up to the personal horrors he lived with, and of Eliot in allowing his antiheroes still to acknowledge transcendence and its problems (as *Prufrock* had done before him) are as crucial to an understanding of Larkin's poetry and formation as any formal or stylistic tutelage that he underwent at the hands of Hardy or Yeats.

Another irony of Larkin's formation, as Edna Longley has pointed out, is that though he bemoaned not finding an 'English line' when compiling his Oxford anthology, a line did exist, of which he became a part. Yeats's refusal, in his *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, to include the best poetry that came out of the First World War, wilfully ignored a parallel line of studied impersonality in English poetry.

The line of Thomas and Owen, on to Auden and then to Dylan Thomas was a line that Larkin may have felt made little evolutionary sense to the critical industry he so mistrusted in poetry, and this may have been his reason for down-playing his admiration of these four poets, but they were his 'genealogy', as Longley has phrased it. To a certain extent Larkin became the poet – post-1945 – that Auden had been expected to become, and his apparent rejection of the older poet seems more and more staged the more one looks at it, given the strength of feeling he invested in the

work through his teenage years and into adulthood. With Dylan Thomas, Larkin's place in 'the Movement' presupposed a rejection of the 'myth kitty' that Thomas was associated with, but in a comparison of the two poets' work concerning religion, it is Thomas who appears as the mythology-rejecting atheist, while Larkin retains a quiet sense of wonder and interest – in John Osborne's words 'he, like his hero Hardy, kept faith with his lack of faith'<sup>481</sup>.

For all of his limericks, letters and more, Larkin's kinship with his seemingly opposite contemporaries, Ted Hughes and Thom Gunn, was far stronger than they (Gunn's autobiographical reflections aside) were all prepared to admit. The three poets prove – perhaps increasingly, the more time that passes since their deaths – that common influences do not common poetry make. Hughes and Larkin's consideration of the post-Edward Thomas and post-First World War settings of the English countryside and the 'national ghost' (as Hughes termed that war) sought the same studied, impersonal engagement with those events, but never at the cost of poetic distance or detachment (emotionally) from the subject. Larkin and Gunn's charting of the sexual and physical changes and ruin visited on human beings may have taken place in settings that couldn't be further apart, but again, the concerns were the same. The 'impersonal 'I'' attracted them both, and allowed, again, a combination of connection and dispassionate observation.

The achievement of 'the Larkin-Hughes-Gunn' was to blend the facets of Modernism that all saw as naturally successive to previous poetry (the colder, impersonal elements, largely) with the poetry preceding that which they felt still

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<sup>481</sup> Osborne 2008, p. 258.

most relevant; Hardy and others for Larkin, the Elizabethans for Gunn, Shakespeare and others for Hughes. None of the three ‘fits’ into a school or movement, which demonstrates not only Robert Conquest’s failure (in trying to cram Larkin and Gunn into *the Movement*) but also Alvarez’s inaccuracy, in seeing poetry as a series of ‘negative feedbacks’, rather than of assimilation and forward-moving response. It is how a poet such as Seamus Heaney can claim both Larkin and Hughes as influences, just as Hugo Williams claims Gunn and Larkin.

If, in 1964, Larkin worried that poetry seemed to have ‘got itself into the hands of a critical industry’<sup>482</sup>, it is probable that he would be concerned about the critical industry that has had its hands on him since his death. Repeatedly ‘defenders’ of Larkin have limited readings and interpretations of him as much as – or in the case of the Amises, more than – his detractors and opponents. What Larkin seemed wary of in his admiration of Dylan Thomas and Sylvia Plath (that their fame meant everyone knew of them, but not necessarily of their writing) often seems dangerously likely to happen to Larkin – his name registers on the face of most people I mention it to, but I can rarely predict if their reply to his name will be the first line of ‘This Be The Verse’ or a comment as to his perceived racism, misogyny or conservatism. And whether it is Paulin (a Larkin admirer)’s ‘sewer’, Ackroyd (a Larkin detractor)’s ‘foul-mouthed bigot’, or Amis Jr. (a Larkin ‘defender’)’s victim of political-correctness, this limits our understanding and reading of Larkin – as he saw biographical legends do to Thomas and Plath, and must have feared for himself.

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<sup>482</sup> Larkin-Hamilton 1964, p. 19.

We are less than a decade from the centenary of both *The Waste Land's* publication and Larkin's birth. In the mid-1990s, there was a sense that Larkin's centenary might be quietly left to slip pass unnoticed, while *The Waste Land's* would be lauded, no doubt at the popular expense of Alvarez's 'negative feedback'-ers, such as Betjeman, Amis and Larkin. At the time of writing, however, with the exception of such bizarre anti-poetic claims as Amis Jr.'s in his introduction to the *Selected Poems*, the critical and literary landscape seems healthily, though cautiously, positive towards Larkin. While John Osborne's 2008 book was conceived originally as a defensive work, it and other writers have broadened the scholarship on Larkin to the extent that a comparison of Larkin's Bleaney with Eliot's Prufrock does not seem as impossible as it previously had<sup>483</sup>. As time passes, the ability to view Larkin as 'amongst' the poets once more – as he had so often seen himself as being – grows more likely, and the too-hasty desire to separate poets from one another, either into schools or poles, seems to lessen.

With this project I have not sought to prove Larkin as a closeted ultra-Modernist, nor that influences previously ascribed to him that were not Modernist were unimportant. I wished to show him for what he, in the light of the full range of evidence, seems to have been; a reader and lover of poetry, whose own work stemmed from many inspirations and interpretations, and who – when he was limited by others' assigning to him membership of 'schools', 'groups' and 'movements' – was frustrated by over-simplified readings of authorial intent. In a final irony, as it was the book that began the controversy that I have termed 'the watershed', Thwaite's 1988 introduction still holds true for a full reading of Larkin as

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<sup>483</sup> I am thinking specifically here of Christopher Ricks's well-intentioned but constantly unhelpful definition(s) of Larkin as the definitive anti-Modernist.

‘a major poet, testing, filtering, rejecting, modulating, achieving’<sup>484</sup>. It is this openness in Larkin, his assimilation and transmission of all (regardless of trend, ‘school’ or author) that he saw as good which, in the words of Heaney on the *Collected Poems*

...means that his *Collected Poems* is already a classic, with a guaranteed life on the market and in the memory.<sup>485</sup>

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<sup>484</sup> *CP*, p. xxiii.

<sup>485</sup> Seamus Heaney, review of Larkin’s *Collected Poems*, *Observer*, 9<sup>th</sup> October 1988, p. 44.

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