"At death, you break up"
– Philip Larkin's struggle with mortality –

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> – "Do you think much about growing older? Is it something that worries you?"
> – "Yes, dreadfully. If you assume you're going to live to be seventy, seven decades, and think of each decade as a day of the week, starting with Sunday, then I'm on Friday afternoon now. Rather a shock, isn't it? If you ask why does it bother me, I can only say I dread endless extinction.[1)]

As if he had intended to build up his career along clear landmarks, Philip Larkin published his poetry volumes at the rate of one per decade: *The North Ship* in 1945, *The Less Deceived* in 1955, *The Whitsun Weddings* in 1964 and *High Windows* in 1974. The poet's sudden death on 2 December, 1985, at the age of sixty-three, unfortunately, left our hope for a final volume unfulfilled. Throughout these four volumes, Larkin has dedicated himself to writing about the 'unhappiness' of people caught up in time: "Deprivation is for me what daffodils were for Wordsworth".[2)] The recurring themes are 'memory', 'passage of time', 'old age' and 'death'. Larkin insistently dealt with them again and again.

'Daffodils' functioned as a powerful external stimulus for the poetic genius of Wordsworth, and in Larkin's early work, too, we notice how the theme of time and its pressures comes to the poet from outside, as a subject of independent fascination. In Larkin's later work, however, Time has developed into the poet's very own private problem, for which he tries to find a personal solution.

In other words, Larkin's whole career can be considered as a preparation for the end of life, death. In his incessantly repeated reflections and contemplations of time and its inescapability, Larkin seems to have gone through important changes in his attitude towards death: from an initially conventional romantic fascination for death and a

sentimental fear for the unknown, to a final awareness of Death's absoluteness and to the acceptance of Death as a part of life.

As his career is developing, Larkin starts looking at death as a strictly physical ending. The spiritual salvation from the instinctive fear of death offered by established religion has become an archaic theme in the modern world where nobody believes in eternity. Death is, as Larkin puts it, an 'endless extinction' of body. What saves Larkin from falling into a sheer nihilism is the substitute he creates for conventional religion: a quiet resignation to the endless continuity of life.

In this essay, I will focus on the changes in Larkin's concept of life and death, and I will make it clear how each of his volumes represents a crucial stage in his life.

I

The pervading feeling in *The North Ship* is, as Larkin states in his "Introduction" to the volume, a vague romantic sentiment, a typical 'schoolboy's infatuation' with a melancholy.[3] The frequent appearances of 'sky', 'moon', 'sun', 'wind', 'sea', 'dream', and 'star' control the mood of the collection. The frustrated feeling dominating daily life is associated with an 'unripe apple':

> So through that unripe day you bore your head,
> And the day was plucked and tasted bitter,
> As if still cold among the leaves.[4]

Or the numbing fear of death is softened by dreamy melancholy:

> My sleep is made cold
> By a recurrent dream
> Where all things seem
> Sickeningly to poise
> On emptiness, on stars
> Drifting under the world.[5]

Human suffering and misery are described in terms of romantic nature, and become blurred in a haze of melancholic indulgence:

To write one song, I said,
As sad as the sad wind
That walks around my bed,
Having one simple fall
As a candle-flame swells, and is thinned,
As a curtain stirs by the wall
– For this I must visit the dead.[6]

II

In *The Less Deceived,* Larkin is said to have found his own voice and style. In order to leave his superficial Yeatsian sentiments behind, Larkin allows a skeptic 'distance' to interrupt the connection between his observations and himself. Larkin, deeply concerned with fighting against all romantic illusions, becomes an isolated artist, and takes the stance of an 'exile' from the conventional 'reality' which is tainted with impossible dreams. Larkin renounces his 'responsibility for time' (as Stan Smith has pointed out in *Inviolable Voice*)[7], and becomes a stoic observer of life.

As a detached artist rather than an ordinary, suffering part of humanity, Larkin puts two things on a scale and judges which is more suitable to artistic feeling. In "Reasons for Attendance", Larkin devides the scene of the world into two halves, 'that' side of young couples who are absorbed in dancing 'face to flushed face' and 'this' side where the poet is standing with artistic composure, thinking that 'I too am individual'. But he is not completely absorbed in 'this' side of an individualist's happiness. There is always the question whether single-minded dedication to art brings genuine satisfaction:

. . . . . Therefore I stay outside,
Believing this; and they maul to and fro,
Believing that; and both are satisfied,
If no one has misjudged himself. Or lied.

The poet's sudden doubt about his being stuck with the heavy sense of duty as an artist invents the image of a 'toad' as a metaphor for work or labour. In the poem "Toads", two different ways of life, once again, make a contrast: one is a world of 'taking it easy' where people use their 'wit' to

lead an easy life while earning just enough to survive:

> . . . . . .
> Lectures, lispers,
> Losels, loblolly-men, louts –
> They don't end as paupers;

Or those who

> . . . live up lanes
> With fires in a bucket,
> Eat windfalls and tinned sardines –
> They seem to like it.

