Chapter - Two

Philip Larkin: A Poet of Melancholy

The note of melancholy which one notices in the poetry of Philip Larkin might have had more immediate source in his study of Thomas Hardy who was probably the greatest single influence on the poetry of the Movement. But Hardy is not a melancholy poet in the sense in which this word is often used in literature. It will not be out of place here to give a brief sketch of the history of the word and its manifestation in various writers in order to distinguish Larkin’s distinct attitude to it. Melas-black-chole-bile; so it is called as the condition of having too much black bile which is a kind of mental disease. It is one of the four fluids - blood, phlegm, choler (yellow bile) and
melancholy (black bile). It is marked by ‘sullenness rasibility or mental dejection and depression, Webster’s New International Dictionary explains the difference between sadness and melancholy: “Sadness is the general term for depression of spirits of whatever degree; melancholy, in modern usage, is a settled depression, the word little more pensive, sometimes pleasing sadness”. According to Britannica World Language Dictionary ed by Frunk and Wagnalis, melancholy is dark, acrid, vicious substance once believed to be secreted by the kidney and to be responsible for gloomy dejection of spirits, pensive contemplation, serious sober reflection. Reference to it occur in some of the great writers in English. The following examples occur in Britanica World Language Dictionary:

2. ‘Hence loathed melancholy of Cereberus and blackest midnight born’ Milton’s L’Allegro I.
3. “And melancholy marked him for her own”. Gray’s Elegy.
4. In the very temple of delight veiled Melancholy has her sovran shire. Keats’ Melancholy.
5. The superstitious are often melancholy and The melancholy always superstitious. Dr. Johnson’s Rasseles XIV.
6. Melancholy music fills the plain Dryden’s Virgil George IV 747.

It will be noted that Larkin’s melancholy is not a conscious poetic attitude. It arises from the kind of corpus that he uses as his raw material: John Press has rightly noted that Larkin’s poems describe with surprising accuracy the suburban social ethos of England in 1950’s. It is his own ethos which he has seen and observed and naturally despite his frequent recourse to irony and parody, there remains an unmistakable sadness in his verse which is suffused with compassion, melancholy, a sense of sadness and the
transience of things, an awareness of random quality inherent in human existence. He accepts resignedly all the implications of his atheism, pronouncing in level tones his verdict on our life.¹

Life is first boredom, then fear
whether or not we use it, it goes
And leaves what something hidden from we choose And age, and
only the end of age.²

Larkin’s mode of melancholy is similar to Thomas Gray, who was a transitional poet. Gray is melancholic not only because of social conditions but due to personal reasons also. Major part of Gray’s life was spent in surroundings with which he was out of tune. David Cecil remarks:

The origin of this melancholy of Gray’s is to be found partly in a constitutional langour of temperament, partly in that fundamental suspicion of life engendered in him to early an acquaintance with its power to hurt.³

In his biographical survey of Thomas Gray, Cecil refers to Gray’s family circumstances which were mainly responsible for Gray’s misery. He chose celibacy out of duress. The untimely death of Gray’s intimate friend, Richard West was another blow of misfortune which as soon compounded by the death of Horace Walpole, another dear friend. Poverty and solitude encouraged despondancy which made Gray’s life shyer than ever. Chill Penury Froze the academic progress of his career for which he had to borrow money from his sister to continue his study at Eton.

Saint of this learned awful grove, While slow along they walk I rove,
And pleasing scene, which all that see Admire, is lost to me.⁴
Between 1750 to 1757 he wrote several pindaric odes including *Progress of Poesy* and *The Bard*. After reading Icelandic and celtic poetry he wrote his eponymous and the most popular poem “*Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard.*”

Both Philip Larkin and Thomas Gray wrote their poems against the background of great poetical periods. Gray wrote in the aftermath of the neo-classical period which was dominated by the genius of Alexander Pope. Pope had used his talent for putting both life and letters on the right footings. For him poetry was not self-expression. A poet was primarily a teacher who must use his gifts for setting things right. He was thus a cultural hero, a leader of society who wielded his powers for larger social and moral purposes. The age expected this from him. Gray did not possess Pope’s self-assurance and power. He looked upon his period as an unpoetical age which cared nothing for the finer values of life. He had no fascination for satire which Pope had used so effectively and so artistically. Gray found more affinity in the Miltonic-mediative tradition and his poetry breathes an air of pensiveness partly because he could not relate himself to the momentous public issues which had moved the heart and mind of Pope. Larkin had the entire modernist background to write against Eliot the arch-poet of the modernist mode had defined poetry and poet keeping in view the contemporary condition. He also ridiculed poetry as an expression of personality. He in fact announced that poetry was an escape from personality. It was only by sacrificing his personality that a poet could address himself the larger task of shoring up the fragments of a crumbling civilization and could bring the life-giving waters into the arid wasteland which the west
European civilization had become after the war. The poet in such circumstances was both a prophet and a philosopher who could give a sense of direction and significance to his contemporary life. By the time Larkin came to compose his poems the great modernist experiment had run its full course and its conceptual and aesthetic weakness had become obvious. Larkin was not fascinated either by modernist attitudes to reality or the artistic strategies which the modernist writers had evolved to articulate those attitudes. Larkin’s relationship with his illustrious predecessors was largely negative. Like Gray in the eighteenth century. Larkin also could not relate himself to prophetic attitudes. His awareness that he was living and writing in the aftermath of a great literary period with which he could not have any intellectual or moral affinity induced in him a feeling of loneliness which is mainly responsible for the melancholy and pensiveness in his poetry. He knew of his distance from Eliot and also of the necessity of evolving a new poetic style. He has remarked:

