CHAPTER V

HIGH WINDOWS
Larkin has expressed his disapproval of an artist changing his style 'in order to be better'¹ at what he is. His views on an artist's development have often been clarified extensively. When High Windows, his last volume of poetry was published in 1974, the critics immediately noticed an emergence of a changed and refreshed artist. The voice of the poet of The Whitsun Weddings and The Less Deceived is essentially the same. But High Windows definitely shows a widening of range and variety in style and tone not to be found in the earlier Larkin. In a radio broadcast on the occasion of his 50th birthday, Larkin not only expressed a wish that he would change but also welcomed the idea of change:

What I should like to do is write different kinds of poems, that might be by different people. Someone once said that the great thing is not to be different from other

¹ Ian Hamilton, 'Four Conversations', p.77.
people, but to be different from yourself.\(^2\)

He selected 'The Explosion' (HW 42) to be read as an example of his changed style. There are few other poems that can be quoted similarly. The predominant themes of the earlier three volumes, — theme of man's subjugation to Time, the validity and futility of human choices and the preservation of traditions and historical past — recur in this volume with increased intensity and complexity. The tone of the poems is much more personal and rings with a note of authenticity and experience. The speaker is no longer a young man but he speaks from the vantage point of age. None of the poems in the earlier volumes dealt with any contemporary events, whereas *High Windows* has a number of poems that directly deal with such situations, e.g., 'How Distant', 'Posterity', 'Homage to Government'. But the most significant change one notices is in his more mature, well-considered and positive outlook towards life and art. There are more moments of assertions, and his optimistic vision is less blurred and unsure. The earlier tentativeness has been transformed into more complex and

subtle emotional responses to reality. While his vision is rooted to the ordinary everyday life, he allows his imagination to transcend this earthly realism after much scrutiny. The resulting ambivalence or ambiguity lend a unique strength and vigour to his poetry. It reflects a rare combination of sensitivity to suffering and keen perception of humanity.

The opening poem 'To the Sea' (HW 9-10) evinces the same mystical intensity of the earlier poem 'Here' (TWW 9). But now the speaker does not require isolation as a necessary condition for the clarity of vision. He freely participates in community festivals and finds a profound significance in such ritualistic pleasures. 'To the Sea' begins with the characteristic dismissive attitude, which is witnessed in 'Church Going' (TLD 28-29) and 'The Whitson Weddings' (TWW 21-23):

To step over the low wall that divides
Road from concrete walk above the shore
Brings sharply back something known long before —
The miniature gaiety of seasides.
Everything crowds under the low horizon:
Steep beach, blue water, towels, red bathing caps,
The small hushed waves' repeated fresh collapse
Up the warm yellow sand, and further off
A white steamer stuck in the afternoon —
Still going on, all of it, still going on!
To lie, eat, sleep in hearing of the surf
(ears to transistors, that sound tame enough
Under the sky), or gently up and down
Lead the uncertain children, frilled in white
And grasping at enormous air, or wheel
The rigid old along for them to feel
A final summer, plainly still occurs
As half an annual pleasure, half a rite,

The ritual of sea bathing has attracted generations of Englishmen. The speaker also has been acquainted with this 'half an annual pleasure, half a rite'. - The last word is suggestive of a long forgotten English tradition of sun worship. 'The miniature gaiety' includes everything - the people with their ordinary things (red caps, towels) and spontaneous gestures (lie, eat, sleep). - When they are placed before the vast expanse of the blue sea, their smallness is evident, but it does not dwarf them. They freely enjoy and fearlessly 'lead the uncertain children' between the speaker and his surrounding world:

As when, happy at being on my own,
I searched the sand for Famous Cricketers,
Or, farther back, my parents, listeners
To the same seaside quack, first became known.
Strange to it now, I watch the cloudless scene:
The same clear water over smoothed pebbles,
The distant bathers' weak protesting treble
Down at its edge, and then the cheap cigars,
The chocolate-papers, tea-leaves, and, between
The rocks, the rusting soup-tins, till the first
Few families start the trek back to the cars.

After a momentary lapse, into his childhood to the
moments of pure innocence and joy - the speaker happily
revels in the beauty of the natural and human world,
Inspite of the litter (real and symbolic) the spectacle
still retains its charm. This description of the sea­
side scene reminds one of T.S. Eliot's similar theme
in *The Waste Land*.

The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends
Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are
departed.

And their friends, the loitering heirs of city
directors —

Departed, have left no addresses.\(^3\)

Both the poets etch out the urban landscape of the sea, inspite of the urban despoliation. Larkin's retrained, and casual style makes a brilliant post-script to Eliot's heavily allusive one. The Larkin speaker wonders at the human failings especially when nature so generously bestows upon man its most benign gifts:

... ... If the worst
Of flawless weather is our falling short,
It may be that through habit these do best,
Coming to water clumsily undressed
Yearly; teaching their children by a sort
Of clowning; helping the old, too, as they ought.

The speaker almost concludes that, the fault lies not in the weather but in human failures (our falling short). However, he assures that through such rituals, and such spontaneous and free interaction between nature and man, will the manking bring some meaning to life, and even habits are able to accomplish so much. The smile at the 'clumsily undressed' people and their 'clowning' is too gentle and loving to offend or take away affirmative spirit. These simple gestures acquire a special meaning and beauty through their spontaneity and frankness. The poem ends with his affirmation of belief in the social rituals.
Larkin's faith in tradition is reflected not only through the choice of themes but also through his choice of traditional stanzaic patterns, syntax, metre and rhyme scheme. They all serve to convey his concern with the preservation of the values and attitudes of the historical past of England.

'Show Saturday' (HW 37-38), another long poem about the community festival creates a transformed reality through vivid perception and imagination. The poem begins with the description of the people that are thoroughly involved in the spirit of the show. The fair in the country has its tents and booths, its side shows, exhibitions, games, races and the innocent hustle and bustle which bring these local people together. The crowds still value such gatherings and sense their importance. The detached speaker observes various animals, livestock competitions, wrestling matches, food and craft display, all the thronged people, a varitable mêlée of objects and noises. The colourful crowd includes:

The men with hunters, dog-breeding wool-defined women,
Children all saddle-swank, mugfaced middleaged wives
Glaring at jellies, husbands on leave from the garden
Watchful as weasels, car-tuning curt-haired sons —
Back now, all of them, to their local lives:
To names on vans, and business calendars
Hung up in kitchens; back to loud occasions
In the Corn Exchange, to market days in bars,

To winter coming, as the dismantled Show
Itself dies back into the area of work.
Let it stay hidden there like strength, below
Sale-bills and swindling; something people do,
Not noticing how time's rolling smithy-smoke
Shadows much greater gestures; something they share
That breaks ancestrally each year into
Regenerate union. Let it always be there.