The other world is the life of deligent labour where Larkin feels a temptation to escape from. He decides to choose the 'toad work', however, because he knows that the people described above are not actually living, but only slip away on the surface of life (notice, how slippery the sounds are in the first two lines). The poet's feeling of repulsion for them leads him to a forced realization that 'something sufficiently toad-like / Squats in me, too'. The poet, rather self-justifyingly, continues that the toad never allows him to 'blarney[8] / My way to getting / The fame and the girl and the money / All at one sitting'.

The life of dedication, however, is merely one other way of escaping. The poet cannot commit himself to the real boredom and ugliness of life. Consequently, Larkin cannot exactly pin down the horror of death, either. Death is something approaching, but still far in the distance and the poet still feels free to submerge himself in melancholy. In "Next, Please", for example, Larkin cannot go beyond the conventional euphemism of death symbolised by the image of a sailing ship:

> Always too eager for the future, we
> Pick up bad habits of expectancy.
> Something is always approaching; every day
> *Till then* we say,

But

. . . . . ., it never anchors; it's
No sooner present than it turns to past.
. . . . . .

Only one ship is seeking us, a black-
Sailed unfamiliar, towing at her back
A huge and birdless silence. In her wake
No waters breed or break.

Larkin succeeds to point out the ironical fact that what we are truly hoping for never happens, and that instead, death comes to everybody. As with the character of the poem looking down from a 'bluff' upon the course of his life, there is too much distance between the present moment and the remote possibility of actual death to make death sound like a real threat.

III

When *The Whitsun Weddings* was published, A. Alvarez commented on the collection: 'there are no poems here which would look out of place in *The Less Deceived*, and as that was published nine years ago one might say that Mr. Larkin was consistent to the point of being static'[9] Although we are once more confronted with all of Larkin's favorite subjects concerning time, nevertheless, the main change is that Larkin has apparently become much older. The sense that 'half life is over now'[10] pervades the collection.

There are several poems which reveal important discoveries marking Larkin's third volume as notably different in spirit from the earlier ones. Larkin's main narrative persona in *The Less Deceived*, who thought that he was different from others in the sense that he was cautious enough not to be deceived by time, finds in *The Whitsun Weddings* that he is also time's fool. What he thought to be true has turned out to be a 'trite untransferable / Truss-advertisement' and his face is like a

. . . bestial visor, bent in
By the blows of what happened to happen.[11]

Larkin also comes across with a shocking fact that what made the poet and the rest of humanity choose different way of life is not what may be thought truest or what we 'most want to do', but 'innate assumptions' which are

> . . . . . .: habit for a while
> Suddenly they harden into all we've got
>
> And how we got it;

Life is a series of meaningless habits and

> 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.[12)]

In *The Whitsun Weddings,* Larkin's previous condescending attitude towards reality has disappeared and the poet comes down to ordinary life from his artistic superiority, feeling more compassionate towards life, because he is also one of its participants. "Toads Revisited" is a curious poem which represents the reverse from what had been described in "Toads": the 'toad', which the poet described as a symbol of routine work from which he still wanted to escape is now, in "Toads Revisited", finally described as an old companion of life whom he has been living with for a long time and without whom he feels uncomfortable.

The people who were 'witty' enough to 'drive the brute off' in the previous poem are now either ill or cast-offs, 'dodging the toad work / By being stupid or weak':

> Palsied old step-takers,
> Hare-eyed clerks with the jitters,
>
> Waxed-fleshed out-patients
> Still vague from accidents,
> And characters in long coats
> Deep in the litter-baskets —

The speaker of the poem is not jealous of them this time and is well aware of how he lives with 'toad'. The ultimate resignation to the boredom of

life even enables him to put a brave mask to the unfaceable:

> Give me your arm, old toad;
> Help me down Cemetery Road.

The need for some symbolic social focus for life's continually revitalizing power was already hinted at in "Church Going" in *The Less Deceived*. "The Whitsun Wedding" is a poem about one of those moments which embody 'a hunger in himself [the poet] to be more serious'[13], about a potential instinct to survive time. The speaker of the poem is first allowed to be a detached observer because he is a railway passenger looking at several wedding parties boarding the same train. He is an abstracted, distant observer who can preserve his own individuality.

But when he notices people seeing the train off 'as if out on the end of an event / Waving goodbye / To something that survived it', the narrator of the poem is struck by a new and serious notion of life. There is a noticeable flow of compassion towards the wedded couples once they and the narrator are left together on the train. The passenger role of the narrator has changed to the attitude of a fellow traveller and the poem ends with the reassurance of the vital energy of people starting a new life:

> . . . 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.