“..... a style is much more likely to be formed from partial slipshod sampling than from the coherent acquisition of a literary education against Eliot who discribed the need for a poet to be aware of the Europe arguing that no poet of worth can form himself wholly on private admiration.”

Celibacy, (forced or voluntary, it is difficult to say) and shyness are the other common qualities of Gray and Larkin: “I would say, yes, I was and am extremely shy”. In “Places, Loved One’s the poet laments over his own fate as he never married and settled down with his own family due to the challenges of the world, and the failure of choice:
So that it is not your fault
Should the town turn dreary
The girl is dolt.?

All this contributed to Larkin’s reticence about choosing themes which
demanded bold generalisations. He has relied chiefly on ordinary human emotions for
supplying the raw-materials for his poems. Donald Davie, who has been an avid admirer
of Larkin’s verse has confessed that the quality of self abnegation in Larkin’s poetry is
something which Davie has not been able to learn himself:

“I yield to hardly any one in my admiration of Philip Larkin’s poetry
and I sometimes see, in his refusal to go for experience outside
England, a heroic exploit of self obligation beside which my own
grabbing to sensuous experience where ever I can find it seems some
how wanton ... that right world is little Englandism”.

Larkin maintains a remarkably low profile in the choice of his poetic
subjects. “Wants” is a characteristic early poem which is taken up with this problem.
Poetry is not an escape from loneliness, it is itself a mode of lonelines. Anyone choosing
to be a poet chooses to be lonely. The turbulence of nature, the strong erotic emotion of
love and company, even the desire to have a reciprocating family do not move the poet to
impose poems. In fact the entire business of living rests on oblivion-how much we are
able to forget. The poet has to train himself in absolute concentration despite the tensions,
real or artificial which confront him in life. The wish to be alone, the desire for oblivion
spur the poet to engage himself in the task of poetic composition. He writes poems not
for settling the questions and problems of life but to enter a state of mind in which the
poem alone exists and it along gives meaning and substance to life. “Wants” is a very
small poem consisting of just ten lines but it can be regarded as Larkin’s poetic manifesto:

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, the desire of oblivion runs.⁹

The simplicity of diction and regularity of syntax and the obvious tone of ironic indifference to any kind of emotional provocations—all combine to produce an effect of ordinariness of meaning while at the same time they also suggest a complete command over the experience which is being verbalized. The irony rests on the mixing of linguistic registers and the repetitions of certain phrases and clauses. Every poetic device is subordinated to the central theme to which the poet keeps on returning in an effort to make it as forceful as possible within the short space of ten lines. A similar attitude of indifference towards avoidable sociability is manifested in “Reasons for Attendance”. It is not any superficial sense of sophisticated aloofness or a sense of injured pride which prevents the poet from mixing with others but just because the poet’s understanding of life which stands in his way and blocks his path. He is neither a misanthrope hating and distrusting human company nor a highbrow person obsessed with his personal and social
identity. There is no doubt a strong sense of self-awareness but is the self awareness of no ordinary man. His frankness is disarming but at the same time it carries conviction:

But not for me, nor I for them; and so
With happiness. Therefore I stay outside
Believing this; that maul to and fro
Beliveving that; and both are satisfied,
If no one has misjudged himself. Or lied.\textsuperscript{10}

The poet decision to stay away from the crowd is rooted in his inability to join the general stream of emotions which is most likely our perspective on life. One must know one’s limits and knowing them must work within them. Any effort to transgress these limits in the name of decorum will only make one ridiculous. Moreover, there is no guarantee that the new experience would not unsettle him. Joy is universally coveted but that does not prove that it is open to universal experience. To remain disillusioned is prodence, to run after illusions and learn from them is folly. All this should not suggest that Larkin is an incorrigible pessimist but then he is no romantic idealist either. His attitude to life and art is charactrised by a refusal to glass over facts. The act of poetry does not entitle the poet to take leave of reality and take a flight from it on the viewless wings of poesy.