The poet's respect for such traditional scenes and their importance in human history is evident. Like the sea-goers of the previous poem, these local people do not realize their contribution as a continuing link between the ancestral past and the future. The last few lines are expressive of the speaker's appreciation of the simple pleasures and a human bondage experienced through them. 'Below the sale bills and swindling', i.e., below the deviousness of complex contemporary commercial life, lies this more innocent, more child-like trafficking of people with one another, a relic from the past, indicative of a clearer air, both physical and spiritual. Larkin's prayer, 'Let it always be there' is full of genuine hope and respect for the
traditional folk living which is the backbone of any civilization.

Both the poems present Larkin's positive outlook towards social festivities. But he believes that essentially it is the imaginativeness of man which lends meaning to such rituals. While he praises the moments of assertions in social community, he refrains from giving any definite ideology. He only expresses his 'sense' of the experience and its imaginative value. Establishing the supremacy of imagination Larkin has observed:

Good social and political literature can exist only if it originates in the imagination, and it will do that only if the imagination finds the subject exciting, and not because the intellect thinks it important; and it will succeed only in so far as the imagination's original concept has been realized.⁴

It is quite obvious that Larkin's imagination finds beauty in such festive community events and he faithfully and lyrically records such commonplace social rituals that lift them above their ordinary plans. And yet, there is ambivalence in his response. He is reluctant to pronounce any definite statement and only points out the possibility. He explores the human and natural world, and feels these moments of illumination in such subtle and hidden way that it is impossible to take any emphatic stand without possibly ruining the subtlety and delicacy of the poems.

There is a possibility of a religious dimension to these poems. When the two powers - human and natural - meet, such powerful moment of connection gives a feeling of "non-dimensional space ... something deathless, life-less and eternal."

Larkin also says that the most successful of his poems "float free from the preoccupation that chose them" ... and are 'reassembled - one hopes - in the eternity of imagination.' This is the farthest one can come towards

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the assertion of a transcendental world without naming it. Larkin is exceptionally alert to his reality and is equally imaginative; when daily experiences acquire an unusual vividness and these experiences are recreated in art; they are immortalized.

There are other poems in *High Windows* that bring out Larkin's concern for the natural world's beauty and its restorative necessity. In 'Going Going' (HW 21-22) Larkin openly resents the growing materialism of his contemporary England:

    I thought it would last my time --
    The sense that, beyond the town,
    There would always be fields and farms,
    Where the village louts could climb
    Such trees as were not cut down;
    I knew there'd be false alarms.

    In the papers about old streets
    And split-level shopping, but some
    Have always been left so far;
    And when the old part retreats
    As the bleak high-risers come
    We can always escape in the car.
Things are tougher than we are, just
As earth will always respond
However we mess it about;
Chuck filth in the sea, if you must:
The tides will be clean beyond.

--- But what do I feel now? Doubt?

Or age, simply? The crowd
Is young in the M 1 cafe;
Their kids are screaming for more —
More houses, more parking allowed,
More caravan sites, more pay.

On the Business Page, a score
Of spectacled grins approve
Some takeover bid that entails
Five per cent profit (and ten
Percent more in the estuaries): move
Your works to the unspoilt dales
(Grey area grants)! And when

You try to get near the sea
In summer ...

The poem's nostalgic tone is Betjemanesque. Larkin's admiration for the older poet has been quite often expressed
in his reviews. This nostalgia for the vanishing tradition of a lovelier, greener and more innocent England and his dislike for rapid, ugly, industrial growth seem to show Larkin's concern for the historical past, the loss of his beloved Edwardian England.

The speaker lists all the details which cause alarm and anxiety. The decadent present is filled with the greed of many (their kids are screaming for more — / More houses, more parking allowed, / more caravan sites, more pay.) and shrewd exploitation of the few. The scenario is not only confined to England. This growing materialism is seen everywhere and all run towards the physical future, of which 'all that remains / For us will be concrete and tyres'. The speaker admits that such pessimism is perhaps due to his old age but he cannot help expressing that this so-called progress destroys far more than it creates. The growing population and their demands are a threat to the country he loves; perhaps he will have to see the utter desecration of the few unspoiled dales and green places that are yet untouched. As a young man the poet had thought that the countryside would last his lifetime but the progress of decay had been much faster than he had imagined.
All of this is done in the name of progress and socialism. Larkin clearly distrusts and resents the materialism that characterises life in the Welfare state, Britain:

It seems, just now,
To be happening so very fast;
Despite all the land left free
For the first time I feel somehow
That it isn't going to last,

That before I snuff it, the whole
Boiling will be bricked in
Except for the tourist parts —
First slum of Europe: a role
It won't be so hard to win,
With a cast of crooks and tarts.

The poet does not take any prophetic stand; nor is he bitterly condemning; he even makes allowances for the muddled good intention of the pushers of 'progress'. But he is clearly against it. Then he lovingly lingers over the things he cherishes:

And that will be England gone,
The shadows, the meadows, the lanes,
The guildhalls, the carved choirs.
There'll be books; it will linger on
In galleries; but all that remains
For us will be concrete and tyres.

Most things are never meant.
This won't be, most likely: but greeds
And garbage are too thick-strewn
To be swept up now, or invent
Excuses that make them all needs.
I just think it will happen, soon.

The verse itself slows down when he mentions the vanishing past. The root cause is avarice, greed. The real concern for the destruction of the beauty and ceremonial way of life that the speaker loves comes out in a controlled manner in the last stanza. The ambiguity of 'Most things are never meant. This won't be most likely:' is characteristic of Larkin, reflecting a hopeful doubt of his being wrong. But the intensity and truthfulness are genuine and his anxiety reveals his immediate concern for his people. Historical epochs are entwined in human lives and the surface details reflect the threatened interior. Larkin's ability to imagine and identify with intensity and sympathy gives his poems a rare strength and beauty.
In the poem 'Money' (HW 40), he rues this greed in a more gentle-sad way. After listening to money reproaching him, the speaker compares the ways in which others have spent their money and smilingly concludes; 'Clearly money has something to do with life'. He wonders aloud to himself whether money can buy happiness or not. Then he finds a close connection between money and life; both offer a disappointing but alluring view:

I listen to money singing. It is like looking down
From long french windows at a provincial town.
The slums, the canals, the churches ornate and mad
In the evening sun. It is intensely sad.

