CHAPTER VI

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Philip Larkin's poetry reflects the chief characteristics of the Movement group of the fifties. Alun Jones voices the feeling of many critics when he writes:

> It is in the poetry of Philip Larkin that the spirit of the 1950s finds its most complete expression in English poetry.¹

After studying Larkin's poetry from *The North Ship* (1945) to *High Windows* (1974), the reader cannot fail to observe the two-fold development of the artist. While his poetry retains the sceptical, empirical and parochial tone of the group, it transcends its narrow limits through his distinctly original voice. The growth of the artist is striking and 'every stride has been complete, considered and well-planned'.² The poems of the first volume, *The North Ship* show all the deficiencies natural to an undergraduate budding poet. But what strikes the reader is his growth, from this early stage of subjective

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lyricism into the master of the most authentic and mature style of *High Windows*. It is so unique and original in its voice and manner that it came to be known as 'Larkinesque' in English poetry. Larkin's place as the most distinguished poet of the second half of the twentieth century is now widely accepted. He has been called "the unofficial poet laureate of post-1945 England" by Donald Davie who also believes that he is 'the central figure in English poetry over the last twenty years.'

When *The North Ship* was republished in 1966, Larkin clearly voiced his sense of awkwardness and embarrassment. He expressed his feeling of 'shame compounded with disappointment' and also 'in some ways being cheated'. The poems have many limitations. They lack authentic, truthful note and suffer from too many derivative influences, chiefly Yeats's and Hardy's. But these poems are interesting because they represent the poet's juvenilia. Behind their rhetorical style and vagueness of emotions, there is an unmistakable intensity of feelings. There

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are powerfully felt impulses that have yet to withstand the scrutiny of 'the less deceived' eye. Nonetheless they are real and genuine, and remain with the poet till the last published volume. The young poet's desire 'to become an instrument ... / For all things to strike music as they please" (Poem IX, TNS 21), evinces his sensitivity to beauty. The easy and spontaneous acceptance of the early creed 'submission is the only good', lacks in conviction; he tries to make up by his efforts to synthesise beauty and happiness through the creation of art. This pursuit of the aesthetic and the moral through art continues in the subsequent volumes. His favourite themes of Time, Death, loneliness, history, human choices, appear in the poems of The North Ship in their embryonic form. They are handled with sincerity and seriousness, indicative of a definite poetic search.

Although a lyrical and subjective tone pervades most of the poems of The North Ship, some of them are dramatic and portray an inner conflict. From the time of Homer, the presentation of human, moral and emotional choices has been a great poetic theme. They are deeply rooted in the human psyche with its dual nature. Larkin depicts an inner struggle to choose between a wild abandonment to
impulsive joy and a patient maturing of the spirit through a dull and daily routine as in Poem XX, (TNS 32-33). This theme appears in the later volumes with an unusual intensity, complexity and dexterity, with a characteristic sense of ambivalence. However, it is very significant that even at such an early stage of his artistic development, the poet is concerned with a truthful portrayal of the equally powerful but seemingly contradictory impulses. It is true that there is an essential duality at the core of any creation of art and the poet himself embodies a duality as artist and as man. Larkin's poetry is a persistent search for an honestly balanced relationship between life and art. In the last poem XXXII (TNS 48) of The North Ship, which was added as a coda by the poet to show the direction his muse was to take in the later volumes, the poet faces a paradoxical situation, where his muse which feeds on romantic love demands a break from that very source of inspiration. This poem is remarkable because of a real life situation which has a convincingness about it. The poet realizes that he has to make a difficult but necessary choice between an unwavering commitment to his muse and seeking fulfilment in life and human love; or to quote Yeats, "to choose perfection of the life or of the work".
This only suggests that Larkin does not just happen to write poetry casually or writes it as a reaction against something. This automatically removes him from the narrow confines of the Movement group with its narrow objectives and an anti-poetic stance. Like any other major poet his poetry springs from far deeper sources. About writing poetry he said: "... it was a vocation, at once difficult as sainthood and easy as breathing" he was fully aware of the sanctity, responsibility, mystery and spontaneity involved in the creation of art. He appears to choose art to other human pursuits when he writes "What calls me is that lifted, rough-tongued bell, if you like ..." in 'Reasons for Attendance' (TLD 18); in an interview he said: "I didn't choose poetry, Poetry chose me". These views show a profound concern with art which only a major poet can truthfully experience and express. Jung writes: "... the creative act, which is the absolute antithesis of mere reaction, will for ever elude the human understanding". Larkin was in the