Bryan Appleyard has suggested that though Larkin does betray a sense of loss of the abiding values of life. This loss was keenly felt by Larkin because “There was simply nothing there to start with. Our age was obliged to the fact; the grand movements of history would simply have to passby.”\textsuperscript{11} It is in this awarness of the broad historical and cultural changes which suggests a parellel between Larkin and Hardy. Larkin’s
“sense of futility is barely kept at bay by irony and the frivolous routine of life reprehensibly perfect.” Larkin has been compared with Wordsworth as they resemble in speaking of the ordinary sorrows of ordinary life in an ordinary language. Kuby says that they share a vision of man as the victim of blind forces of the ‘will of nature’ and of man’s own duality, both of which operate like fate to frustrate individual will and to ensure disillusionment. In a Radio programme Larkin expresses his reason for appreciating Hardy’s poetry:

When I came to Hardy it was with a sense of relief that I didn’t have to try and jack myself up to a concept of poetry that lay beside my own life... one could only relapse back into one’s own life and write from it.

Most probably, Hardy’s view that suffering is the most important element in life attracted Larkin and forced him to follow the same patterns. Chirstopher Ricks in his review of *The Whitsun Wedding*, while noting Larkin’s debt to Thomas Hardy, talks “an extraordinary marriage of Hardy’s bluntness with Tennyson’s fineness of phrases” in the volume. Larkin has also been compared to W.B. Yeats. Edna Longley has observed that Larkin “resembles Yeats in his command of a grand manner, in his deployment of resonant and declamatory adjectives, in his mastery of decisive and memorable lines.”

“MCM XIV” expresses the emotional sympathy of the poet with those soldiers who had died in the war. Similarly in “Easter 1916” Yeats also mourned those martyrs who sacrificed their life for their country’s sake, They also resemble in views about sexual
passions, approach of the old age and the prospect of death, but these similarities are superficial and John Press has rightly remarked:

As far as the concept of death is concerned Yeats believes in immortality and reincarnation which is not found in Larkin. Here it can be said that Larkin is close to Hardy.¹⁵

Bateson has noted the influence of Davie on Larkin and has said that both poets write about the crisis in human relationship but they dispaly perfect emotional control while writing about this crisis. Both eschew sentimentalism and abstract images. Larkin and Davie are contemporaries and both write from a similar awareness and therefore the similarities between the two poets should not surprise anyone.

The various influences which have been mentioned here may have contributed to the shaping of Larkin’s poetic genius but Larkin’s development as a poet and the statue that he came to have in the Post-Second World War period cannot be attributed to these influences. He has responded to the ethos of his period in his own peculiar manner. He constructed a new poetic style for himself because in every great poet he perceived the inadequacy of the prevailing poetic style in expressing that ethos. Poetry did not come to him easy; he wrote by fits and starts but he matured as an artist fairly quickly. His The North Ship has certain affinities with poets like Auden and Yeats but it did not take him long to cast off these borrowed mannerisms and discover his true poetic vocation. He was concerned with his age as all great poets are but this in itself is no virtue. Great poets are temporal as well as timeless in that they respond to their contemporary history and at the same time go beyond it. His first collection of poems The
North Ship is undoubtedly influenced by a certain enthusiasm which is romantic and Larkin was frank to admit this fact in his introductory lines to the volume. Says he:

Looking at the collection today, it seemed amazing that any one should have offered to publish it without a check in advance and a certain amount of bullying. This, however, was not how I saw it at the time.16

The North Ship published in 1945 was Larkin’s first collection of poems. The thirty-one poems of this volume have a variety of themes but what makes them more interesting is the variety of influences which operate in the poetic sensibility of the poet. Larkin has confessed that the poems have an undergraduate ebullience about them and that they lack a definite stamp of authentic poetic style. Here are Larkin’s own words on the subject:

Looking back I found in the poems not one abandoned self but several of the ex-school boy, for whom Auden was the only alternative to “old-fashion poetry” (this is a reference to the modernists who had become old-fashioned by the forties); the undergraduate whose work a friend affably characterised as Dylan Thomas, but you have a sentimentality that is all your own”, and the immediately post-Oxford self isolated in Shropshire with a complete Yeats stolen from the local girls’ school.17

The war-poets did not interest Larkin then or thereafter. But alongwith the influence of Auden from whom Larkin had borrowed the title of the volume there was the figure of W.B. Yeats who had exercised a powerful influence on Larkin. But interestingly this is the prophetic Yeats who engages his attention but the romantic Yeats whose verbal music and whose love for dreams had their away on Larkin. It must be recalled that Yeats
had influenced Auden also and this Auden has acknowledged in one of his most moving poems, but Auden had looked upon Yeats as a complete poet who had succeeded in preserving his artistic integrity in face of the gravest crisis which the post first war Europe had presented before him. Larkin is, however, more discriminating in his admiration for Yeats, because he was not interested in the great symbolic systems and esoteric visions which had preoccupied Yeats in most of his twentieth century poems. Larkin says:

