CHAPTER III

THE LESS DECEIVED
The Less Deceived, published in 1955, almost ten years after The North Ship, definitely shows a gradual but unmistakable development of Larkin as a poet and an artist. Whereas the poems in The North Ship were more subjective in tone and flawed by self-conscious labouring and emotionalism, those in The Less Deceived rise above the level of personal pain. With far less restraint and far more self-confidence the poet handles material from ordinary everyday life. The simplicity of manner and matter now seem to be inherent in his verse and not something imposed. The ring of truthfulness heard everywhere in the volume impresses the reader by the genuineness of the poet's experience; indeed, he is almost invited to believe that these are his own feelings, that his very own experiences find an echo here. The wide generalised nature of the experiences described in The Less Deceived and the technical virtuosity displayed therein caught the attention of critics, and Larkin was soon acknowledged to be a distinctly original and uniquely English voice among the poets of his time.
Larkin's original intention (entirely in keeping with his penchant for the subdued and understated) was to call his 1955 volume simply Various Poems. When asked for something more striking, he selected a phrase 'the less deceived' from the poem entitled 'Deceptions'. The title The Less Deceived suggests a stance towards experience connoting a sceptical cautioniness characteristic of the Movement poets and evident from the titles of their works. John Wain's Mixed Feelings, Kingsley Amis's A Frame of Mind, Elizabeth Jennings's A Way of Seeking and Donald Davie's Brides of Reason are a few examples that suggest an intellectual suspicion about and aversion to grand gestures.

The poems in The Less Deceived are about human suffering, loss of illusions, the validity as also the futility of making choices, and the pleasure and pain of solitude. Larkin's compassion now widens to include humanity itself. His fundamental concern is human life, everyday events and simple and personal emotions. Like his later model Hardy, Larkin has 'an acute eye for human suffering' and he considers it 'a positive moral force'.¹ For Larkin, suffering

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is not negative but essential for spiritual growth. Comment-
ing on Hardy's poetry, Larkin writes:

"... the presence of pain in Hardy's novels is a positive, not a negative, quality not a mechanical working out of some predeter-
minded allegiance to pessimism or any other concept, but the continual imaginative cele-
bration of what is both the truest and the most important element in life, most import-
ant in the sense of most necessary to spiri-
tual development."²

The Less Deceived opens with the poem 'Lines On a Young Lady's Photograph Album' (TLD 13-14). The poem has a casual conversational tone, and an anti-romantic, self-
deprecatory, almost ironical stance. The reader at once marks the distinct quality of a new-found voice so differ-
ent from the romantic yearnings of The North Ship. This is a modern love-poem. It symbolises the effect of the past and its memory on the present. The poem develops through subtle modulations into serious reflection on the art of photography. It begins:

² Philip Larkin, 'Wanted: Good Hardy Critic', Critical Quarterly VIII (Summer 1966), pp.177-8.
At last you yielded up the album, which,
Once open, sent me distracted. All your ages
Matt and glossy on the thick pages!
Too much confectionery, too rich;
I choke on such nutritious images.

The first three stanzas try to dispel any illusion
about the romantic past. Words like 'matt and glossy',
'nutritious images' can evoke no profound sentiments or
feelings. Every effort is made to mock and laugh, almost
satirise any sentimental response to these photographs.

Then, there is a sudden address to the art of photo-
graphy itself which marks a shift from casualness to seri-
ous reflection:

But O, photography! as no art is,
Faithful and disappointing! ...

This art is disappointing and disheartening because it
records faithfully the very lineaments of the past. And
yet it is perhaps the only form of art that appeals to
the modern man and his sensibility. He inhabits the
industrial world, lives in built-up cities and faces drab
realities everyday. The modern art of photography re-
produces the state of things itself:
... that records
Dull days as dull, and hold-it smiles as frauds,
And will not censor blemishes
Like washing lines, and Hall's-Distemper boards,

But shows the cat as disinclined, and shades
A chin as doubled when it is, what grace
Your candour thus confers upon her face!
How overwhelmingly persuades
That this is a real girl in a real place,

In every sense empirically true!

Larkin appreciates the success of the art of photo­
graphy which preserves things as they are; The 'dullness'
the 'frauds', the 'blemishes' are all intact, persuading
"That this is a real girl in a real place".

The real surprise springs upon us when Larkin
asks a deeper question:

Or is it just the past? Those flowers, that gate,
These misty parks and motors, lacerate
Simply by being over; you
Contract my heart by looking out of date.
This turning point of the poem works a sudden sense of release from what is 'empirically true'. These photographs are no longer the records of the past. The very pastness of things impinges on the present awareness.

The girl contracts his heart presently because she belongs to an irreversible past. The earlier light-heartedness has turned into a reflection on life. The very unalterability of the past makes us cry:

Yes, true; but in the end, surely, we cry

Not only at exclusion, but because

It leaves us free to cry ...