5 Philip Larkin, Required Writing, p.44.
6 Philip Larkin, Ibid., p.62.
grip of such a creative art.

An ambivalent attitude to life and art is the greatest source of the strength of Larkin's (major) poetry. When *The Less Deceived* was published in 1955, almost ten years after *The North Ship*, the critics at once recognized emergence of a truly representative voice of their age. The title of the suggestion suggests a more cautious, guarded stance that the poet now intends to take. It is almost as if Larkin is trying to appease his own earlier feeling of 'being cheated'. The general tone of the poems of *The Less Deceived* is tentative, but always truthful. Larkin's own conviction that tension between two impulses reside at the centre of any creative piece of art', finds its creative expression in these poems. The coexistence of the romantic impulses and their ruthless scrutiny pervades throughout the volume and the final ambivalent note appears to be the only honest and humble response of the poet. The opening poem, 'Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album' (TLD 13–14) deals with the theme of time and its organic relationship with Man. The poem is representative of

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8 Philip Larkin, Ibid., p.83
Larkin's newly developed style. It is anti-sentimental, sceptical and empirical in tone, It "... records / Dull days as dull" and "a real girl in a real place" with a photographic accuracy and detail, and so, "In every sense empirically true". But the physical world of reality and the inner world of thoughts and emotions are inseparable for the poet. The imagination combines the ideal and the real image, the concrete and the general in the fusion of genuine poetry. Here also, the poem transcends the narrow confines of time, place and person. In the end, the past and the future dissolve into a clear and lasting present and the personal experience is elevated to the level of a universal quest for truth: Man's relationship with Time. Time, instead of being an obstacle becomes a source of deeper involvement and the experience of love is immortalized ironically, by the very passage of time: "It holds you like a heaven, and you lie / Unvariably lovely there". These lines remind the reader of Hardy's "Thoughts of Phena" in which the older poet's earlier regret for the loss of the beloved through time is regained through memory:

"Thus I do but the phantom retain
Of the maiden of yore
As my relic; yet haply the best of her fined
in my brain ..."
... No mark of her late time as dame in her dwelling, whereby

I may picture her there

But Larkin's poem is more complex, dramatic and moves through irony, caution, self-mockery and sceptical analysis of every emotion before it arrives at its truth in a casual but concrete way. And even the final pronouncement is not absolute but tentative and ambivalent. Time is a major theme in Larkin's poetry and 'Age', 'Triple Time', 'Arrivals, Departures', 'At Grass' and a few other poems directly or obliquely deal with this theme in varying tones, manner and final perception. The hopelessly pessimistic tone of 'Next, please' reflects one mood of the poet:

Only one ship is seeking us, a black —
Sailed unfamiliar, towing at her back
A huge and birdless silence. ...

(TLB 20)

These lines may remind one of Andrew Marvell's lines:

But at my back I always hear
Time's winged chariot hurrying near;
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.10

(To His Coy Mistress)

Both the poets are haunted by the tyranny of time
and the knowledge of mortality, but while Marvell is
obviously play acting, Larkin's sense of time's tyranny
is nearly tragic. Art may be immortal but man the crea­
tor is subservient to time. Yet in another mood, joyful
and happy, the young bride of the "Wedding Wind" (TLD 15)
challenges the earlier gloom by asking:

Can even death dry up
These newly delighted lakes?

And here Larkin is fearlessly romantic.

Or in 'Coming', (TLD 17) a thrush seems to say in
'its fresh - peeled voice':

"It will be spring soon,
It will be spring soon"

10 Andrew Marvell, 'To His Coy Mistress' Quoted
Immortal Poems of the English Language ed. Oscar
Williams (1952 rpt, New York: Washington Square Press,
Thus, it is difficult to talk of a particular tone or theme in Larkin's poetry. It embraces opposites. Larkin's poetic world delineates a wide range of human emotions which vary considerably in perception, tone, manner and attitudes. Larkin's dual awareness of the irreducible potential of human spirit and the limitations of the finite generally induces him to take up a largely cautious and non-committal, ambivalent, but nonetheless, honest stance.