The predominance of Yeats in this volume deserves some explanation. He then recounts an incident in which Vernon Watkins gave a talk on Yeats. As a results I spent the next three years trying to write Yeats not because I like his personality or understood his ideas but out of an infatuation with his music..... In fairness to myself it must be admitted that it is particularly potent music, pervasive like garlic, and has ruined many a better talent .... Every night after supper before opening my dark large manuscript book I used to limber up turning up the pages of the 1933 plum-coloured Macmillan edition which stopped at ‘Words for Music’ perhaps and which meant in fact that I never absorbed the harsher Last Poems. This may be discernable in what I wrote.18

Larkin’s honey-moon with W.B. Yeats was short lived as was his admiration for Auden. The young poet who was in search of a complete model didn’t feel uneasy Auden and Yeats because neither poet could be parcelled out in bits and pieces. One had to like them whole or not like them at all. Larkin very soon discovered the poet he had been looking for. He was aware of the peculiar limitation of his talent and did not take long to realize it. As he says in the introduction:
When reaction came it was undramatic, complete and permanent. In early 1946 I had some new digs in which the bedroom faced east, so that the sun woke me inconveniently early. I used to read. One book I had by my bedside was the little blue chosen poems of Thomas Hardy. Hardy I knew as a novelist, but as regards his verse I shared Lytton Stretchy’s verdict that ‘the gloom is not even relieved by a little elegance of diction’. This opinion did not last long. If I were to date its disappearance, I should guess it was the morning I first read ‘Thoughts of Phena at News of Her Death.’

But these words were written much later and as Larkin himself has remarked his first acquaintance with Thomas Hardy the poet post dates the publication of *The North Ship*. Many critics, however, believe that Larkin knew Hardy’s poems while he was composing his own that are collected in his first volume. Thus John Holloway writes:

Larkin’s first collection of verse, *The North Ship* (1945: the choice of title for the book should not go unnoticed) shows everywhere the influence of Yeats. In the preface, however, the poet writes of how he gave Yeats up..... Larkin speaks in the same place of his early admiration for Auden--the rest of modern poetry was ‘old fashioned’ by comparison -- and of the decisive influence of Hardy; mentioning Hardy’s *Thoughts of Phena .... at News of Her Death* (c. 1898). The gist of Hardy’s poem is crucially to the point for Larkin: it is that Hardy has absolutely nothing loft by way of relic or memento of Tryphena Sparks, his early love. But, says the poem, in just that great zero there is hidden perhaps a small positive quantity: perhaps, Hardy suggests, I retain her memory, the real her, all the better precisely on account of that.
Needless to enter into any controversy about whether Larkin had read Hardy before *The North Ship* or afterwards. One of the chief qualities of Larkin’s poetry, including the poems in his first volume, is his preoccupation with the absent: this absence may be the absence of a thing once possessed and now lost or it may also be the absence of something which the poet passionately desires but can never hope to have. It cannot be termed nostalgia, a longing for something irretrievably lost. It is much more than that because it does not always refer to the past but the present and future as well. Even in these early poems this theme is present in predominance.

The volume, however, opens on a very different note, the poet, observing the objects of nature in a mood of gay abandon exhorts everybody to rejoice:

All catch a light
At the spread of spring;
Birds crazed with flight
Branches that fling.
Leaves up to the light-
Every one thing,
Shape, colour and voice,
Cries out, Rejoice!²¹

These lines sound like typical juvenelia and juvenile exuberance does not last long. Not long afterwards the mood of questioning sets in:

Are you prepared for what the night will bring
The stranger who will never show your face,
But asks admittance, will you greet your doom
As final; set him leaves and wine; knowing
The game is finished which he plays his ace,
And overturn the table and go into the next room?.\textsuperscript{22}

Auden’s voice is clearly describe in the ‘Conscript’. It has the familiar thirties images associated with war but without any touch of idealism. The poet concentrates on the emotion of pity and this is brought out by a deft use of irony:

The assent he gave was founded on desire for self affacement in order not to lose his birth right, brave, For nothing would be easier than replacement, which would not give him time to follow further The details of his own defeat and murder.\textsuperscript{23}

‘The Dancer’, an ‘arty’ poem recalling W.B. Yeats once again, gives some hint of the poet’s struggle to free himself, from his ‘ancestors’. It is a poem about the anxiety of influence.’ Here the poet makes a confession of sorts. For writing a genuine poem he

Must visit the dead
Head stone and wet cross,
Paths where the mourners tread,
A solitary bird,
These call up the shade of loss,
Shape word to word.\textsuperscript{24}

A genuine poem needs a genuine experience. This realization consoles the poet. ‘Ugly Sister’ half heartedly announces the poet’s desire to give up the romantic dreamings and choose subjects closer to real experience:

since I was not bewitched in adolescence
And brought to love
I will attend to the trees and their gracious silence
To winds that move.\textsuperscript{25}
And the poem that immediately follows bears testimony to his new mood. It is the description of a girl caught in a snow-storm. The vivacity of the girl cannot attract the poet nor can the wildness and savagery of nature:

The beauty dries my throat
Now they express
All that is content to wear a worn-out coal;
All actions done in patient hopelessness
And that ignore the silence of death,
Thinking no further than the hand can hold
All that grows old
Yet works on uselessly with shortened breath.26

His preoccupation with the absence and the melancholy pensiveness that it generates finds expression in the poem entitled ‘Winter’. If ‘Winter’ is taken up with the theme of absence, there are a couple of poems in which the poet relates his problem of finding an individual authentic idiom. There is something in him which cries:

Submission is the only good.
Let me become an instrument sharply stringed
For all things to strike music as they please.