The past being a fact may not allow us to justify our grief. But seen in retrospect it imparts a clarity which sends a stab of pain. It is not a romantic or a sentimental regret in which he indulges. Larkin broadens the 'I' into a universal 'we':

... ... ... we know what was

Won't call on us to justify

Our grief, however hard we yowl across

The gap from eye to page. ... ...
The photographs makes a difference to the poet's sense of reality. But the universalisation of personal, almost selfish, suffering into the impersonal and selfless inquiry suggests an effort to cleanse himself of a mere sense of possessiveness. Finally the poem approaches a stasis of meditiveness:

In short, a past that no one now can share,
No matter whose your future; calm and dry,
It holds you like a heaven, and you lie
Unvariably lovely there,
Smaller and clearer as the years go by.

Past and future have both dissolved into a clear and lasting present now. The photograph has become a permanent source of memories. Time, instead of being an obstacle, becomes a source of deeper involvement and she is almost immortalized, by the very process of time.

In 'Lines On a Young Lady's Photograph Album', Larkin uses the conventional vocabulary and form. Even the subject - 'photograph album' is most unpoetic. But then he finally builds up the emotions and comes to the final assertion and acceptance of love. Through caution, irony and even mockery, he tries to destroy every possible illusion.
Through his own empirical, hard way, through the concrete and the particular, he arrives at the truth which is inescapable. Thus, love enters into the poem, as also in the consciousness of the poet, in a casual but concrete way. The earlier effort to reject and dismiss the whole experience lightly is defeated. The transformation has been gradual but total, in a profoundly sad way.

But Larkin's 'tentative cast of mind' does not allow him to surrender too easily to the moments of affirmation. In 'Church Going' (TLD 28–29) the most significant and representative poem by Larkin, this struggle, or the conflict within the psyche of the personae is most poignantly brought out. Larkin is often regarded as a 'hopeless pessimist' because of his inability to submit to any established faith, or 'reliable absolutes'. Andrew Motion comments: 'The dilemma is not whether to believe in God but what to put in God's place'. Larkin has said that his concern in this poem is with "going to church, not religion. ... I tried to suggest this by the title - and the union of the important stages of human life - birth

3 Andrew Motion, Philip Larkin (New York, Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1982), p.60.
marriage and death — that going to church represents."  

The greatest strength of the poem lies in its intense dramatization. Larkin himself has acknowledged his conscious effort at it. There is a constant shift in tone and attitude between the two impulses in the speaker, which is effectively brought out.

The poem begins with the speaker’s initial wryness. His casual narration and sceptical attitude, at once alerts the reader to the customary honesty of his response. The reader suspects that this is not the wholehearted belief of the speaker and becomes attentive and curious:

Once I am sure there’s nothing going on
I step inside, letting the door thud shut.
Another church: matting, seats, and stone,
And little books; sprawlings of flowers, cut
For Sunday, brownish new; some brass and stuff
Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;
And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,
Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off
My cycle clips in awkward reverence,
Move forward, run my hand around the font.

4 Ian Hamilton, ‘Four Conversations’, p.73.
The sceptical manner almost becomes cynical when the speaker observes the things around him and lists them in the manner of a reporter. The deftly employed sensory effects, chiefly the audio and the visual, build up a tense expectation in the reader. After almost fixing the ordinariness of the scene around, suddenly, in an important but unguarded moment, the speaker 'take(s) off (My) cycle clips in awkward reverence' - The action of the poem seems to start sprouting from this point, its exploration into the inner spaces of the church begins and with it a search into himself:

Move forward, run my hand around the font.

From where I stand, the roof looks almost new
Cleaned, or restored? Someone would know; I don't.
Mounting the lectern, I peruse a few
Hectoring large-scale verses, and pronounce
'Here endeth' much more loudly than I'd meant.
The echoes snigger briefly. Back at the door
I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence,
Reflect the place was not worth stopping for.

The speaker's lack of intention to attend to any service was clear from the start because he had made sure
that there was nothing going on inside before entering the church. His careless, casual stance is further confirmed when he let 'the door thud shut'. The purposelessness of his visit is revealed when he observes mere 'things' in the church without evoking any serious religious feelings. But he appears to be vacillating between respect and annoyance. This attitude towards established religion, is not uncommon to Larkin persons. In 'Aubade'\(^5\) he calls religion:

"that vast moth-eaten musical brocade
Created to pretend we never die ..."

But this speaker of "Church Going" is vague and ambiguous about the purpose of his visit. He wavers between a nonchalant 'God knows' and 'awkward reverence' and the self-conscious 'Here endeth' louder than intended. But the inner drama begins as soon as he attempts to arrive at the conclusion that 'the place was not worth stopping for.' The very next moment the other voice, more sensitive, strives to speak out:

Yet stop I did: in fact I often do,
And always and much at a loss like this,
Wondering what to look for; wondering, too,

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When churches fall completely out of use
What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep
A few cathedrals chronically on show,
Their parchment, plate and pyx in locked cases,
And let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep.
Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?

The speaker, appears to be at a loss, wonders at the
nature of this compulsion, and reflects on the uses of the
church for future generations. He questions any possibility
of its religious, philosophical or spiritual value and
suggests that such cathedrals may continue to exist only
as historical monuments or as evidence of past superstition
or lost faith. Apparently the human need for a supra-
rational explanation (superstition, if not religion) will
last:

Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?