'Church Going' (TLD 28–29) may perhaps be described as the most representative poem of the post-modern age. It explores the place of faith in an age which is past belief and disbelief. Larkin's refusal to submit easily to any established faith or reliable absolutes has often been misinterpreted as his being a hopeless pessimist. But, the poet's search is for an honest truth, to discover meaning in this seemingly meaningless world. The poem is a proof of the poet's artistic achievement, and its success lies in its forceful portrayal of two equally powerful but contradictory impulses, (one romantic and the other sceptical), that reside at the centre of the human psyche. The title suggests various tones, including the flickering hope of the survival of human values or the place of faith in modern life. The Larkin persona assumes a dual role;
he is casual and serious, romantic and sceptical, awkward and at ease ("take(s) off cycle-clips in awkward reverence"). He may represent the Movement group with his empirical and guarded approach to his surrounding and refusal to assume any definite stand: "someone must know: I don't". At once humble and open-ended, his casual response is deceptive. The mask of indifference and non-involvement conceals a deeper compulsion and the urge for submission. Unlike the earlier speaker of The North Ship who spontaneously surrenders - "the heart in its own endless silence kneeling" (NS 21), the present persona only hesitantly admits that he often stops at this place and wonders why "It pleases ... to stand in silence here". The poet's solemn search for an honest answer is brilliantly depicted through subtle modulations, twists and turns, and intense dramatization. The final assertion of faith is a negative seeming, but deeply positive, assertion, though ironic and ambivalent in its tone:

A serious house on serious earth it is,  
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,  
Are recognized and robed as destinies.

He affirms a hope that 'someone will forever' 'gravitate to this ground' which was once 'proper to grow wise in'
but with an awareness of 'so many dead lie around'.
This perhaps can be the only truly honest response of a
sensitive man, - (a representative)-of a generation which
has suffered through the horrors of the war, the proxim-
ity of death, and the accompanying uncertainties and
insecurity in daily existence.

The themes of human choices and their validity and
futility keep recurring in a number of poems. 'Places,
Loved Ones', 'Reasons for Attendance', 'No Road', 'Poetry
of Departure', 'Toads' are a few poems that juxtapose the
Larkin Persona's preference for solitude, withdrawal and
passivity, "a deliberate step backwards" against the
majority's active participation in the world of action.
After depicting truthfully and powerfully both the sides
of the argument, generally the persona takes up an extre-
meely humble and moral stand:

I don't say, one bodies the other
One's spiritual truth;
But I do say it's hard to lose either
When you have both.

'Toads', (TLD 33)
Such a profoundly humane and moral approach to life and art can arise only from an artist who is absolutely honest to his perception and its portrayal. There is an undeniably moral concern running through Larkin's evaluation of human choices. Just as he reveres his art, he values human life with equal sensitivity and responsibility. In 'Deceptions' (FLD 37), he expresses his profound sympathy for the raped girl - "Even so distant, I can taste the grief, / ... he made you gulp." and ponders upon the human propensity to deception through blind desire.

Ever since the Fall, man has lost his ideal of Paradise, and his Reason and Will are separated; his perpetual falters through desire and his knowledge of the ability of reason to dispel the illusions, result into an acceptance of both, the limitations and the potentials of human life and creative art. All true poetry enhances human awareness and imparts a fresh insight to our perceptions.

Larkin is aware that he writes poetry in an increasingly anti-poetic age, for the post-war world which has been "disillusioned with disillusionment itself."11 Establishment of any claim of imagination or emotion has to

pass through the ruthless scrutiny of the poet's 'less deceived' eye. No simplistic approach to human problems can ever be truthful or convincing. Larkin's fidelity to daily reality, even while establishing imaginative absolutes in poetry, results in the creation of a truthful and ambivalent note. The tension between the real and the ideal often leads to such ambiguous lines: "Nothing, like something, happens anywhere" (TLD 39), at once accepting the possibility and impossibility of hope.

With the publication of *The Whitman Weddings* in 1964 (again a decade after the last volume) the poet was a recipient of many honours and gained an unequivocal recognition as a poet of the urbanised industrial modern society. There is a noticeable development in the extension of linguistic range, enlargement of sympathy towards the common man's predicament, a clear and well defined poetic world, more familiar situations, an extraordinary ease and naturalness in the use of colloquial diction. In short, Larkin now emerges as the most authentic and distinguished English voice of the post-war times, a poet with an unusual gift of creating poetry out of the most unpastic subjects.
The vague abstractions of *The North Ship* are now replaced by the familiar identifiable people, places and situations. The poems effectively bring out the ironies and complexities of the urban 'out-price crowd'. Larkin's immense sympathy for the common men and the portrayal of the commercial wasteland that they inhabit, in a simple and concerned way is in complete contrast to Eliot's allusive and obscure version. Larkin's concern for the accessibility of poetry to its readers and poetry's primary concern to give pleasure and enjoyment to them links him with the humanist tradition of Wordsworth, Hardy, Edward Thomas, Betjeman and others. Poetry is "Man speaking to men" and as Donald Davie writes:

"For the poetry to be great, it must reek of the humans, as Wordsworth's poetry does. This is not a novel contention, but perhaps one of those things that cannot be said too often."  