But the poet is not willing to allow himself to be dictated by others. Others voices will not permit him to concentrate on his authentic emotions. He finds “an ancient sadness” gripping his heart and this he cannot bear it for long. But so far this volume is concerned, this effort seems to have been of no avail. Auden and Yeats wrestle for supremacy in the poets mind. Yeats’ sweetness has flowed into Larkin’s breast and Auden could get there only through the back door as it were. As for Hardy, he is almost
totally absent from the volume. In poem after poem Larkin presents variations on W.B. Yeats’ flow of sweetness. Who but a devoted disciple of Yeats could have composed lines like these:

I put my mouth
Close to running water
Flow north, flow south,
It will not matter,
It is not love you will find.
I told the wind;
I took away my words;
It is not love you will find,
Only the bright tongued birds,
Only a moon with no homes.

This desire to be realistic is repeated in many poems of the volume and the use of machine-imagery is like a proof. In a poem which has the structure of a sonnet with its theme of love the poet instead of shapsodizing over love concentrated on the physical side of it. The mood of regret, of passing time reminds one of Donne, specially in the following lines:

We are husks, that see
The grain going forward to a different use
There is regret. Always, there is regret
But it is better that your lives unloose,
As two tall ships, wind-masted, wet with light Break from an estuary with their courses set,
And waving part, and waving drop from sight.27

And a little later, in another poem we have this:

This is the first thing
I have understood;
Time is an echo of an axe
Within a wood.  

The poem which gives the title to the volume is Audenesque in the sense that the central image of the poem is so thirtyish but it is Audenesque in another sense also and it is that the attitude towards the ships which the poet is observing is not only matter of fact but also it is free from any excitement or amasement. Obviously the ships are worships. The first ship went to the west to a rich country. The second one was captured by the enemy. But the third ship was saved by its neutrality. The two ships returned ‘happily or unhappily’

But the third went wide and far
Unto an unforgiving sea
Under the fire-spilling star
And it was rigged for a long journey.  

John Helloway has pointed out that the theme of this poem is similar to Auden’s “Fleet Visit” in which the train of thought is very much like that of Hardy’s poem to which reference has already been made. Holloway writes:

The poem [Fleet Visit] contemplates some American worships in harbour. They are neutral, they are doing nothing, all the conventional or traditional interest or excitement attaching to worships is missing from them. But, Auden says, they look the better, they are more interesting not less, precisely because of that. In both poems we have the characteristic Larkin pattern of thought. The poems relinquish the conventional too easy terms sources of feeling, but the result is not zero. A nucleus of feeling, modest, traditional in fact in its own way, but insured against deflationary
collapse exactly through the stress on how conventionalities have been discarded, remains intact and can be accepted.\textsuperscript{30}

Not only “North Ship” but almost every poem of this volume lacks any sense of exuberance or enthusiasm. They seem to have been written out of a sense that in the variegated universe man has to endure much and enjoy little. Even though Larkin has acknowledged his indebtedness to Yeats and Auden, their influence is not easy to come by. Most poems are written in rhymed stanzas of varying lengths and barring few exception the diction is simple and prosaic. Most poems are cast in interrogative forms as if the poet has not been through his explorations. Nothing is overtly affirmed but nothing is overtly rejected; everything is left hanging in the balance. Intensity of experience has been moderated through a mood of questioning. Most poems seem to transport the reader between romanticist escapism and classicist grounding in fact. Refering to the exchange between Larkin and Montgomery which Larkin has mentioned in the introduction to the reissue of \textit{The North Ship}, Seamus Heaney has very correctly remarked that this exchange “prefigures the shape of the unsettled quarrel conducted all through (Larkin’s) mature poetry between vision and experience. And if that anti-heroic, chastening, humanist voice is the one which is allowed most of the lines throughout the later poetry, the rebukes it delivers cannot quite banish the Yeatsian need for a flow of sweetness.”\textsuperscript{31}

The poems of this volume carry an unmistakable note of sadness and this sadness has been engendered by the poet’s failure to come to terms with his surroundings. Time is his greatest enemy the echo of an axe within a wood which has rendered him helpless. It is only an echo and no tangible object; it frustrates the poet’s
efforts to stabilize and fix and save his experience from the eternal flux. George Hartley has aptly said:

For Larkin, the fact that ‘time’s eroding agents’ bring final oblivion, tend to make ambitious and alternative life-styles all equally meaningless, doesn’t prevent him from struggling towards some kind of poetic meaning.  