Or, after dark, will dubious women come
To make their children touch a particular stone;
Pick simples for a cancer; or on some
Advised night see walking a dead one?
Power of some sort or other will go on
In games, in riddles, seemingly at random;
But superstition, like belief, must die,
And what remains when disbelief has gone?
After making an assertion, an affirmation of faith: 'Power of some sort or other will go on'; the speaker once again suggests that these are all futile attempts to find some place for man in the universe. These two distinct voices are two major impulses residing in modern man's psyche. The speculation further throws up a question what is left when belief and superstition are followed by disbelief, and when that too dies? But before the reader could dwell on such a serious termination of human belief and disbelief he fancies the lot himself:

Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky,

A shape less recognizable each week,
A purpose more obscure. I wonder who
Will be the last, the very last, to seek
This place for what it was; one of the crew
That tap and jot and know what rood-leafs were?
Some ruin-bibber, randy for antique,
Or Christmas-addict, counting on a whiff
Of gown-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh?
Or will he be my representative,

So, when the churches have completely decayed into uselessness, and have lost their significance totally, perhaps
only the 'ruin-bibbers' or 'christmas-addicts' will visit them occasionally. However, there is still a possibility that another visitor, sort of his own representative, might look in once in a while in the belief that the churches are repositories of tradition and values that are slowly and silently perishing:

... it held unspilt
So long and equably what since it found
Only in separation - marriage, and birth,
And death, and thoughts of these - for whom was built

This special shell?

By now the reader has realised that the speaker is not so 'bored' or 'ignorant' as he was led to believe. He is much more serious and thoughtful, his meanderings are not accidental or random but thoughtful and purposeful. He has been wiser for the knowledge that the church is the source of 'power of some sort or other' because it symbolises some basic aspiration of the human spirit. The religious dogma may not be fully believed in; but 'the roots of culture lie in the immemorial rituals associated with birth, marriage, death which have been celebrated on this spot'. The speaker comes up with the positive

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assertion, 'It pleases me to stand in silence here'. The conclusion of the poem is poet's own restrained even solemn voice:

A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognised, and robed as destinies.
And that much never can be obsolete,
Since someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious,
And gravitating with it to this ground,
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,
If only that so many dead lie round.

The last stanzas is a profound reflection on man and his aspirations. In spite of his scepticism towards the teachings of the church, the speaker acknowledges and yields to the compulsion of 'being serious' in 'a serious house' on 'serious earth'. Larkin seems to suggest that religion embodies and preserves the metaphysical substance which lies deep in the physical life. The expression 'never can be obsolete' suggests the eternal and the transcendental nature of the church which survives.

The poem progresses in feeling like the earlier 'Lines on the Young Lady's Photograph Album'. The speaker
who had entered the church in a sceptical frame of mind leaves it moved and stirred despite himself. As R.N. Parkinson has aptly expressed:

"It is a typically mid-twentieth century negative-seeming affirmation of the need for faith and of the existence of faith under the most unexpected guises and circumstances."7

Terry Whalen calls such moments of submission Larkin's carefully measured moments of epiphany'. 'Larkin's tendency is' he writes, 'to record the moment of flight and at the same time to hold back.'8 So, the speaker in 'Church going' in the end is both, 'mixed up with earth and gestures towards an eternal land of the spirit'.9

Larkin is at once ironic and romantic, his quality of imaginative restraint showing intelligent control over


romantic energies. He is not an overtly optimistic poet, but there are moments in his poetry that suggest the irreducible potential of the human spirit to withstand all pessimism. This ambivalent attitude which tends towards both the impulses can be felt in a number of poems in *The Less Deceived*. At this stage of his poetic development, there is a stronger tendency to be 'less deceived' - a stubborn reluctance to submit to any illusions without, at the same time, entirely ruling out the possibility of hope.

The poem, 'Places, Loved Ones' (*MLD* 16) brings out the same ambivalent attitude towards love and 'rooted lives'. It begins in an easy conversational tone which later mingles with the most formal, bringing out effectively the desired responses:

No, I have never found  
The place where I could say  
This is my proper ground,  
Here I shall stay;  
Nor met that special one  
Who has an instant claim  
On everything I own  
Down to my name;
Larkin speaker is an aloof and unparticipating observer of 'rooted lives'. Isolation suits him. In fact he prefers it to the kind of love, where 'an instant claim / On everything ... / Down to (my) name' is made. In his later works, The Whitsun Weddings and High Windows, this preference for isolation and the complexity involved in its choice are more clearly and elaborately expressed. In a typical Larkinsque, half-jesting, half-serious, ironic stance, he brings out the paradox of the situation more clearly:

To find such seems to prove
You want no choice in where
To build, or whom to love;
You ask them to bear
You off irrevocably,
...

To the speaker, 'to find such' means refraining from making a choice. Andrew Motion comments on Larkin's emphasis on the necessity of choice and its profoundly moral character:

"The power to choose .... (is) the most fulfilling of all human capabilities. As his poems explore the gulf between deception and clear-sightedness, illusion and reality, solitude and sociability, they constantly discuss the need
to decide on one or other of them; that is, not simply to notice the difference but to make an active choice about which to adopt.\textsuperscript{10}

This freedom from the responsibility of making a choice perhaps suggests a wider and subtle indifference on the part of the one who has settled down to things and persons:

So that it’s not your fault,
Should the town turn dreary,
The girl a dolt.