This is Larkin's half-comic, half-sad comment on material and sensual fulfilment. He views this ever-increasing demand for money with scepticism. Life and money both are devalued with the passage of time. This sad realization of man's subjugation to time is lightly mentioned in the presence of 'an evening sun' - suggestive of how things decline.

Larkin unerringly watches the effect of time on an individual's life. His concern and alarm at the thoughtless material progress sometimes lead him to an
uncontrollable moment in which he cries out indignantly as in 'This Be the Verse' (HW 30):

They fuck you up, your mam and dad.
They may not mean to, but they do.
They fill you with the faults they had
And add some extra, just for you.

With a possible pun meant on 'verse' in the title, this poem reveals a totally different style of writing. The deliberately offensive language brings out the speaker's deeply felt indignation at a modern man's callousness and ignorance about his past. The history of human civilization has little to boast for itself and he would order himself to stop the nonsense:

Man hands on misery to man
It deepens like a coastal shelf.
Get out as early as you can,
And don't have any kids yourself.

But such moments of fierce realism are very rare in this last volume. Generally, he is more positive and optimistic in his view. The present day reality may not offer an enthusiastic picture but he definitely shows more hope in human potentials. Larkin's ever increasing interest
in the contemporary events is a unique feature of this volume. The topical issue in 'How Distant' (HW 31) is about emigration during the years 1870-1910 by many people from British Isles to settle in America or Australia:

How distant, the departure of young men
Down valleys, or watching
The green shore past the salt-white cordage
Rising and falling,

Cattlemen, or carpenters, or keen
Simply to get away
From married villages before morning,
Melodeons play

On tiny decks past fraying cliffs of water
Or late at night
Sweet under the differently-swung stars,
When the chance sight

Of a girl doing her laundry in the steerage
Ramifies endlessly.

The description of the scene, though distant is precise but even more impressively precise is the expression of aspiration and confidence in terms of the pioneering
life the adventurous young men are ready to create:

This is being young,
Assumption of the startled century

Like new store clothes,
The huge decisions printed out by feet
Inventing where they tread,
The random windows conjuring a street.

The speaker is older than the people he watches and the young men and women recede from him, with a new romantic enthusiasm of building up a new country. Their hurry 'simply to get away' 'from married villages', give out their somewhat callous indifference to the lives they are leaving behind. The epithet 'married villages', brings out the human care and warmth and close relationships that only a small community can allow. The young men's 'huge decisions printed out by feet' has both the heroism and casualness, in their wanderings. They have an apparent irreverence towards the traditional mode of living (like new store clothes) and uncertainty of the future ('inventing') written into their live. What they create for the future generation is perhaps 'random' and of a doubtful value. Larkin's ambiguous response arises out of his sceptical ('startled century') but hopeful vision about
their chances and determination. He simultaneously acknowledges the human limitations and human potentials. The title 'How Distant' ironically suggests a paradox of distance and proximity in time and space created by the emigrants and also of the urgency of the awareness of the problem. Larkin's ambivalent response accepts the possibility of self-knowledge through such exploration but also sceptically views any 'reduplication' of a way of life either through mere place or person.

'Homage to A Government' (HW 29) is another poem with a topical interest. It is written in a satirical vein about Britain's growing materialistic approach. It was originally published in The Sunday Times to express disapproval over the Labour Government's reduction in 1968 of the military expenditure overseas. Larkin's conservative stand in politics is revealed here. In keeping with his love of the country's past and traditions is his frustration at seeing power slipping away from Britain's hands. It begins with the poet's announcement:

Next year we are to bring the soldiers home
For lack of money, and it is all right.
Places they guarded, or kept orderly,
Must guard themselves, and keep themselves orderly,
We want the money for ourselves at home
Instead of working. And this is all right.
Larkin further enumerates the publicly stated reasons for closing various military bases abroad:

The places are a long way off, not here,
Which is all right, and from what we hear
The soldiers there only made trouble happen.
Next year we shall be easier in our minds.

The tone and the deliberately repeated phrase 'It is all right' make very clear Larkin's view of the whole farce of withdrawal of the troops. He is mimicking the complacent, liberal commonplaces, and suggests through his repeated phrase the limited outlook and lack of vision that characterizes his government. John Wain praises this poem for its independence of thought and 'superb tailoring of form and content'. He writes:

The poem is clinker-built; it's timbers are designed to overlap. Each six-line stanza has three rhyme-words, each repeated twice, closing into a tight centre and then opening out: home-right orderly-orderly-right-home. The purpose of the poem is to convey disapproval and contempt; the self-enclosed pettiness and lack of imagination which the poet sees
in the government he is satirising have got into the texture of the verse; it enacts its content. 7

A similar satirical, humorous tone is heard in 'Posterity' (HW 27) which condemns the too-professional approach to academic work and the American fetish for the so-called research. The speaker of the poem, Jake Balokowsky, is an American junior college research scholar who has to publish or perish without 'tenure' and grumbles about being 'stuck with this old fart' (i.e., Larkin) at least a year:

Jake Balokowsky, my biographer,
Has this page microfilmed. Sitting inside
His air-conditioned cell at Kennedy
In jeans and sneakers, he's no call to hide
Some slight impatience with his destiny:
'I'm stuck with this old fart at least a year;

The reader (once again) faces a complex situation.
The poet laughs at his own self through a character which

is fictitious and of own creation. The reader at once resents the irreverence of the speaker and sympathises with the subject - i.e. the poet himself. The similar ironical method was used in 'Naturally the Foundation will Bear Your Expenses' (TWW 13). Both the speakers share the same insensitivity towards their work, but, the speaker of 'Posterity' is at least not pretentious. He is an impatient youngster who is at least frank ("no call to hide ..."), but seems arrogant, greedy and indifferent to both literary and human values from the coarse and offensive language he uses. His judgement about his subject of research, i.e. the poet himself reveals his own hollowness. The ironical contrast between the poet's own compassionate attitude towards the ordinary human life and this American scholar's callous approach towards the poet's life, enhances this feeling of a hollowness. Similarly, the poet's calm and patient tone (some slight impatience with his destiny) towards the speaker's impatience and the latter's impatience ("I'm stuck up with this old fart") ironically bring out the contrast between the past and the present moral values.