The persistent mood of interrogation which runs through The North Ship has continued through and characterizes Larkin’s oeuvre as a poet. Holloway has said that the immediate after war years were the most unsuited period for bold affirmation. A tongue-in-check attitude was inevitable in those years and the literature of the period bears testimony to this fact. Larkin’s next volume, appropriately entitled The Less Deceived, was published in 1955. In between the years of publication of The North Ship and The Less Deceived Larkin had cured himself the facile and at times insincere socialist idealism of Auden and the romantic idealism of W.B. Yeats. Thomas Hardy was an autidote to both Auden and Yeats and Larkin learnt from Hardy not only Hardy’s handling of language his old fashioned manner of writing in rhymed stanzas as if verse libre had never appeared in English poetry but also Hardy’s refusal to affirm any truth in a world where man had but a very marginal role. Davie says:

Hardy appears to have mistrusted and certainly leads other poets to mistrust, the claims of poetry to transcend the linear unrolling of time. This is atonce Hardy’s strength and his limitation; and it sets him irreconcilably at odds with for instance Yeats, who exerts himself repeatedly to transcend historical time by seeing it as cyclical, so as to leap above it into a realm that is visionary,
mythological, and ... eternal. It ought to be possible for any reader to admire and delight in both Hardy and Yeats, if only so much of the finest Yeats is concerned with the effort of transcendence rather than the achievement of it. But for any poet who finds himself in the position of choosing between these two masters, the choice cannot be fudged; there is no room for any compromise. And so there is an emblematic significance to Philip Larkin’s conversion... from Yeats to Hardy in 1946 ..... 33

The Less Deceived represents the typical characteristic features of his age like Amis’ A Case of Samples, Gunns’ On the Move, Davie’s A Winter Talent and Wain’s A Word Carved on a Still. The title is derived from his own poem “Deceptions”:

For you would hardly care
That you were less deceived, out on that bed
Than he was, stumbling up the breath-less stair
To burst into fulfilments desolate attic.34

About the actual compositions of the poems in this collection Larkin has said the following:

“I moved to Belfast in 1950 as sublibrarian in the university, which I found very stimulating, and there I wrote the bulk of The Less Deceived under no particular influence except Kingsley’s. I’d vision of showing him things he would laugh at. It is a formidable experience to be laughed at by Kingsley’s.35

Larkin’s words should not be taken too seriously because the poems here are no laughing matter. The picture of life that emerges from the poems is studiedly subdued. On reading the poems one has a feeling that probably Larkin has deliberately distorted life’s realities, that he has deliberately avoided and excluded that side of life
which is brighter and more inviting. When his publisher wrote to him that he should change the title of the volume Larkin replied:

I especially did not want any ambiguous title or one that made any claim to policy or belief. This, however, would give a certain amount of sad eyed (the Clear eyed) realism and if they did pick up the context that might grasp my fundamentally passive attitude of poetry (and life too I suppose) which believes that the agent is always more deceived than the patient because action comes from desire and we all know that desire comes after wanting something we have not got.\textsuperscript{36}

The desire for being unambiguous, for keeping close to the real experience of life, the refusal to rhetoricize the universal experience of suffering, and finally the conviction that absences count for much more in life than presences are typical Larkin attitudes which remained practically changed till the very end. “Deceptions” which was originally titled “The Less Deceived” makes a reference to real incident in which a girl was raped by a maniac. Obviously the theme is tragic because the victim’s suffering is entirely unmerited. However, the poet despite his sympathy with girl feels a certain distance from the girl. This is necessary because the poet is trying to unravel the mystery of suffering and too much identification with the girl would take away the necessary objectivity from the poet’s comprehension of the girls. He does not make any attempt to soften the pain or to minimise the sense of outrage. He would not dare console the girl even if he could, because he knows the certainty and inevitability of suffering in life. That minimal affirmation to which Holloway has made a reference is even more minimised:
What can be said,
Except that suffering is exact, but where
Desire takes charge, reading become erratic?

The victim and the tormentor are equally deceived. In fact the girl is less deceived than her enemy:

For you would hardly care
That you were less deceived, out on that bed,
Than he was, stumblin up the breathless stair
To burst into fulfilment’s desolate attic.\(^{37}\)

What could have become a sentimental tear-jerker in the hands of a lesser poet or an occasion for berating human lust and greed for a preacher is expressed in a controlled, measured language, with the focus remaining fixed on the object of the poem but without degenerating into a catalogue of lurid sexual details. The poet is moved as well as unmoved by the incident and succeeds in conveying simultaneously his sense of trauma and repose.