The deterioration of place and person is independent of ‘you’.

Yet, having missed them, you’re
Bound, none the less, to act
As if what you settled for
Mashed you, in fact;

These lines, carefully balanced in construction as well as in thought, bring out a very significant experience of ‘missing’. Thus this experience of ‘missing love’

\textsuperscript{10} Andrew Motion, Op.cit., p.70.
is also a profound experience of absence. Regardless of the predicament one is in, by making a choice responsible or otherwise, one has settled for something. The significant use of the word 'settled' suggests the immediate and inescapable impact of the surroundings on 'you'. This effect of reality is emphasized by the carefully balanced 'As if' and 'in fact'. The dubiouness of 'as if' is taken away by 'in fact' and the very fundamental experience of being 'mashed' is always there:

And wiser to keep away
From thinking you might still trace
Uncalled-for to this day
Your person, your place.

After considering the consequences of both, 'to choose' and 'not to choose', the poet finally arrives at this 'wisdom'. If 'to choose' be disastrous ('the town dreary, the girl a dolt'), then 'not to choose' also has its own stress and strain. The best way, perhaps, is 'to keep away from thinking'. This is suggested in an apparently philosophical way, to accept the middle way between total non-commitment and absolute commitment.

Once again, we witness this unique Larkinesque movement
from negative to some kind of a positive affirmation. The poem began with a negative attitude to self-surrender, and through powerful dramatization and subtle and clever observations, it tried to show the emptiness of the surrender of choice. But has he freed himself by his own choice? No. What he has settled for has also nearly 'mashed' him. While trying not to be deceived, he has walked into his own trap! The only remedy is to keep away from thinking that one might as well have had one's own person or place; that is a dubious wisdom indeed!

This technique, ironical and oblique, is used in many other poems. The poem may begin on a personal note with a commonplace event and end in the serious and universal through a convincing dramatization of the situation.

'Reasons for Attendance' (TLD 18) is an excellent example of such dramatization where two different life-styles are presented. The poet is a middle aged librarian, quite older than the young students with whom he deals. While standing outside a discotheque he watches the young couples' dancing-faces close together apparently caught up in a trance of happiness:
The trumpet's voice, loud and authoritative,
Draws me a moment to the lighted glass
To watch the dancers - all under twenty-five ...
Shifting intently, face to flushed face,
Solemnly on the beat of happiness.

The voice of the trumpet is very emphatic and compulsive. It momentarily attracts the speaker. But the joy of the young couples is described in a matter-of-fact fashion with no romantic emotions attached. It is an activity solemnly and seriously performed, almost ritualistic as in Yeats's 'Sailing to Byzantium':

... 'The young
In one another's arms' ...
Caught in that sensual music ...

The Larkin speaker would not lend an unqualified assent to his first reaction. No sooner has he questioned his own alienation from the party he finds his response presented in a form of a counterquestion:

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... Why be out here?

But then, why be in there? Sex, yes, but what
Is sex? Surely, to think the lion's share
Of happiness is found by couples — sheer

Inaccuracy, as far as I'm concerned.

Though, the instinctive compulsiveness to sex is ad-
mitted, the speaker finds 'sheer Inaccuracy' in such think-
ing. He is unwilling to accept any routine recipe for
happiness. It could be found differently by different
people; for the speaker the way is perhaps through his art:

What calls me is that lifted, rough-tongued bell
(Art, if you like) whose individual bell
Insists I too am individual.
It speaks; I hear; others may hear as well,

But not for me, nor I for them; and so
With happiness. 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.

He prefers his independence just as the young prefer
their mutual dependence and either position is satisfactory
so long as it is honestly held.

The last line of the poem is again very significant; it has sting in its tail. Larkin admits plurality, i.e. he suggests that both can be happy, only if there is no misjudgement or deception. He confronts a very serious problem of illusion and reality. What appears to be happiness may be an illusion and having known the reality fully he can only suggest 'Reasons for Attendance'. At a deeper level, one submits to human reality, not in ignorance, but with awareness. This is a very delicately wrought poem. Larkin's ruthless honesty is clearly revealed when the irony is self-directed as in this poem and also in 'Toads' and 'Poetry of Departure'.

The last two words of 'Reasons for Attendance' make it clear that there is as much possibility of an illusion or self-deception in the speaker's commitment to art, as there is in others who enjoy their freedom. Similarly, in 'Toads' (TLD 32/33) and its sequel 'Toads Revisited' (TWW 18), Larkin compares two different life-styles. 'Toads' begins in a characteristic Larkinsque tone:
Why should I let the toad work
Squat on my life?
Can't I use my wit as a pitchfork
And drive the brute off?
Six days of the week it soils
With its sickening poison ...
Just for paying a few bills!
That's out of proportion.

This irritation and annoyance at his daily, dull routine apparently sounds very genuine. There are many others who have chosen a life of ease:

Lots of folk live on their wits:
Lecturers, Lispers,
Losels, loblolly-men, louts —
They don't end as pimple.