Larkin's concern for his audience led him to his anti-modernist attitude. Writing in an introduction to *All What Jazz*, he clearly states his views:

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I dislike such things (modern art) not because they are new, but they are irresponsible exploitation of technique in contradiction of human life as we know it.\footnote{13}

and voices his genuine concern for the ordinary commonplace life:

I don't want to transcend the commonplace,
I love the commonplace life. Everyday things are lovely to me.\footnote{14}

This refusal to transcend is not a mere acceptance of any limitation. The opening poem 'Here' (TWW 9) is a journey to 'unfenced existence'. Surprisingly the vision of a Larkin persona has now become more objective, less gloomy and the emotions are sufficiently depersonalized to let him laugh freely at himself as well as others. This ability to laugh at his own expense takes a self-deprecating tone in this volume and the next. But the

\footnote{13} Philip Larkin, \textit{Required Writing}, p. 297.

most significant aspect of this volume is, that there are more moments of transcendence and a definite indication of some possibilities of spiritual liberation.

'The Whitsun Weddings', the title-poem significantly reveals the chief characteristics of Larkin's new poetic achievement. The movement of the poem is from the negative to the positive - the speaker who appears wry and indifferent, most unlikely to appreciate the festivity, gradually comes around with an assertion of faith in such simple rituals of common people. The surface irony and distance are dropped as the poem progresses and the spontaneous participation of the persona reveals a totally transformed and fresh response, which survives to the very end. The poem celebrates his growing faith in the survival of the basic human values. While Larkin retains his commitment to reality, he is surprisingly open to the moments of transcendence and joy. The final stanza creates a strange feeling of commingled love, celebration, pathos and apprehension. The image of "arrow shower" suggests fertility and growth and 'somewhere becoming rain' is equally hopeful. Though his characteristic ambivalence raises its head, when even at the festive finale, tending to prevent the poet from
brining it to any perfect absolute by calling it "this frail travelling coincidence", the close is one of hearty sense of fulfilled experience.

A truly great poem always enhances our awareness. The meaning lies in its sensitive alertness. The marvellously accurate, detailed and sensitive description of the industrial landscape and people that inhabit it create a unique world of beauty and truth. Larkin reflects an aesthete's sensibility to see the world. His early attempts to find perfection in art and life (TNS Poem XXXII), are not easily successful. However, at this later stage of his poetic development, he is able to view both the world of facts and the world of imagination blended in the world of poetry. This artist's search to synthesise beauty and truth, finds a momentary transcendence in this and some other poems of this volume.

Larkin's major themes of love and human choices persist in this volume with a greater intensity and complexity - 'Mr. Bleaney', 'Love Songs in Age', 'Faith Healing', 'Dockery and Son', 'Self's the Man' and others vary in tone and attitude. There are moments of intense gloom when the poet confronts the ennui and meaninglessness
of the modern existence. In 'Dockery and Son' (TW 37-38) he writes:

*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.*

But even in such utter hopelessness, the poet does not give in to despair and his concern is with what is left behind. Inspite of the boredom, fear and death, 'something' is left behind. The poet's quest is for that: "I needs must turn / To know what prints I leave" he wrote in 'Age' (TLD 30). So, his primary concern is with the relationship of past, present and future, of man and time, i.e. with human history and preservation of art and experience. Even the sensitive and imaginative depiction of the physical world in his poems reflects the same preoccupation with the passage of time and the human potential to transcend its limitations. He reflects on the mortality of man and immortality of art, which is the subject of the last poem 'Arundel Tomb' (TW 46). The passage of time is beautifully expressed: "Snow fell undated. Light/Each summer thronged the glass". Such
memorable lines, simple, and yet loaded, unequivocally ensure Larkin's place in the history of English poetry.

Though time has destroyed much in human history, 'something' vital and perennial has survived its onslaught: "Only an attitude remains". Time may be an adverse force to all that man aspires to achieve or wants to preserve but the poetry is immortalised, the 'attitude' remains eternally. Larkin has created a world of art through love which will continue to survive. However, it is difficult to simplify the complexity and incomprehensibility involved in such issues. Larkin's ambivalent response to all human problems arises because of his faith in the human worthwhileness and simultaneous awareness of the limitations of the finite consciousness. He is a poet who can sensitively and truthfully portray the savage ironies of human existence, and make the reader aware of his responsibilities to life, but such a subtle, sensitive and humane poet ultimately leaves it to the reader to explore his own resources:

Hours giving evidence
Or birth, advance
On death equally slowly.
And saying so to some
Means nothing; others it leaves
Nothing to be said.