Hermann Peschmann has called The Less Deceived ‘a public volume implying thereby that there is in this volume a more empirical and objective attitude to experience than in the earlier volume.\(^{38}\) Whatever the truth of the above observation, the poems of this volume give us an unsentimental and non-committal attitude to the realities of life. This is not to suggest that they lack intensity of feeling or that the poet does not feel deeply involved in his themes. he has both but he expresses himself with restraint. Whether he writes of love, sex, marriage, religion, places or persons, he remains unenthused because the knows rather too well that reality does not admit of strong
emotions and that the best way of approaching the reality of life is to maintain an attitude of neutrality. As Bruce K. Martin has suggested Larkin manages to project a very personal concern for the things which personally concern most people living in the modern world.39

The poet cannot ignore the fact that everything in life happens in time. Our sufferings and our joys are conditioned by time. Our passionate dreams and our most painful frustrations are rounded by time. We may call it destiny, chance, fate, etc. or by whatever name we choose for it. We keep projecting our dreams and visions in the future but when that future becomes the present those dreams and visions become matters of the past. Thus time moves on but we remain where and what we were. The expression exposure of such an experience about time can be found in his poem like “Tripple Time”, “Next Please”, “I Remember - I Remember”, “Dockery and Son” and “Arrivals, Departures” in plenty. The decisive nature of time makes the poet melancholy.

The main purpose of these poems is to expose reality so that one does not get unnecessarily involved with his dreams, hopes, ambitions, and desires. One has to live in one’s present and make the maximu of it. We look upon time as an instrument for getting comfort, for thinking that everything will be well in future. Hardley opines:

“To complain of this as a distortion of reality convey feelings, not ideas. We can take pleasure in this superb craftsmanship as we would with other beautifully wrought objects.”40

“Tripple Time” takes into account the division of time into past, present and future. The present is declared as a time ‘unrecommended by event’ in which no
relevant progress is found or experienced by man, which is described with the help of certain images- ‘empty street’. The dissatisfactory and pessimistic beginning of the poem indicates the mood of melancholy. The Present seems to be childhood in which we hope for better youth. The portrayal of the future as ‘the furthest childhood saw’ is described with ‘contending bells’-

Here, “An air lambent with adult interprise”, we find the irony of the poet describing the feeling of a child for his bright future in adulthood for which he was continuously struggling but the cruel present crushes his planning and makes him dull. To quote P.R. King:

The choice of lambent, a somewhat archaic and mysterious word, stands out in a poem with a diction that elsewhere is unspectacular and catches perfectly that sense of the romantic projections which the young place on the adult future. In fact the complete phrase has an air of preciousness (particularly in the use of enterprise) which gives the feel of adulthood as being serious and important, as it appears to a child.”

The last stanza is about the past which he describes as ‘a valley cropped by fat neglected chances/That we insensately for bear to fleece’. These neglected chances are those which we stick to but they also ultimately prove deceptive because we can neither possess them nor control them. When the chances fly away from our hands we accuse the past because we have to create another imaginary castle to get transitory satisfaction for the time being. The past is described as an artist who fails to make the
garland and leaves the bare-thread for the forthcoming period. The message of the poem is to make the readers aware that our past and future will give meaning to the present.

In “Tripple Time” the poet expresses his response with the help of several images, but in “Next Please” the central image is the detached observation of the speaker from a diff looking out to sea at the approaching ‘sparkling armada of promises”. The poem begins:

Always too eager for the future, we
Pick up bad habits of expectancy
Something is always approaching, every day
Till then we say. 42

But the promises which future projects before us become a drag on us. They always remain distant, beyond our reach and thus waste our time and energy. They never make haste as if man had the whole eternity to wait for them. We keep waiting for them “holding wretched stalks of disappointment.” Meanwhile ‘the armada of promises’, our future dreams and fantasies turn into the past the moment they materialize in the present. The ships movement seems mysterious as well as dangerous. The ship is not laden but like the boat of man’s life it is empty, and its deck is outdated. And to cap it all:

........ it never anchors; its’
No sooner present than it turns to past.

Thus the bubble hopes of man disappear as soon as the moment of their fulfilment arrives. While the armada of promises turns out to be an illusory one, there is another shy, very real one, indeed:
Only one ship is seeking us, a black-
Sailed unfamiliar, towing at her back
A huge and birdless silence. In her wake
No waters breed or break.\(^{43}\)

It is D.H. Lawrence’s ship of death. But Lawrence was one of the last romantics and he never foreshook the vision of revival or regeneration. For Larkin there is a final blankness, a zero.

“Arrivals, Departures” has similarity with the “Next Please” as here also we find the same image of the ship. In this poem the speaker is watching from a channel boat the continuous movement of a ship. When the ship comes; it says, “Come and choose wrong” and while departing ‘O not for long’. It indicates that in the arrival we are deceived by time but as the time does not exist for a long time our departures from this world makes us free from the deceit of time. While life offers no choices, death closes all choices, and thus man has to helplessly watch the arrivals and departures of the ship without any hope of making any meaning out of it.