The excessive alliteration of the consonant 'L' clearly indicates a sure jibe at these different classes of people. Their easy, flippant pleasures and lack of honesty and seriousness, momentarily catch the fancy of the speaker:
Ah, were I courageous enough
To shout Stuff your pension!
But I know, all too well, that's the stuff
That dreams are made on:

The speaker obliquely refers to lofty idealism and suggests that only a dreamer or an unpragmatic idealist can take such a stance. Larkin has made excellent use of these lines from Shakespeare's *Tempest*. The tension between the Movement poet's strict adherence to basic realism and a Romantic poet's yearnings to rebel is powerfully felt in such poems.

Blake Morrison writes in his book *The Movement*: 'A characteristic tension is the conflict between a disappointed resignation in the face of what life is, and continuing awareness of what it 'should' or 'might' or 'could' or 'ought to' have been.'\(^{12}\) The Larkin speaker cannot take to adventure, risk and romance. He recognizes something 'toad-like' in his character that cannot be shaken off easily - the bourgeois nature of his soul has to be faced:

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.

The final conclusion is elusive. The Larkin speaker refrains from making any final choice. In all modesty, he accepts his way of life and dismisses the desirability of the other. 'The spiritual truth' is ultimate and uncontestable, which no one else can judge for the other. Then the last two lines pose a dilemma — as a realist his commitment to the surface of things stands, while an idealist streak in him cannot let him deny or dismiss the "infinite realities beyond the finite." Even this final assertion is too ambiguous and only confirms the ambivalence which is a characteristic note of Larkin's poetry.

'The Poetry of Departures' (TLD 34) has the same theme elaborated. The speaker compares his life with the one who has:

... Chucked up everything
And just cleared off.

and wonders about his own unvaryingly monotonous life and the reason why he does not break away from it:

Yes, swagger the mut-strewn roads,
Crouch in the fo'c'ale
Stubbly with goodness, ...

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Larkin deliberately employs an offensive language and evokes pictures that may hide his genuine sympathy under a mask of unsympathetic harshness. He remains unconvinced about the genuineness of the dreamers. The poem ends in recognizing the artificiality involved in such 'audacious, purifying, / Elemental move'. His final and honest response is:

... if

It weren't so artificial,
Such a deliberate step backwards
To create an object:
Books; china; a life
Reprehensibly perfect.

The typical Larkinesque response is once again recoils to himself since the other move also is equally artificial, leads to 'a life reprehensibly perfect'.

This ruthless self-mockery and ironical stance are more frequently and effectively used as poetic devices in the later two volumes, The Whitsun Weddings and High Windows. It is a modern man's irony that he has to convey his sentiments in the most unsentimental way. But the general mood of the poems of the The Less Deceived is of sadness. The
reality is bleak, dull and drab. The overpowering blankness that the poet seems to have experienced at the heart of things during the post-war years comes out in some of the poems in this volume and the next, The Whitson Weddings. Larkin's sympathy for the disheartened and disappointed, and their suffering often comes out more spontaneously and less ironically, without dramatization.

In the poem 'Deceptions' (TLD 37), the poet sympathises with a girl who has been drugged and raped. The poem is based on Mayhew's account of the London Labour and the London Poor of the 19th century. It is a commentary on the human tendency towards disillusionment. The true significance lies in the direct relevance:

Even so distant, I can taste the grief,
Bitter and sharp with stalks, he made you gulp.

Larkin's sympathy for the unfortunate girl back through the years is clearly indicative of his deep involvement with humanity and its sufferings. In a pensive mood, even while he consoles, he accepts the limitations of his consolations. And yet, he tries to assure her that her suffering at least has a redeeming aspect - it helps towards clarity and
exactness - even if it was the precise nature of pain that one learnt to understand:

... All the unhurried day
Your mind lay open like a drawer of knives.
Slums, years, have buried you. I could not dare Console you if I could. What can be said, Except that suffering is exact, ...

At least she is closer to truth than the deluded rapist who has blundered into an empty confusion, mistaking disillusionment for fulfilment of desire. But Larkin realizes that such consolation will not minimize the victim's suffering:

For you would hardly care
That you were less deceived, out on that bed,
Than he was, stumbling up the breathless stair
To burst into fulfilment's desolate attic.

Larkin contrasts her being less deceived, her greater illumination with the attacker's own deception. He is the victim of illusion and though the girl cannot be consoled in her pain, at least she was 'less deceived'; And being 'less deceived' may have its own rewards. The poet seems
to imply that the disenchantment written into what the rapist thought was fulfilment shows how all gratification of human desire is fated to be vain.

The poem 'No Road' (TLD 26) uses a metaphor to bring out the ambivalent nature of a close relationship:

Since we agreed to let the road between us
Fall to disuse,
And bricked our gates up, planted trees to screen us,
And turned all time's eroding agents loose,
Silence, and space, and strangers ... our neglect
Has not had much effect.

The figurative language is used as a subtle tool here. The breakdown of the relationship appears to be mutually agreed upon by the lovers. But, in a subtle way, it is suggested that the action is willed by the speaker:

Walking that way tonight would not seem strange,
And still would not be allowed....