'Nothing To be Said' (TWW 11)
It would be apt to observe the development of the Larkin persona, now more complex, ironic, satirical and self-deprecatory and then retaining his basic sensitivity, sympathy, subtlety and casualness. Some of the poems of *The Whitsun Weddings* and *High Windows* are powerful dramatizations and Larkin excels in his portrayal of the complex and intricate human emotions with unusual ease and naturalness, blending the colloquial with the formal, with an unusual grace and skill. His earlier preference for solitude and isolation, is often relinquished later and he partakes of the gaieties and sorrows of common humanity. The vision of death does not obsess the speaker and he smilingly and ambivalently puts it:

What are days for? ...
They are to be happy in:
Where can we live but days? 'Days' (TWW 27)

There is a simultaneous acceptance of the limitations of time and the human capacity to derive happiness and meaning from the very situation.

Love appears now in a more affirmative perspective.
"In everyone there sleeps / A sense of life lived according
to love", he writes in "Faith Healing" (TWW 15), and questions whether "the glare of that much-mentioned brilliance, love", can ever "solve, and satisfy" (TWW 12). His perceptions and responses vary from poem to poem but very significantly he ends the volume on a more positive and less ambivalent tone:

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

'An Arundel Tomb' (TWW 46)

'The poems of High Windows vary in tone and manner not only from those of the earlier volumes but also amongst one another. The satirical tone, very rarely expressed in the earlier volumes ("Naturally the Foundation will Bear Your Expenses", (TWW 13) appears in 'Homage To a Government' (HW 29), 'Money' (HW 40), 'This Be The Verse' (HW 30), 'Posterity (HW 27) and even 'Sympathy in White Major (HW 11). In the last two poems the humour is self-directed. But these poems bring out Larkin's growing concern and alarm at the despoliation of England. They are often angry and bitter in tone - He calls his beloved England "First slum of Europe" (HW 22) or "I listen to money singing" (HW 40) or "All we can hope to leave them now
"is money" - all suggesting the poet's alarm at and disapproval of the materialistic approach and growing commercialization of our times. The most appropriate example of this ironical tone is in 'The Old Fools' (HW 19–20). The poem is a profound meditation on the helplessness of man before the tyranny of time and finality of death. The surface brutality and mercilessness of the attack is only an ironical mask that conceals the deepest human sympathy. The poem opens with the relentless questionings and abuses at the old fools' pathetic predicament and their ignorance of imminent death. The irony of human existence, and the impotency before Time is brought out with an exceptional immediacy. The highest achievement of the poet is in his ability to portray this profound and metaphysical quest for the meaning of human existence in an unusually simple and colloquial diction. This ironic mask is perhaps necessary to conceal the sensitive and subtle emotions; in a world which grows more commercial, complex and dehumanized, the only effective way to communicate for the poet seems to be through this irony. The deeper the emotions, the greater is the need to restrain and conceal them.

Larkin's poetry is unique in that it effectively brings out the ironies and complexities of human existence.
without losing the essential faith in human nature. The depiction of 'The Old Fools' as the bewildered, baffled, confused lot - unaware of the realities of their life and time reminds the reader of the women of 'Faith Healing' (TWW 15) - "dumb" ... and "like an idiot child" - or "the stumbling" lambs of 'First Sight' (TWW 36) - They all seem to portray the confused, helpless, pathetic humanity. But while Larkin is aware of this limitations of the finite trapped human existence, he never surrenders to hopelessness. Just as he records the old fools's "Ash hair, toad hands, prune face dried into lines" and other ugly details of their degenerated existence, ecstatically responds to the moments of beauty - To bring to bloom the million petalled flower / Of being here". The awareness of being alive on this earth is gratefully and bountifully acknowledged. The poem ends with a characteristic open up attitude "well, we shall find out", ambivalently accepting both the horror of death and the joy and responsibility of living.

Larkin's ability to explore truth with a superb control over his medium is seen in 'The Building' (HW 24-26), one of his major poems. That the building is a hospital is made explicit only through the details of description. But these physical, concrete details assume a symbolic
significance and the oblique reference to the cathedral only enhances its complexity. The minute details of the patients' nervous gestures, their fearful expressions and their proximity to death remind us of the old fools' pathetic predicament with "faces restless and resigned". "Humans, caught / On ground curiously neutral, "Some old, but most at that vague age that claims / The end of choice, the last of hope; and all / Here to confess that something has gone wrong'. The building is even compared with the prison. "O world / Your loves, your chances are beyond the stretch / of any hand from here!" They are beyond hope and help.