However, more interesting and perplexing are the similarities that the poet has skilfully posed between
the speaker and his subject (i.e. the poet) They both are disappointed in their romantic longings, Larkin by his own admission as a 'less deceived' poet and the speaker had his own unfulfilled dreams:

I wanted to teach school in Tel Aviv,
But Myra's folks' — he makes the money sign — 'Insisted I got tenure. When there's kids —'
He shrugs. 'It's stinking dead, the research line;
Just let me put this bastard on the skids,
I'll get a couple of semesters leave

To work on Protest Theater.', ...

The controlling presence of the poet is felt by the reader, who has to find out who is 'One of those old-type natural fouled-up guys'.

Larkin's ability to portray such complexities of human nature and its ultimate incomprehensibility through a remarkably casual and off-hand style, is his unique achievement. He skilfully combines modern complexity with traditional simplicity.

At first glance, the poem seems scornful of the academic life. But the central irony is the similarity
between the two. The speaker and the subject are both disappointed and sad at their own failures. They both experience the tension between romantic longings and practical needs and they both have to be reconciled to their own ordinary lives. The title 'Posterity' points at the poet's concern about the kind of world that we leave behind for future generation. Though the immediate issue was the loss of British literary manuscripts and cultural take over by American libraries, the poem grows beyond its topical interest and through a powerful dramatic monologue makes a serious historical point, in a joking but effective manner.

'Vers de Société' (HW 36) is also a very powerful dramatic monologue on the theme of making choices. Here this theme is treated in a more personal fashion and under a familiar situation:

"My wife and I have asked a crowd of craps
To come and waste their time and ours: perhaps
You'd care to join us?" In a pig's arse, friend.
Day comes to an end.
The gas fire breathes, the trees are darkly swayed,
And so 'Dear Warlock Williams: I'm afraid —'
Funny how hard it is to be alone.
I could spend half my evenings, if I wanted,
Holding a glass of washing sherry, canted
Over to catch the drivel of some bitch
Who's read nothing but Which;
Just think of all the spare time that has flown
Straight to nothingness by being filled
With forks and faces, rather than repaid
Under a lamp, hearing the noise of wind,
And looking out to see the moon thinned
To an air-sharpened blade.

The speaker's first response is generally sceptical and dismissive. His preference for solitude is often seen in the poems of the earlier volumes. But Larkin speaker's withdrawal is different from Prufrok's because solitude for the former is an active state of imaginative thinking. His initial rejection of the invitation to the party has a positive value of the living presence of Nature (hearing the wind / And looking out to see the moon thinned / To an air-sharpened blade). There is a greater reward (repaid) in such elemental connections than in those age-bound parties whose worth is doubted even by the hosts.
themselves. The monologue brilliantly records the movement of the speaker's mind. The hostile rejection is given a second thought:

A life, and yet how sternly it's instilled

'All solitude is selfish'.

The speaker realizes that this propensity for solitude may be an honest way to self-preservation (A life). But it is definitely anti-social and desire-bound, and so socially and morally imperfect, and therefore not thoroughly acceptable. And even though imperfect, these social gatherings have some value and virtue for they are at least selfish:

... No one now
Believes the hermit with his gown and dish
Talking to God (who's gone too); the big wish
Is to have people nice to you, which means
Doing it back somehow.

'Virtue is social'. Are then, these routines

Playing at goodness, like going to church?

The cliche 'All solitude is selfish' is ironically inverted. 'The big wish' for human solidarity - to be nice to people and their being nice to you - shows a
complete (inversion) of the earlier wish for isolation and oblivion earlier explicitly expressed in 'Wants' (TLD 22). There are no great claims made on love (as witnessed in the women of 'Faith Healing' (TWW 15). The speaker is reconciled to mutual 'niceness', and faces lesser chances of disappointment. These 'routines / playing at goodness' is compared with 'going to church'. Even when they lost most of their meaning and full significance, these gestures still continue to exist and satisfy some inner need and compulsions. Though not flawless, these social gatherings still serve as a link between an individual and his society and through such relationships can man explore his own capacity for love and growth.

This 'playing at goodness' may not reach the depth of Hardy's 'loving-kindness' but even in a somewhat crude manner, it does point to a moral direction. Like the sea-goers of 'To the sea' and the local crowd of 'Show Saturday', these party-goers also have something to do with the continuation of human tradition. But Larkin refrains from taking any definite stand - "Too subtle, that. Too decent too." - It is impossible to assert any final truth about this apparently ephemeral reality without disregarding good taste and honesty. The Larkin speaker, so sensitive and subtle, would rarely assert his views. He can only accept with reluctance:
Oh hell,

Only the young can be alone freely.
The time is shorter now for company,
And sitting by a lamp more often brings
Not peace, but other things.
Beyond the light stand failure and remorse
Whispering 'Dear Warlock-Williams: Why, of course --

what appears to be a spontaneous acceptance ('Why, of course') is a response born out of a very sad realization about the inability to bear the burden of failure and remorse in old age. The young, are comparatively free for both loneliness and experiment since they are not still burdened with knowledge that human history is full of miseries and failures. Human life seems to offer very little to choose from, and the whole poem seems to enact this helplessness in an ironical way. The speaker sees through the validity and futility of both the choices and grudgingly accepts the invitation. This last gesture affirms the poet's hope in human solidarity. The tension, between the speaker's first nearly romantic impulse to deny the invitation and later, well-considered, almost conventional conformity to accept it, is powerfully brought out. Larkin's equivocal stand accepts both the imperfections and the worthwhileness of the human society.
Larkin's refusal to take any definite moral stand as a final answer comes from his ruthless honesty and ever-renewed humility. The device of the dramatic monologue is most suitable to presenting both the viewpoints equally vigorously and also to afford the necessary distance to refrain from giving any solution.