There is a paradox in the situation. Through the image of the road, the poet beautifully brings this out - the possibility of walking on the road and the impossibility of it also ('would not seem strange' and 'would not be allowed').
The acceptance of the self-imposed barriers is born out of the poet's self-awareness. He cannot allow any illusion to blur his vision and so he stoically accepts:

Drafting a world where no such road will run from you to me;
To watch that world come up like a cold sun,
Rewarding others, is my liberty.

'Cold sun' suggests the potentially possible hope but benumbed due to some reasons.

The poem which began with a tender melancholic tone develops into a new awareness:

Not to prevent it is my will's fulfilment.
Willing it my ailment.

The metaphysical element in the use of conceit and in the paradox of the last lines suggests that Larkin's simplicity is only apparent. By blotting out a road from her to him he would certainly experience gloom; the lost world would come upon him like a cold sun. That might of course mean disentanglement, liberty for him and reward for other lovers. By withstanding the temptation he would
be having his will's fulfilment, but when he wills the separation, it is agony, 'ailment' for him. The toying with the word 'will' inevitably reminds one of Shakespeare's sonnet no. 135. But the state of love's ailment is even sharper here.

'Maiden Name' (TLD 23) is less complex, but has a typically Larkin-tone. It begins in an almost satirical, humourous vein:

Marrying left your maiden name disused.
Its five light sounds no longer mean your face,
Your voice, and all your variants of grace;
For since you were so thankfully confused
By law with someone else, you cannot be
Semantically the same as that young beauty:
It was of her that these two words were used.

The predominant theme is about time and memory. The speaker is aware that though the past is gone, the present is still his concern:

... Try whispering it slowly.
No, it means you. Or, since you're past and gone,

It means what we feel now about you then:
How beautiful you were, and near, and young
So vivid, you might still be there among
Those first few days, unfingermarket again.
The clarity with which the past and the present dissolve into an eternal present is particularly striking. With an effortless elegance he moves from a seemingly negative to a positive assertion - 'left your maiden name disused' - to 'shelters our faithfulness'. Thus, once having clearly defined what this 'maiden name' means, the uncertainty, vagueness and confusion are lifted. She is once again seen as beautiful and near and young. The poet's faith in certain permanent aspects which continue to be meaningful inspite of the changes reveals his belief in permanence of certain values. His deliberately chosen ironic mask is often a put-on for his genuine sympathy and deep concern for human relationships.

The Larkin-speaker's choice for aloofness and his inability to actively participate have been frequently brought out in the poems of *The Less Deceived*. This isolation is necessary for personal growth. But the danger of egoistic self-indulgence is always there. This dilemma is revealed more dramatically and with an intense urgency in the poems of the later volumes. It is movingly brought out in "Age" (TLD 30), where the same paradoxical trap of proximity which prohibits perspective is delineated:
My age fallen away like white swaddling
Floats in the middle distance, becomes
An inhabited cloud. I bend closer, discern
A lighted tenament scuttling with voices.
O you tall game I tired myself with joining!
Now I wade through you like knee-level weeds,
And they attend me, dear translucent bergs:
Silence and space. By now so much has flown
From the nest here of my head that I needs must turn
To know what prints I leave, whether of feet,
Or spoor of pads, or a bird's adept splay.

There is a strange dilemma in the speaker's mind. On
the one hand he has remained aloof from 'age' to experi-
ence in words, an objective assessment. On the other hand,
this deliberate distancing prevents him from perceiving what
he is. In the living presence of the elements of 'silence
and space' he finds his integrity and identity. Though he
is certain of the 'prints' he is going to leave behind, his
only doubt is of what kind - ' ... Of feet, / Or spoor
of pads, or a bird's adept splay.' The final experience
is one of profound openness about his contribution.
'I Remember, I Remember' (TLD 38-39) looks at the experience of childhood with an unromantic, anti-sentimental eye. While making a train-journey with his friend, the poet passes through Coventry, his birth-place:

... A whistle went:
Things moved. I sat back, staring at my boots.

'Was that' my friend smiled, 'where you "have your roots"?'

No, only where my childhood was unspent,
I wanted to retort, just where I started:
By now I've got the whole place clearly charted.

Ironically enough, every detail of the 'unromantic childhood' is clearly remembered. Like the speaker of 'Church Going' (TLD 28/29) (who visits the interior of the dimused church, with scepticism) the journey into the memories of the past is made without any sentimentality attached to it. Humour here is self-directed:

Our garden, first: where I did not invent
Blinding theologies of flowers and fruits,
And wasn't spoken to by an old hat.
And here we have that splendid family
I never ran to when I got depressed, 
The boys all biceps and the girls all chest, 
Their comic Ford, their farm where I could be 
'Really myself'. I'll show you, come to that, 
The bracken where I never trembling sat, 

Determined to go through with it; where she 
Lay back, and 'all became a burning mist'. 
And in those offices, my doggerel 
Was not set up in blunt ten-point, nor read 
By a distinguished cousin of the mayor, 

Who didn't call and tell my father There 
Before us, had we the gift to see ahead ... 
'you look as if you wished the place in Hell,' 
My friend said, 'judging from your face' ... 