The poem brings out the inadequacy of man to out-build death with this new faith in medicine, science or technology. The controlled tone of the poem ironically conceals a tragic awareness of the inadequacy of all modern human attempts to transcend death. The acceptance of the fact of mortality is inevitable and the flowers in the last lines of the poem indicate the fragile beauty and ironic truth - "wasteful, weak, propitiatory flowers".

However, this awareness of death and human impotency do not dispel the essential value of life in Larkin's
Especially *High Windows* has more poems confirming Larkin's faith in the survival of human values. The opening poem 'To The Sea' (HW 9-10) reflects the same spirit of 'The Whitsun Weddings' (TWW 21-23). The history of mankind and of a nation retain the essence of human values in their customs, traditions and rituals; and so, even when the full significance cannot be comprehended, "through habits they do best". 'Show Saturday', 'High Windows' also echo the same note that human potential survives the ravages of time. The Larkin persona's preference for solitude and withdrawal is now questioned and even doubted. In 'Vers de Societe' (HW 35), he dramatises these two responses - "all solitude is selfish" and "Virtue is social" and finally surrenders to the later response and once again confirms his faith in the validity of such social festivities for they enhance man's capacity to love and grow. It is Larkin's faith in human solidarity that finds expression in the poems of this volume. Larkin is a truly humanist poet with his concern for man, his traditions, history and nature. Elisabeth Drew perceptively remarks:

... The mysteries and sufferings remain and must be accepted. The humanist faith rests on any explanations but on experience of value
in the human tradition and in the individual relationship between man and nature, man and man ... to the creative energies of man's spirit.¹⁵

Some of the poems of *High Windows* celebrate the living relationship between man and nature. The earliest impulses to surrender to the beauty and mystery of nature: "I will attend to the trees and their gracious silence" (HW 31) are reaffirmed in a totally transformed way and 'The Trees' (HW 12) break their silence and "The last year is dead, they seem to say, / Begin afresh, afresh, afresh." 'Solar,' 'Livings', 'Out Grass' directly and openly celebrate the moments of beauty and transcendence. Larkin transcends the limitations of time through the creation of his art.

But these moments of transcendence are not always attained without the inescapable ambivalence. 'High Windows' is concerned with man's capacity to capture that moment of beauty and truth. The poem's initial ironic tone is intended to shock the reader into an awareness of the mechanical, dehumanised world he inhabits.

But gradually the movement from negative to a more positive displays the poet's complete control over his medium. The last stanza is a classic example of the typically Larkinseque sublime. "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".

The tension between two equally powerful impulses, one leading up to an assertion of faith and the other remaining rooted in earthy realism lends a rare beauty and subtlety to Larkin's poetry. His early vague desire to receive the "image of a snow-white unicorn ... and its golden horn" (TNS 33) is concretely realised in the last poem of High Windows 'The Explosion' (HW 42) moves from an ironical viewing of mining diaster to a vision of transcendence. The ambivalent experience of domestic and awesome reality is finally transcendental and the situation rises into a visionary moment where the Christian promise of the Resurrection of the flesh is visualised and "Larger than in life they managed / Gold as on a coin ..."

Larkin's poetic world is unique, modern and undeniably
British. The roots of his poetry are in native English tradition which runs "... 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." The poet's own version is only partially acceptable for while he definitely sets up a task of reestablishing English poetry against the 'modernist' tradition forged mainly by Eliot's and Pound's internationalised poetry written under the influence of French symbolism and imagism and an obsession with the elusive unity of European tradition, his own poetry inevitably shares some of the elements of the selfsame modern tradition which he protested to resist.

As to Larkin's place as one of the very few major poets of the second half of the twentieth century, it is deservedly secure. His poetry blends the native English tradition with the quintessentially modern elements.

Early in his career he had said that his poetry has been influenced by Yeats and Hardy. These two different veins combined with an unflinching quest for his own truthful voice and distinct voice emerges from the tension and appeals to our modern sensibility in an unerring way.