"An Arundel Tomb" is an impressive poem which also leads the reader to a new awareness of time. Larkin meditates on the stone effigy of an earl and a countess in Chichester Cathedral. He ironically points out that however faithfully the effigy is made according to their original figures, its verisimilitude is 'just a detail friends would see'. The individuality of the couple is effaced by the continuous changing power of time. The 'air' has changed to 'soundless damage' and the earl and countess have become anonymous like all the dead. What does not change, however, is the visitors' attitude towards the stone effigy. The visitors always come, although they are endlessly different people, with the same purpose to 'wash' at the 'identity' of the countess and earl, believing that the couple

lying there anonymously is an emblem of 'love'.

The 'stone fidelity' people see in the effigy was not central to the couple's life in the first place. But it has become their 'final blazon' in the 'unarmorial age' of modern times, to prove a truth which has survived time: the genuine human desire and need to live 'according to love'[14]. The effigy proves

> Our almost-instinct almost true:
> What will survive of us is love.

In these last lines of the poem, the hesitant approval of the value of 'love' paradoxically gives a certain weight and importance to the hackneyed expression, 'what will survive of us is love', and makes it sound like a truly moving epitaph.

IV

What is strikingly different in *High Windows* from the previous volumes is, apart from several poems written evidently on different subjects, like "The Card-Players", "Livings", or the two poems, "Going, Going" and "Homage to a Government" which Larkin composed for certain occasions, we see the poet changing from a 'rationalizer' to a 'resignator' who takes the world as it is.

In "To the Sea" and "Show Saturday", we see how Larkin more openly admits the positive meaning of life. There is no specious reasoning in these poems; they reveal the poet's honest response to the practices of society. In "To the Sea", the speaker confesses how relieved he is when he finds the sea-bathing custom, which Larkin calls 'half an annual pleasure, half a rite', still going on, in spite of time's continuous attack upon individuals.

Larkin sounds rather happy in the poem about the fact that the same familiar 'miniature gaiety' that he has known long before, still exists. It is symbolic that the 'white steamer' in the distance looks 'stuck in the afternoon' when the poet contemplates the custom of sea-bathing as something transcending time. Time is suspended and does not move until some families start going back to their own home.

"Show Saturday" also represents Larkin's deep concern with social

events which link individuals and generations despite the onslaught of time. His emotional inclination towards the hidden continuity of life as a source of comfort and strength is well conveyed in the last stanza of the poem:

> Let it stay hidden there like strength, below
> Sale-bills and swindling; something people do,
> Not noticing how time's rolling smithy-smoke
> Shadows much greater gestures; something they share
> That breaks ancestrally each year into
> Regenerate union. Let it always be there.

The poems mentioned above show the optimistic side of Larkin's new insight, while the poems on the theme of the inevitable, inescapable death reveal the most realistic, most oppressive observations in Larkin's whole career. As Larkin has once said that the fear of death is 'too much of a screaming close-up to allow the poetic faculty to function properly, but demands expression by reason of its very frightfulness',[15] the weakest side of Larkin's poems, so far, has been their inability to find a situation correlative to the horror of death. "The Old Fools" and "The Building" are, perhaps, the first full expressions of the subject owing to their persuasive, proper metaphors.

The 'old fools' are those detestable seniles whose power to choose is gone, living in a 'hideous inverted childhood'. The shivering, grotesque fact is that these grown-ups show all the characteristics of babies, with a mouth 'hanging open, drooping' and 'pissing themselves'. The speaker of the poem is full of disgust and anger in the beginning and cannot help reverting to sarcasm to hide his true emotion of helplessness. He escapes into the deliberately blunt, pejorative terms:

> At death, you break up: the bits that were you
> Starts speeding away from each other for ever
> With no one to see.

But as the poet starts thinking, he gradually learns to consider the situation as everybody's problem. The 'old fools' who were first described as if they were monstrous creatures with 'ash hair', 'toad hands' and 'prune

face dried into lines' are now said to be fellow travellers in life. We are all walking towards the same peak of 'extinction's alp'.

"The Building" describes the fear of death in terms of patients waiting in a hospital. The 'building' is depicted as if it were 'death' itself, overwhelming and devouring everything nearby:

> Higher than the handsomest hotel
> The lucent comb shows up for miles, but see,
> All round it close-ribbed streets rise and fall
> Like a great sight out of the last century.
> . . . . . .
> . . . . . Humans, caught
> On ground curiously neutral, homes and names
> Suddenly in abeyance;

In Larkin's world, the belief in life hereafter is cast aside as an old-fashioned theory. Death is no more than physical extinction into oblivion. As if to make the hospital look as suitable as possible for the undramatic end of prosaic life, the poet fills the place with dull, monotonous images like an 'airport lounge' with 'paperbacks' and 'cups of tea'; or a 'local bus' with people in 'outdoor clothes' and with 'half-filled shopping bags' on. The inside of the hospital now looks like a new reality they belong to, and the world outside suddenly starts looking 'unreal':

> . . . . . — O world,
> Your loves, your chances, are beyond the stretch
> Of any hand from here! And so, unreal,
> A touching dream to which we all are lulled
> But wake from separately.