By now, the humour has darkened into a biting satire, 
directed both against himself (such a non-person) and his community (so flat and insensitive). The romantic myth of childhood and its innocence are destroyed. The poet suggests that his disenchantment with life is complete. Then, suddenly these strikingly powerful lines bring out a paradox:
... 'Oh, well

I suppose it's not the place's fault, I said.

'Nothing, like something, happens anywhere.'

This inability to be bewitched by life illustrates the poet's unfailing fidelity to his muse and his experience. But these, in themselves need not lead to utter hopelessness. "Oh, well ..." dispels the bleakness and dullness. The casual tone suggests that the disillusionment need not be regretted endlessly. The reason for the failure may lie 'anywhere' ('It's not the place's fault') It is significant that 'nothing like something happens' - The poem ends with a characteristic ambivalence. The utter hopelessness of 'nothing' is saved by the admission that it, like 'something' would happen 'anywhere'.

This ambivalence at the heart of things definitely speaks for Larkin's ruthless honesty towards his experience. The self-scrutiny does not allow any emotion or sentiment to pass through without its total validity being proved to himself. The classical strain in him constantly limits and curtails the romantic impulses natural to a poet.

However, at this stage of his development, the lyrical
subjectivity comes out in some poems. The number of poems is much less compared to The North Ship, his earlier volume. Death is 'an endless extinction' for Larkin. A romantic death-wish is expressed in 'Wants' (TLD 22):

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.

What begins as 'a wish to be alone' evolves into a desire not only for withdrawal from meaningless social rituals but 'oblivion'. The progress from 'wish' to 'desire' is towards a stronger attachment, but from 'alone-ness' to 'oblivion' is indicative of a movement towards detachment. Both the movements are opposite and therefore suggestive of a paradox involved in life and death.
'Going' (TLD 21) is another small lyric which deals with the theme of death:

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

The graphic visualization etches out the unique nature of this evening. Abstract imagery may flow from many a poet. But very few can make an abstract image so vivid and real. Larkin effectively embodies something which is essentially unembodied when he describes the oncoming of this uniquely personal evening. The deceptively pleasurable association of comfort is suggested through its 'silken' appearance. 'Yet' destroys that illusion. The evening becomes a growing metaphor and the discomfort also increases:

Where has the tree gone, that locked
Earth to the sky? What is under my hands,
That I cannot feel?

What loads my hands down?
The sight of 'the tree' was another source and symbol of comfort. Its seemingly unchanging element may provide a sense of permanence and comfort. But the disappearance of all these familiar sources increases and intensifies the poet's discomfort. He is so benumbed by the experience that he doubts the very existence of reality:

What loads my hands down?

This is a very strange kind of depression. It is an experience, almost spiritual, of blankness - the reality exists, but he cannot be a part of it. The gradual disappearance of the objects and sensations which were the components of his reality is disquieting under an apparent calm. The questions asked are profound and subtle. The suggestion is made that there is nothing left to rely upon, and this is a very devastating experience. The final effect of the poem is of some kind of a secular spiritualism, spiritual in the sense of the poet's total being shaken up, nearly swept away.

Another lyric 'Wires' (TLD 27), beautifully brings out the maturing effect of suffering on the sufferer told through animal metaphor. The poem comments on the painful but necessary growing up process through experience that
violently shatters youthful illusions. It brings out how effectively electric fences 'age' the young 'steers':

The widest prairies have electric fences,
For though old cattle know they must not stray,
Young steers are always scenting purer water
Not here but anywhere. Beyond the wires

Leads them to blunder up against the wires
Whose muscle-shredding violence gives no quarter.
Young steers become old cattle from that day,
Electric limits to their widest senses.

This is a complex poem, and can be interpreted at various levels. At one level, it can be a comment on the acceptance of the limitations of human will. The metaphor of the fences simultaneously suggests, the security of the limits as also its dangers. The final wisdom and maturity lie in accepting "the here" which is definite and real instead of yearning for "anywhere" which is vague and indistinct. Though the tragic irony is felt throughout, the final tone does suggest some kind of reconciliation.

It would be apt to end the analysis of the individual poems of *The Less Deceived* with 'Wedding Wind' (TLD 15).
It is a rare poem which openly celebrates the moments of transcendence and beauty. There are the characteristic Larkinsque restraint and reserve, but not so powerfully clamped. The speaker is a young bride who celebrates love, marriage, and happiness:

The wind blew all my wedding day,
And my wedding night was the night of high wind;
And a stable door was banging, again and again,
That he must go and shut it, leaving me
Stupid in candlelight, hearing rain,
Seeing my face in the twisted candlestick,
Yet seeing nothing. When he came back
He said the horses were restless, and I was sad
That any man or beast that night should lack
The happiness I had.

Now in the day
All's unravelled under the sun by the wind's blowing.
He has gone to look at the floods, and I
carry a chipped pail to the chicken-run,
Set it down, and stare. All is the wind
Hunting through clouds and forests, thrashing
My apron and the hanging clothes on the line.
Can it be borne, this bodying-forth by wind
Of you my actions turn on, like a thread
Carrying beads? Shall I be let to sleep
Now this perpetual morning shares my bed?
Can even death dry up
These new delighted lakes, concludef
Our kneeling as cattle by all-generous waters?