Larkin wrote to an American student:

"I looked to Hardy rather than to Yeats as my ideal, and eventually a more rationed approach, less hysterical and emphatic, asserted itself." 17

He has also said: "Hardy taught me to feel rather than write" 18. One definitely finds similarity in emotion and attitude in Larkin's and Hardy's poetry. They both value suffering as essential for spiritual growth. Like Hardy the Larkin persona also has a preference for solitude and withdrawal and both share a profound concern for moral choice. Hardy emphasizes the value of "loving kindness" in human relations in the context of an

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18 Philip Larkin, Required Writing, p.111
apparently indifferent cosmos. Larkin also reflects a similar compassion for the urban man - the unaware 'Mr. Bleaney', the dumb and confused women of 'Faith Healing', the suffering patients of 'The Building' and the helplessly and hopelessly lost 'The Old Fools'. They are all depicted with immense sympathy and deep compassion. Inspite of their suffering and sorrow, they are approached with an unmistakable human warmth. Like Hardy, Larkin celebrates the fact "of being here" with equal responsibility and reverence. He affirms the fundamental value of love and fellowship which overcome alienation and despair. 'The Darkling Thrush' could be cited as an excellent example to show how from, in the midst of a total despair and experience of nullity the poem emerges into an experience of joy and hope. There is an innate duality in the experience of Hardy's poem: a totally passive surrender to suffering and an active sense of light and joy. The deliberate choice of thrush to sing and celebrate, transports the poem to an unexpectedly positive level of awareness. The poem celebrates the act of poetic will which suggests a possibility of survival of joy in an apparent world of dissolution. Larkin's 'coming' (TLD 17) also has a similar pattern. But the difference lies in the latter poet's ability to
give the experience a new incarnation. The poem is disarmingly simple, ironical, direct and unpoetic. Hardy’s thrush looks heavily poetic before Larkin’s lines:

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

(TLD 17)

Larkin simplifies the simplicity of Hardy. The poem is almost like a nursery-rhyme but how pointed and how genuine in its group of the antinomies of life!

When Larkin says “Betjeman is a true heir of Thomas Hardy” he expresses his administration for their “fundamental interest (in) human life, or human life in society...” and for their concern for the places, the landscape that the people inhabited. Larkin’s own poems reflect this concern for the rapidly changing

19 Philip Larkin, Required Writing, p. 211.
topography which is at once the cause and effect of cultural and moral erosion. Betjeman's poems tend to be nostalgic; Larkin's assume a different tone, not of an open regret or nostalgia, but almost a fond assimilation of facts to imagination. Though in "Going Going" (HW 21-22) the tone is very Betjeman'esque in lines like:

And that will be England gone,
The shadows, the meadows, the lanes,
The guildhalls, the carved choirs.

Larkin calls Betjeman "unique" for he "knocked over the 'No Road Through to Real Life' signs that this new (modern) tradition had erected, and who restored direct intelligible communication to poetry ..."20

He brought poetry back to the general reader, and Larkin shares this concern for the audience, once again reflecting his faith in human understanding and their ability to respond, to love and ultimately grow. Larkin's choice of simple diction, his faith in the basic enjoyability of poetry take him close to the native English tradition of Wordsworth, Hardy, Kipling, Houseman and others.

20 Philip Larkin, Ibid., p. 217.
Larkin's rejection of 'modernist' tradition is not as final as it is often made out to be. He is often called 'parochial' or 'provincial' because of his refusal to be involved with foreign poetry, and his rejection of Eliot's allusive style in poetry. But, Eliot started his poetic career when he was faced with a poetry which was dying, of either decadence or provincialism or its own jingle. He had to be "difficult" because it was his historical need and his concern for 'culture' and 'civilisation' which includes 'great variety and complexity playing upon refined sensibility'. When Larkin came to the poetic scene, "English poetry went off on a loop-line that took it away from the general reader ..., and "needed elucidation" so, Larkin's characteristic response "Foreign poetry? No!" is as much concerned about establishing English poetry to its proper place.

Larkin's poetic search is two-fold, moral and aesthetic. So, even when he claims rejection of Yeats's influence on his later poetry, it is only at a surface level.

21 T.S. Eliot, Selected Essays, Quoted Philip Larkin, Required Writing, p.217.

22 Philip Larkin, Ibid., p.216-217.
Even if he seems to leave Yeats behind, he himself reaches that level of poetic imagination where he almost ecstatically accepts some of the profoundest values of human existence which Yeats has discovered through his poetic growth. If one compares Yeats's 'A Prayer For My Daughter' with Larkin's 'Born Yesterday' (TLD 24), the affinity between the two poems at a deeper level can be seen under the seeming differences and also how deliberately Larkin plays down his emotions in contrast to Yeat's highstrung ones. There is an oblique link between the two. Both the poems begin in gloom and both reject that beauty which "lose natural kindness" (Yeats) or "pull you off your balance" (Larkin); They both value that 'innocence' which preserves precious values and is therefore divine. Larkin deliberately underplays his emotions, but his wishing for "dullness is equated with "enthralled catching of happiness". Both the poets value and wish for 'customs' to survive - 'Nothing uncustomary' as Larkin calls it, and Yeats 'Ceremony's a name for the rich horn, / And custom for the spreading laurel tree'.