'Sympathy in White Major' (HW 11) is another powerful dramatic monologue. The title is a conscious parody of the poem 'Symphony in White Major' by the French poet Gautier written in 1850. The earlier poem openly propagates his 'Art for Art's Sake' attitude and declares his disapproval of the bourgeois civilization. The images that appear in Larkin's poem can be traced back to the works of arts created under the influence of Gautier's works. However, the purpose of this thesis is not to trace symbolist elements in Larkin's poetry.

Almost monosyllabic in rhythm and commonplace in style the poem portrays an imaginary situation in which the speaker is being toasted by his friends:

When I drop four cubes of ice
Chimingly in a glass, and add
Three goes of gin, a lemon slice,
And let a ten-ounce tonic void
In foaming gulps until it smothers
Everything else up to the edge,
I lift the lot in private pledge:
'He devoted his life to others'.

While other people wore like clothes
The human beings in their days
I set myself to bring to those
Who thought I could the lost displays;
It didn't work for them or me,
But all concerned were nearer thus
(Or so we thought) to all the fuss
Than if we'd missed it separately.

'A decent chap, a real good sort,
Straight as a die, one of the best.
A brick, a trump, a proper sport,
Head and shoulders above the rest;
How many lives would have been duller
Had he not been here below?
Here's to the whitest man I know —'
Though white is not my favourite colour.

Once again the reader faces a complex situation in
which three voices - the speaker's, his friends' and
the controlling one of the poet are heard. (Earlier in 'Posterity', the same device was used when the subject of the poem was the poet himself). The first three stanzas describe the speaker who is socially considered virtuous. The friends 'he devoted his life to others' is supported by the speaker's confession that 'while other people wore like clothes / the human beings in their days / I sat myself to bring to those / who thought I could the lost displays;' His staying away from the common human exploitations definitely supports his morally blameless character. But he immediately deflates any notion of grandeur by further confessing. 'It didn't work for them or me' - the absence of any 'but' or 'yet' brings out the starkness and matter-of-factness of the realization. However, the total worthlessness of such virtues is denied only by a concession that, at least the speaker's selfless efforts brought 'all concerned nearer thus' - But even that is left with a characteristic ambiguity - ('or so we thought'). The speaker's refusal to take any stand as final or morally correct shows his characteristic open-endedness. In 'Toads' (TLD 32-33) he puts it clearly 'I don't say / One bodies the other one's spiritual truth'. This faith in an
an individual's ability to reach his own truth is itself an affirmation of human worthwhileness.

This poem further lists the virtues attributed to him by his friends. But they have little meaning, for the speaker. They unanimously proclaim 'Here's to the whitest man' and the speaker abruptly concludes that White is not his favourite colour (Absence of 'But' and 'yet' is once again conspicuous). The poem ends on an ambivalent note.

If 'whiteness' suggests purity, Larkin's views on purity in art (and life) are clear. He has always insisted that art which turns aside from social civilization will be self-obsessed, cold and empty of matter. In 'Vers de Societe' he has expressed 'Virtue is social'. That the narcissistic tendencies in art can bring dangerous results is his answer perhaps to the poets who believed in 'Art for Art's sake'. But the poem is characteristically ambivalent in its refusal to glorify or condemn any particular attitude to life -

The title poem 'High Windows' (HW 17) explores the human pursuits for happiness. The opening lines are intentionally and brutally shocking:
When I see a couple of kids
And guess he's fucking her and she's
Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm
I know this is paradise

Everyone old has dreamed of all their lives --
Bonds and gestures pushed to one side
Like an outdated combine harvester,
And everyone young going down the long slide
To happiness, endlessly. ... ...

The tone and language give out the speaker's disbelief in the young couple's idea of happiness. But he soon realises that he himself has passed through such scrutiny by his elders:

... I wonder if
Anyone looked at me, forty years back,
And thought, 'That'll be the life;
No God any more, or sweating in the dark
About hell and that, or having to hide
What you think of the priest. He
And his lot will all go down the long slide
Like free bloody birds'.
The ironic grumbling gradually develops into intense meditation:

... And immediately

Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:
The sun-comprehending glass,
And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows
Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.

The earlier tone modulates, the ironic gradually slips away, the impulse for affirmation gushes forth, through it and is ambivalently felt; it is beyond words.
The tension between the two voices - one given to flight into wonder, and the other ambiguously rooted to reality - is felt with intensity. The moment of boundless beauty is checked by a serious, ironic reserve of inescapable futility, 'the long slide'.

Hulme has defined 'classicism in verse' as 'a careful blend of irony and wonder':

... What I mean by classical in verse, then, is this. That even in the most imaginative flights there is always a holding back, a reservation. The classical poet never forgets his finiteness, his limit as a man. He
remembers always that he is mixed up with earth. He may jump, but he always returns back, he never flies away into the circum-ambient gas.

You might say if you wished that the whole of the romantic attitude seems to crystallize in verses around metaphors of flight ...

In the classical attitude you never seem to swing right along to the infinite nothing ... You never go blindly into an atmosphere more than the truth, an atmosphere too rarefied for man to breathe for long. You are always faithful to the conception of a limit\(^8\).

Larkin's imaginative restraint or his control of his romantic impulses comes very close to what Hulme describes as the classical manner. The last stanza of 'High Windows' has the same 'reigning in of flights', the same recognition of the power of the 'deep blue air'.

(atmosphere) and the same realization that it is 'too rarefied for man to breathe for long.'

The moment of transcendence is perhaps so ephemeral that it cannot be retained for long. The moment is 'further made ambiguous by the image of void ('shows / Nothing, and is nowhere') and the blending of the vision of beauty and sceptical reserve lend uniqueness to Larkin's works. Larkin has this to say about this tension between poetry of 'truth' and poetry of 'beauty':

I have always believed that beauty is beauty, truth truth, that is not all ye know on earth nor all ye need to know, and I think a person usually starts off either from the feeling how beautiful that is or from the feeling How true that is. One of the jobs of the poem is to make beautiful seem true and the true beautiful ... 9

An absolutely romantic belief of the Keatsian sort is no longer convincing to a modern poet and the tension between two impulses remains for him a most real and honest experience.

'Forget What Did' (HW 16) is strategically printed

opposite to 'High Windows' and also shares the same momentary realization of 'pure relationship' with 'living nature'. The poem portrays an intense but brief emotional response. The decision to stop writing a diary was a shocking experience:

Stopping the diary
Was a stun to memory,
Was a blank starting,
One no longer cicatrized
By such words, such actions
As bleakened waking.