Throughout the poem, the wind is a symbol of inner force, an inspiration which sweeps over her entire existence. Though her initial response is bound by the earth which reflects the characteristic tentativeness of the poet, her ecstacy cannot be contained easily. The restlessness of her mind is reflected in the other elements of nature also. The reminders of the mundane reality of her day-to-day life are all there, but they cannot detract from the beauty and happiness of her ecstacy.

Come morning and the woman still savours her happiness even as she goes about her routine tasks. There is a momentary danger of her losing this new-found joy. But the experience of wonder and beauty and ecstacy is so profound that 'even death cannot dry up' this 'all-generous waters'. The imagery used and the nature of experience strongly alludes
to a possible religious significance. But one has to be cautious before making such a claim. This is an exceptional poem which has such unrestrained moments of beauty to celebrate.

Otherwise, the general tone of the poems in *The Less Deceived* is tentative and ambivalent. Larkin observes the everyday reality with deep sympathy and concern. He depicts the sufferings of the disappointed and disheartened people with utmost fidelity. He chooses his subject-matter now from the familiar and the commonplace. The earlier rhetorics of *The North Ship* have yielded place to the plain everyday language of common men. His mastery over the manner and the matter is evident in the transformation of the mundane and drab into the exquisite. He is a keen observer, capable of highly sensitive perceptions. The elaboration of minute details of seemingly insignificant occurrences bestows on them a special kind of particularity. They are no longer vague and elusive but are grounded in reality giving to 'airy nothing a local habitation and a name'. This is as it should be since Larkin disapproves of vagueness and obscurity in poetry. His chief objection to the poetry of Pound and Eliot is largely directed against their erudition and consequent inaccessibility to the
ordinary reader. He believes that poetry must be read and enjoyed and not studied. While showing the preference for 'a pleasure-seeking audience' he writes:

'I am never particularly pleased to be told that my work is being studied by some study group, but I am pleased when people write to tell me of similar experiences or say something which shows they have really been affected ... I think this element of enjoyment is vital; I hate the idea that poetry is to be studied rather than enjoyed, that poetry reading is a duty of the intellectual and all that. I believe a poet has to enjoy writing poetry and the reader enjoy reading it, or they are both wasting their time.'

Larkin's concern for his audience is a proof of his trust in human understanding. His preference for 'pleasure-seeking audience' further confirms his faith in their ability to feel, think, respond and ultimately love. Larkin's unique kind of humanism comes out through this commitment and concern.

14 'Speaking of Writing XIII: Philip Larkin', Times 20 February 1964, p.16.
It is true that in some poems of *The Less Deceived*, a very bleak vision of life emerges, as in 'Triple Time' (TLD 35) or 'Next, Please' (TLD 20) critics have often regarded him as a hopelessly pessimistic poet. Calvin Bedient accused him of having 'a metaphysical zero in his bones' and Charles Tomlinson criticized his 'tenderly nursed sense of defeat'. But this is to read Larkin wrongly. Larkin's way is always from the negative to the positive as far as positivity is possible. While he is fully aware of the limitations and frustrations of everyday reality, he does perceive moments of faith and hope. In modern times, when he writes about love, validity of human relationship or about making choices in life, he scrutinizes every emotion ruthlessly, in the most anti-sentimental, anti-romantic manner. His efforts to discard sentimentalism leads him to a deeper, more honest acceptance. He is not an idealist by intent but perennially romantic sentiments are a permanent state of the poetic mind. Even when he denies the transcendental values, his


fidelity to his muse compels him to accept such dimensions as in 'Church Going' or 'Wedding Wind'. His faith in the continuity, solidarity and worthwhileness of human life comes out from his own statement about writing poetry:

I write poems to preserve things I have seen / thought / felt ... both for myself and others, though I feel that my prime responsibility is to the experience itself, which I am trying to keep from oblivion for its own sake. Why I should do this I have no idea, but I think the impulse to preserve lies at the bottom of all art.17

The poet who believes in the preservation of a valid experience can never be ultimately negative. But, as he has just mentioned, his 'prime responsibility to his experience' does not allow him to adopt an assertive and final tone. He uses dramatization as an effective technique to project varied viewpoints and argues his case with utmost honesty. He takes an ambivalent attitude to

different life-styles and ultimately leaves the reader with subtle suggestions. His tentativeness stems from truthfulness to his experience and not out of a scholarly desire to perplex or puzzle the reader. His absolute honesty and truthfulness to his experience, to his muse and to the reader, is the greatest source of strength and success of *The Less Deceived*. His meagre output of poetry every year reflects his reluctance to put his pen to the paper till he is totally convinced of the underlying truths as he sees them.

In spite of his clear views of the limitations and ironies of modern existence, his poems not infrequently affirm the moments of liberation. He responds to ordinary reality in a profoundly sympathetic way and does not blindly rule out the possibilities of transcendence, inspite of the frightening aspects of daily reality. Terry Whalen has correctly observed:

'Larkin's poems move towards an imaginative dimension of transcendence in a highly personal and uniquely cautious way. He is a very sceptical poet, but his scepticism does not completely erase a more romantic impulse in his poetry, a thirst for a mystical dimension to existence.'

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