In spite of all the adverse elements, Yeats in his

natural exaltation, and Larkin in his characteristic undertone, wish for balance between happiness and peace. The language, metre and tone of these two poets are totally different, but at a deeper level they both accept and wish for that 'custom' which poems like 'The Whitsun Weddings', 'Here', 'To The Sea', 'Show Saturday' celebrate.

Larkin continues to show Yeats's influence on his poetry till the end. 'The Old Fools' (HW 19–20) and 'High Windows' (HW 17) show Larkin's ability to comprehend the highest and the lowest in one poem. Yeats writes in 'Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop':

But Love has pitched his mansion in
The place of excrement;
For nothing can be sole or whole
That has not been rent.\(^{24}\)

The opening stanza of 'High Windows' suggests as if life is only a coupling; but then in the final stanza he suddenly transcends to such moments of beauty and happiness that he says:

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

\(^{24}\) Ibid., p.161.
Thus, for Larkin, happiness begins at banal but ends in eternity and for Yeats love begins in place of excrement but ends in sublime mansion of eternity. Larkin has expressed his wish to free himself from the grip of Yeats the dreamer, of the early poetry, and made Hardy his model. But there never is total rejection of Yeats; and Yeats and Hardy both matter to him till the end. In his sudden flights of imagination, like 'million petalled flower of being here' or "sun comprehending glass", he is closer to Yeats's sublimity which is rarely seen in Hardy. Poems like, 'To The Sea', 'Here', 'The Whitsun Weddings', the poetic flights have same thorough richness of a typically Keatsian poem. Larkin's anti-romantic stance was largely a historical necessity and a safer mechanism. When he started his poetic career, Larkin's later poems 'Here 'Water, 'Solar' are loaded with imagery, metaphors and epithets like 'To Autumn'. Larkin can forsake his privilege and when his imagination is ignited, he writes like Keats, not only restricted to epithets or wearing of words or the quality of visual graphics but the delight of abandonment. In 'Ode to a Nightingale' Keats also wallows in gloom and depression but succeeds in overcoming in 'To Autumn' with greater insight into life. This progress
from Negative to Positive is seen in Keats and Yeats: Keats courts death, Yeats courts dream and Larkin courts his ordinariness. But, when they all rise to their imaginative heights, they recover the fullness of their sensibility and pick up entirely the positive and the affirmative.

If we closely examine the course of Eliot's poetry, 'The Waste Land' is apparently a tissue of allusions, apt to put away a poet like Larkin; he gives way increasingly to a poetry of simplicity, lucidity, frankness and even lyricism. 'Ash Wednesday' is a full manifestation of transition from the erudite to the simple, the oblique to the straight. 'Four Quartets' indeed is a monument to Eliot's achievement of absolute simplicity though it has a few marks of the allusive and indirect; learnedness is no longer his favourite weapon nor is it necessary for the reader to be learned to enjoy the poem. The last poem has the simplicity and richness of music. The diction is as simple as in a poem of such gravity could be. Apparently Eliot's poem seems to end in a grand vision of harmony and order, somewhat corresponding to that of Divine Comedy. But, it is a very difficult harmony which he achieves in the poem since scepticism is never too far from the vision of harmony. Helen Gardner, citing Eliot's
essay on Pascal and his observations on Montaigne writes:

'Four Quartets' shows scepticism integrated into faith, it shows the scepticism nonetheless; in a sceptical age it speaks to those whose scepticism stops at the question, and to those who are led to denial as well as those who are led to believe ..."25

This shows that Eliot also was not whitewashing the realities of his world but comprehending them in the idiom of his day. It is only a matter of emphasis that perhaps Eliot erred on this side of faith while Larkin on the other. Both are at once true to themselves and true to their age. One would not hesitate to conclude one's evaluation of Larkin in Eliot's own words:

To pass on to posterity one's own language more highly developed, more refined and more precise than it was before one wrote it, that is the highest possible achievement of the poet as a poet.26


Larkin's contribution to post-Eliot poetry is something very similar to Eliot's own contribution to post-war poetry. Larkin has changed the shape of the language and also the shape of the poetic perception since it is impossible to divorce a poet's creative language from his creative vision.