I wanted them over,
Married to burial
And looked back on

The speaker looks back at his past with sadness and regret. But he seems resolved not to give in to such despair. He asks:

And the empty pages?
Should they ever be filled
Let it be with observed
Celestial recurrences,
The day the flowers come,
And when the birds go.

The speaker's wise and fortunate choice of filling up the 'future pages' of his diary with 'celestial recurrences' has an unprecedented loftiness. The tension seems to be between the totally ineradicable desire to fill the empty pages and the more powerful impulse to be in line with the 'celestial recurrences'.

There are more poems in High Windows that directly and openly celebrate moments of pure relationship with living nature. They are short but exquisite lyrics. 'Solar' (HW 33) is written almost like a hymn to the brilliant presence of the sun:

Suspended lion face
Spilling at the centre
Of an unfurnished sky
How still you stand,
And how unaided
Single stalkless flower
You pour unrecompensed.

This style of writing, almost resembling the poetry
in the primitive Grand style is unlike anything Larkin has ever written before. The images he uses for the sun—'unaided'—'single stalkless flower'—can be applied, to his own poem which stands singular and unique in its content and style:

The eye sees you
Simplified by distance
Into an origin,
Your petalled head of flames
Continuously exploding.
Heat is the echo of your
Gold.

Coined there among
Lonely horizontals
You exist openly.
Our needs hourly
Climb and return like angels.
Unclosing like a hand,
You give for ever.

All the images complement one another. There is a calm and reserved tone, but no sceptical doubts mar the solemn mood of the poem. The sun is a natural symbol of
benevolence, perfection and source of all creation. The complete acceptance of the mysterious power is checked only by one condition - 'The eye sees you / Simplified by distance'. Only distance lends a proper perspective to the Larkin persona. Like the powerful impulse 'to hold her hand' in 'Broadcast' (TWW 14) the overwhelming acceptance can only be possible at a distance. But the positive spirit of the poem is undeniable and like the sun, this lyric also 'exists openly' - a daring assertion of a very original kind.

When imagination is in tune with the nature, the spontaneity flows through the work of art. 'The Trees' (H W 12) voices the speaker's harmonious relationship with nature inspite of the threatening despondency. The speaker observes the natural cycle of the trees with great intensity:

The trees are coming into leaf
Like something almost being said;
The recent buds relax and spread,
Their greenness is a kind of grief.

Is it that they are born again
And we grow old? No, they die too.
Their yearly trick of looking new
Is written down in rings of grain.
Yet still the unresting castles thresh
In fullgrown thickness every May.
Last year is dead, they seem to say,
Begin afresh, afresh, afresh.

The harmony between the speaker and his subject is so perfect that the grief is squeezed out of the lines as delicately and lyrically as through the greenness of the leaf. The sadness felt is of a cosmic nature—inexplicable, incomprehensible and exquisite. Mortality is common to both—the man and the trees—but the latter manage to conceal the fact. The characteristic ironic humour is introduced through the word 'trick', suggestive of some imperfection in this seemingly perfect nature. But the last stanza, once again dispels the earlier gloom. The full grown thickness of the trees inspires the speaker to participate in this mysterious cycle of renewal with joyous enthusiasm and he openly welcomes the optimistic vision 'Begin afresh, afresh, afresh.'

Cut Grass (HW 41) is also concerned with the same theme of mortality:

Cut grass lies frail;
Brief is the breath
Mown stalks exhale.
Long, long the death,
It dies in the white hours
Of young-leafed June
With chestnut flowers,
With hedges snowlike strewn,

White lilac bowed,
Lost lanes of queen Anne's lace,
And that high-builted cloud
Moving at summer's pace.

The sadness and beauty merge completely in this exquisite lyric and the lovely morning in June appears perfect. The poet seems content simply to let be, and to rest in the beauty of the moment. The fact of death is mentioned only in two lines; the rest of the lines are a quiet rejoicing in the exquisite beauty, the grass, the flowers and the clouds. All are arrested in the slow sweep of an eye. The life of the newly mown grass is all too brief though long and lingering its death.

The theme of death has always been a major preoccupation in Larkin's poetic world. His view of Death as an endless extinction perhaps did not change till his own death. The horror he felt at the time of his death has been described by his closest friend Blake Morrison:
"For friends and admirers, one of the saddest things about Philip Larkin's death is knowing how much he feared dying and how wretchedly he spent his last few months."\textsuperscript{10}

'The Building' (HW 24-26) and 'The Old Fools' are two major poems that deal with the themes of old age, disease and death and man's helplessness before them. Both handle serious themes, in totally different styles. The situation in the former is more realistic and the physical details clearly indicate that the building is a hospital. The scene describes everything that we all have commonly experienced or witnessed. But the perceptive eye of the speaker pierces the surface and identifies with the inner suffering of the patients:

Higher than the handsomest hotel
The lucent comb shows up for miles, but see,
All round it close-ribbed streets rise and fall
Like a great sigh out of the last century.
The porters are scruffy; what keep drawing up
At the entrance are not taxis; and in the hall
As well as creepers hangs a frightening smell.

\textsuperscript{10} Blacks Morrison, 'Unrequired Writing', p. 22.
The co-existence of the contraries, 'lucent comb' surrounded by 'a great sigh', 'creepers and frightening smell' — beauty and terror — create an ironic picture. The speaker describes the 'restless but resigned' patients with an air of casualness — ('like an airport lounge', 'like a local bus'). Their nervousness and uncertainties are very effectively brought out through tension between impatience and stoical calm. They make the patients' predicament even more pathetic:

... Humans, caught
On ground curiously neutral, homes and names
Suddenly in abeyance; some are young,
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
It must be error of a serious sort,
For see how many floors it needs, how tall
It's grown by now, and how much money goes
In trying to correct it.

The infirmity of these patients reminds me of the women of 'Faith Healing' (TWW 15) — 'and all / Here to confess that something has gone wrong' is reminiscent of the earlier poem 'what's wrong? ... / By now, all's wrong'
- It's a universal malady that the poet points at. Ever since the Fall, the mankind has been suffering through this diseased existence. Death remains a mystery for all, but it assumes an exceptionally terrifying proportion, for those who enter this building seeking succour. Their terror invites sympathy. Larkin's compassion for the suffering humanity is clear from his earlier confession 'like a great sigh out of the last century'.