The poem ends with a strong contrast of images: the powerful image of the 'building' towering high like a 'cliff' and the helpless 'crowds' who come with 'wasteful, weak, propitiatory flowers', at least, to try to transcend the thought of their own death.

There are only two ways to write on death: to take a cynical attitude to look at the meaninglessness of death as an absolute emptiness or to leave out all the farcical side of death and extract the elegiac element from it.

"Dublinesque" and "Cut Grass" are of an extremity in their serenity and sadness, just as "The Building" and "The Old Fools" are about the extreme ugliness and helplessness of people facing death.

In "Dublinesque", a poem about a funeral parade in Dublin, the speaker is saved from cynicism by the exotic atmosphere with 'raceguides' or 'rosaries' which makes the whole scene rather unreal. The friendly atmosphere of the funeral parade is not only interesting to look at, but it is deeply impressive because it possesses the air of 'great sadness'. The voice in the parade singing 'Of Ketty or Katy, / As the name meant once / All love, all beauty' reverberates and leaves us with the undescribable sense of being deprived.

The same sadness also pervades "Cut Grass":

> Cut grass lies frail:
> Brief is the breath
> Mown stalks exhale.
> Long, long the death
>
> It dies in the white hours
> Of young-leafed June
> . . . . . .

The 'cut grass' which is now slowly dying is depicted in a beautiful scene of white colours: 'chestnut flowers' blooming, 'hedges' strewn 'snowlike' and 'white lilac' bowing. Everything fits the harmonious tone of nature, where death and life are juxtaposed without colliding.

V

Larkin, as I've discussed, started off as a fake 'romantic' and then turned into a rationalizer who detached himself from both life and death to preserve his own identity. Then he developed into a middle-aged man who awakened to the sense of failure and loss in his own life and the 'Crass Casualty' of life and at the same time to the continuity of communal life. Finally we saw Larkin reaching a state of resignation to both life and death, fully opening his mind to the positive meaning of 'living' in time.

What we notice in Larkin's whole career as a poet is a process of the

poet becoming more adapted to the subjects he chose for his poems. Noel Hughes introduces us to an interesting episode about 'young Larkin' from his university life: 'somehow he Larkin looked more like an old man reaching back for his youth than a young blade breaking out'.[16] From Hughes's comment, there emerges an image of Larkin feeling not exactly at ease with the fact of being young. Larkin, changing from a man 'who is choosing to live his life in a certain way' to a man 'who has lived many years in that way',[17] gradually seems to become more relaxed about his theme and starts feeling more comfortable with what he writes about.

Not only Larkin's actual 'ageing', however, but also the poet's continuous struggle with mortality has caused the fundamental changes in his notions of life and death. What Larkin wrote about the 'sadness' of Thomas Hardy's novels can be well adapted to Larkin and his work:

> ... the presence of pain in Hardy's novels is a positive, not a negative, quality – not the mechanical working out of some predetermined allegiance to pessimism or any other concept, but the continual imaginative celebration of what is both the truest and the most important element in life, most important in the sense of most necessary to spiritual development.[18]

Notes

1) "An Interview with the Observer', 1979; Philip Larkin, *Required Writing* (London: Faber and Faber), p. 55.
2) Ibid., p. 47.
3) Philip Larkin, "Introduction" to *The North Ship* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), p. 8.
4) "XXX", *The North Ship*, p. 43.
5) "65 N.", *The North Ship*, p. 45.
6) "XVII", *The North Ship*, p. 29.
7) Stan Smith, *Inviolable Voice; History and Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan Ltd., 1982), p. 175.
8) 'To blarney' means 'to use cajoling talk, nonsense'.
9) A. Alvarez, *Encounter* (XXII, May 1964), p. 72.
10) "Send No Money", *The Whitsun Weddings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), p. 43.

11) "Send No Money", *The Whitsun Weddings*, p. 43.
12) "Dockery and Son", *The Whitsun Weddings*, p. 37.
13) "Church Going", *The Less Deceived*, p. 28.
14) "Faith Healing", *The Whitsun Weddings*, p. 15.
15) Philip Larkin, "Betjeman en Block", *Listen* (Vol. III, No. 2, Spring 1959), p. 19.
16) Noel Hughes, "The Young Mr. Larkin", *Larkin at Sixty*, ed., Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), p. 20.
17) Bruce K. Martin, *Philip Larkin* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), p. 134.
18) Philip Larkin, "Wanted: Good Hardy Critic", *Required Writing*, pp. 172–3.