The speaker wanders through the maze of the stairways, corridors and rooms that make the hospital. The speaker describes the hospital, its visitors and every physical detail with vividly and then suggests that it is not unlike a cathedral. It offers a possibility of the prolongation of life in this world as the church promises eternal life in the next. They both struggle to transcend the thought of dying. But the final conclusion is that the hospital cannot ultimately 'contra-vene / The coming dark' whereas cathedral might:

... All know they are going to die
Not yet, perhaps not here, but in the end,
And somewhere like this. That is what it means,
This clean-sliced cliff; a struggle to transcend
The thought of dying; for unless its powers
Outbuild cathedrals nothing contravenes
The coming dark, though crowds each evening try

With wasteful, weak, propitiatory flowers.

The fragile flowers in their naturally symbolic effect
are similar to the fragility of the human beings them­selves. The inevitable conclusion has to be accepted.
Larkin has mentioned his apprehensions regarding the possi­bilities of complete happiness, in an interview:

But 'happiness', in the sense of a continuous
emotional orgasm, no. If only because you know
that you are going to die, and the people you
love are going to die.11

So, Larkin's dread of death was not so overwhelming
to make him an utterly nihilistic poet. His awareness of
an 'unresting death' lends his poems an urgency of insight.
But they do not deny happiness altogether.

'The Old Fools' (HW 19–20) another major poem that
deals with the theme of time and death is written in an
entirely different tone. It begins with the relentless
questioning:
What do they think has happened, the old fools,
To make them like this? Do they somehow suppose
It's more grown-up when your mouth hangs open and drools;
And you keep on pissing yourself, and can't remember
Who called this morning? ... ...

The surface brutality is only an ironic mask which conceals genuine and unwavering sympathy and attacks the false and shallow sentimentalism. Man's helplessness before the deteriorating effects of time is movingly brought out by the ironical questioning as if by choice they were such. The starkness of the degeneration is vividly depicted through the contrast between 'the old fools' ignorance' and the speaker's awareness of their imminent death. The latter cries out in desperation:

... why aren't they screaming? ...

At death, you break up: the bits that were you
Start speeding away from each other for ever
With no one to see. It's oblivion, true:
We had it before, but then it was going to end,
And was all the time merging with a unique endeavour
To bring to bloom the million-petalled flower
Of being here. ... ...
The speaker's romantic impulse (million-petalled flower) struggles to transcend gloriously the reality of death. The perplexing calmness of the old people may be either due to proximity to death or their living in the past memories:

Perhaps being old is having lighted rooms
Inside your head, and people in them, acting.
People you know, yet can't quite name; each looms
Like a deep loss restored, from known doors turning,
Setting down a lamp, smiling from a stair, extracting
A known book from the shelves; or sometimes only
The rooms themselves, chairs and a fire burning,
The blown bush at the window, or the sun's
Faint friendliness on the wall some lonely
Rain-ceased midsummer evening. That is where they live:
Not here and now, but where all happened once.

This is why they give.

An air of baffled absence, trying to be there
Yet being here. For the rooms grow farther, leaving
Incompetent cold, the constant wear and tear
Of taken breath, and them crouching below
Extinction's alp, the old fools, never perceiving
How near it is. This must be what keeps them quiet:
The peak that stays in view wherever we go
For them is rising ground. Can they never tell
What is dragging them back, and how it will end? Not
at night?

Not when the strangers come? Never, throughout
The whole hedious inverted childhood? Well,
We shall find out.

- The predicament of facing death is given a metaphorical transformation. The mind of course has "rooms lighted" in old age. But that is now, at the end, a matter of the past, "where all happened once". They are "trying to be there" while they are actually here, embodiments of a baffled absence. Nor do they know fully how close they are to the end. We see their close: "The peak stays in our view wherever we go" but for them the end is an uphill task, the "rising ground". They cannot tell what is dragging them back, living "the whole hideous inverted childhood". Larkin leaves the conclusion nobly open: "Well, we shall find out". This poem is somewhat mellower than the Building. There "the coming dark" is darkness visible. Here there is a profound compassion for the predicament of old age. He would not dismiss the predicament as nonsense, or absurd. He would like to prove it on his
pulses and find out. This poem too transcends the mere paraphernalia of poetry and takes one to the profound human truth.

The themes of failure and death undoubtedly occupy a predominant place in Larkin’s poetic world. But they do not cancel out the essential value of life. Larkin’s sense of history bestows upon him such a vast vision of human history that he can neither simplify nor submit to any definite conclusion without betraying his truthfulness. His fidelity to both, his earthy realism and imaginative vision, bring about this characteristic ambiguity. Often life offers rare moments of beauty inspite of the encompassing sadness.

’Sad steps’ (HW 32) echoes and transforms Sir Philip Sidney’s sonnet. There is a freshness of observation which lends a vigour and vitality to the emotion of the poem. There is an overpowering regret at the awareness of the lost time, but there is no bitterness. The speaker is at once sceptical and romantic:

Groping back to bed after a piss
I part thick curtains, and am startled by
The rapid clouds, the moon’s cleanliness.
Four O'clock: wedge-shadowed gardens lie
Under a cavernous, a wind-picked sky,
There's something laughable about this,
The way the moon dashes through clouds that blow
Loosely as cannon-smoke to stand apart
(Stone-coloured light sharpening the roofs below)
High and preposterous and separate —
Losange of love! Medallion of art!
O wolves of memory! Immensements! No,
One shivers slightly, looking up there.
The hardness and the brightness and the plain
Far-reaching singleness of that wide stare.
Is a reminder of the strength and pain
Of being young; that it can't come again,
But is for others undiminished somewhere.

These two different responses to the moon represent
the differences between youth and old age. The speaker
is 'startled', and 'shivers slightly' at the gracious-
ness of the moon ('moon's cleanliness) and thinks of the
sad comedy of the moon's immeasurable significance to
the young. The beauty is captured in the vividness with
which the moon is viewed. The spiritual potential is definitely alluded to in 'the startling'; however the ambiguity enters with the 'shiver' that suggests transience and failure and old age. To the young, the moon is a cannon-ball, a 'Lozenge of Love', 'Medallian of Art' — "a symbol of the Ideal to all the Young Astrophils yearning for the perfect love — of their young stellas". There appear beauty, dignity and playful irony. The moment of awareness leads the speaker outward as a gesture of goodwill towards the young. Larkin's romantic poetry comprises of this sceptical realism and deep pleasure in beauty. The gentle irony often combines with his ability to praise.

Terry Whalen has this to comment on 'Sad Steps':

The cleverness at the outset, its mixture of the beautiful image with a manner of ridicule, is recognizable as Larkin's penchant for self-mockery and his habit of restraining flight of wonder from soaring past the bounds of transient awe. 'Sad Steps' states an irony and

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beauty at once ... (it) draws on all aspects of Larkin's poetic personality ... Lawrance claimed that it is in these momentary realizations in 'pure relationship' with the 'living universe about us'\(^1\) that major art reaches its fullest and almost religious intensity.\(^2\)

The title 'Sad Steps' seems to be a metaphor for growing old and passing of time. But the moon's reminding of both 'the strength and pain of being young' gives it a dramatic intensity and interest. There are three different dictons - colloquial, descriptive, and sudden elevation to the meditation of the moon. They are carefully modulated and woven into a regular rhyme scheme of abb, aba and steady iambic rhythm.

'The Explosion' (HW 42), the last poem in the volume, moves from an ironical viewing of a mining disaster to a vision of transcendence. John Wain has acclaimed this to be 'one of his finest poems'.\(^3\) The poem is an example


\(^3\) John Wain, *Professing Poetry*, p.120.
of Larkin's changed style. The subject is a mining disaster, which is very accurately described:

On the day of the explosion
Shadows pointed towards the pithead:
In the sun the slagheap slept.

The sense of the ominous is suggested through 'shadows' and 'slagheap slept'. The miners are death-haunted:

Down the lane came men in pitboots
Coughing oath-edged talk and pipe-smoke,
Shouldering off the freshened silence.

One chased after rabbits; lost them;
Came back with a nest of lark's eggs;
Showed them; lodged them in the grasses.

So they passed in beards and moleskins,
Fathers, brothers, nicknames, laughter,
Through the tall gates standing open.

Through the coarse details of the lives observed an awesome beauty arises. The setting, the atmosphere and the carefully controlled suspense, concrete portrayal of men and their gestures - everything leads towards an
ambivalent experience of domestic and awesome reality:

At noon, there came a tremor; cows
Stopped chewing for a second; sun,
Scarfed as in a heat-haze, dimmed.

'The dead go on before us, they
Are sitting in God's house in comfort,
We shall see them face to face —'

Plain as lettering in the chapels
It was said, and for a second
Wives saw men of the explosion

Larger than in life they managed —
Gold as on a coin, or walking
Somehow from the sun towards them,

One showing the eggs unbroken.

The religious consciousness in the minds of the wives gives the disaster a metaphysical dimension. The sense of historical setting is conveyed through the surface details as also the inner workings of their minds. The portrayal of the women listening to the religious sermon ('plain as lettering in the chapels') brings out a special severe plainness. The poet picks out such
such details because he identifies himself with the working-class people and imagines the situation with intensity, as with the victimized girl, in 'Deceptions' (TLD 37). The emotional states of the bereaved wives is indirectly and unsentimentally evoked by the effect of the consoling phrases of the memorial service: There is a brief flash compounded of faith, hope and memory, when the dead men appear to be walking again, resurrected, in a golden visionary haze, surrounded by a soft glow. Touchingly and intimately, one of them seems to show the eggs he had found and carefully replaced in the grass - a moment taken from his joyous vital life. The Christian promise of the Resurrection of the flesh as well as the spirit gives a momentary vision of the dead men walking as they used to, endearingly familiar but magnified and made golden. The combining of the domestic (showing the eggs unbroken) and the sublime (gold as on a coin or walking from the sun) effectively evokes at once the loss and gain of these women. Inspite of the alleged obsoleteness of Christianity in the modern world, there is an undeniable imaginative and moral beauty that Larkin finds compelling. Larkin's interest in the religious states of consciousness is reflected through this poem.
This and 'Wedding Wind' (TLD 15) both clearly and openly embody Larkin's ability as it were, to create centres of consciousness, outside himself. They both are given to beauty, awe and wonder.

The poems in High Windows are strikingly different in tone from not only those in the earlier volumes and but from one another in the same collection. Positive and hopeful notes dispel the impression of utter gloom and bleakness. The passionate romantic yearning of the youthful-self is replaced by a stoic calm or ironic humour. The themes and situations are chosen from every-day life and aim at 'ordinariness' which is more familiar and concrete. His major theme seems to be a concern with human history, here.

The poet now clearly emerges as one deeply involved in history, in the sense that there is a growing faith in the traditions as seen in 'To the Sea' and 'Show Saturday'. Being a modern poet of his sort, his non-religious attitude does not allow him easy means to transcendence. But he accepts the value of traditional festivals and finds significance in the rituals. Modern man is far away from the fundamental myth of Paradise, which was lost not long after creation. But these traditional festivals, rituals and social gathering still retain some 'mysterious' sense of
time and place which impart them a special significance. Larkin assents to these moments of transcendence in such rituals—e.g., 'The Wedding Wind', 'The Whitsun Weddings' ('High Windows', 'To the Sea', to name some. He is a poet who concretely feels the effect of time on an individual's life.

Instead of a singular 'Mr. Bleaney', now there are generations of the young and the old being compared and the resultant ambivalence has a more positive, optimistic note about it, e.g., 'Forget What did', 'High Windows', 'Sad Steps', 'This Be The Verse' and even 'Vers de Societe' and 'How Distant'.

The poet is now in a position to laugh at himself more heartily and take the human condition more freely and with a sense of hope. In High Windows he clearly refers to himself as a middle aged person. He uses dramatic monologues to its fullest advantage in the poems whose subject is the poet himself, e.g., 'Sympathy in White Major', 'Posterity', 'Money', etc. This technique allows him the desired distance from his reader and to present both the viewpoints with equal fidelity and impartiality. Once again, the resulting tentativeness is most suitable to the poet, whose ultimate
aim was to reach and transmute the truth. He saw beauty and truth in the ordinary lives of the people and also in the mystery of nature. There are poems that openly celebrate the living relationship between man and his nature. 'Solar', 'The trees', 'Livings', 'Out Grass', etc., bring out the mystery and beauty of nature that lift the poet momentarily to transcendence and the resultant joy is immortalised in his art.