Among all the Movement poets Larkin has shown his deep concern with the loss of spiritual values which causes most of his poems to become melancholic. The poems like “Church Going”, “The Building”, “Faith Healing” and “Water” express his attitude to religion and religious institutions. To quote Blake Morrison:

“Larkin’s conviction that what brings people to seek religion is an unquenchable need for love, a sense of life lived according to love,’ a sense of all they might have done had they been loved’, but a sense which ‘nothing cures’-makes his climax more moving than Davies”\(^{44}\)
The most controversial and famous poem of Larkin is “Church Going”, published in the *Spectator* on 18 Nov., 1957. The speaker of this poem is “a thoughtful post-war English man; skeptical of the merely material comfort afforded by the welfare state yet sexually dubious of the promise held out by political, religious or artistic extremists”. The poet’s melancholy lies in the very title of the poem- Church Going- which does not mean only the visit to a church but falling of the church into ruins. In the past the main purpose of church was to bring people together to quench their spiritual thirst but now-a-days people seem to have no use of it. The poet is compelled to think about the gradual loss of faith of the people in church and its authority.

The speaker is moving from one church to another and suddenly his sight is fixed upon a particular church. He enters the sacred building just like a casual visitor without any religious conviction and wonders to see:

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....... matting, seats, and stone
And little books; sprawling of flowers, cut
For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff
Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;
And atense, musty, unignorable silence,
Brewed God knows how long.
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While he is brooding over the condition of the church and its slowly decaying structure, an inner impulse makes him to take off his cycle clips in ‘awkward reference: He moves forward in the church, takes note of other sacred items, reads the biblical verses, signs the book and makes a modest donation. He does all this by force of habit. His rational sense remains intact inspite of that awkward reverence and concludes
that the place was not worth stopping for. But he cannot easily get away with this thought and is thrown back in a meditative mood. His mind is gripped not only by the dilapidating condition of the church but also the future of religion and religious institutions. He seems to be pretty sure that churches have lost their use and after some time churches will fall and probably people will avoid them as unlucky places. The future visitors of the church will be people not seriously interested in religion but interested for other reasons:

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?

.......... I wonder who
Will be the last, the very last, to seek
This place for what it was; one of the crew
Who tap and jot and know what rood lofts were?
Some ruin-bibber, randy for antique,
Or Christmas-addict, counting on a whiff
Of gowns-and-band’s and organ-pipes and mynh?
Or will he be my representative,
Bored, uninformed, knowing the ghostly silt
dispersed, yet tending to this cross of ground
Through suburb scrub because it held unspilt
So long and equably. 47

Despite these uneasy questions the speaker has a feeling that it pleases him to stand in silence here. This change from the initially detached and unresponsive pose to one of profound emotional involvement is significant in that the poet cannot dismises the
church off hand. The sight of the decaying church leads the poet to consider the role of religion and religious institution in an irreligious or areligious age. In this way what was an uneasy personal experience in the beginning acquires a universal significance in the last stanza of the poem. The church is an anachronism in a spiritually desolate period but the poet would like to feel the church will continue to play an important role in human affairs. At least birth, marriage and death would acquire meaning only if the church continues to stand:

A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions rest,
Are recognised, and robed as destinies,
And that much never can be obsolete,
Since some one will for ever 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 so many dead lie round.  

The church even if it loses its focal importance in a christian’s life, has another role. It is the place where dead lie buried and the sight of the graves will impart a wisdom which nothing else can and this wisdom will always be needed. The importance of the church is affirmed but for reasons which must have been farthest from the minds of those who had built it. It will have a secular significance as a reminder to people that they should be modest and humble because there is one reality which they cannot escape. And this is the reality of death.
Stylistically, ‘Church Going’ is one of very few of Larkin’s poems where the tone and tenor of language has changed from stanza to stanza. The first stanza begins in a matter of fact manner, giving in a naturalistic manner a whole catalogue of items of use in the church. This undergoes a change in the second stanza where irony is in full flow. The last stanza has a meditative air and contrasts easily with the first, second and third stanzas. As Grubb remarks, the last stanza “relaxes, expands; the slangy opening, the visit itself, is to do with the seriousness the church is felt to be about; Hankerings after a substitute religion are lost in the search for a rationale which can respect religion without going to extremes of belief and disbelief.”

R.R. King is more apt when he says:

The value of the poem is that it does two things at once, both of which summarise the basic dilemma of an age without faith, it reveals that age’s desire to dismiss what it considers to be the spurious crutches of superstition and religion; and it reveals our continuing need to recognize and symbolise our deepest nature. It does not resolve the tension between this scepticism and this desire to believe. The difference between them is caught in the contrasting language of the opening and closing stanzas.

We may safely say that ‘Church Going’ does not make a clear, assertive statement either for or against the institution of the church. The Movement mood as has been suggested already was not one of affirmation. And the reasons for this refusal to affirm lay as much in the post war conditions as in the mind of the writers. This is more true in the case of Philip Larkin. For him a poem comes out only when the poet is ‘pleased’ with himself. A poem is a mode of preserving an experience, of passing it on. Philip Larkin has observed that as a guiding principle “I believe that every poem must be
its own sole freshly created universe, and therefore have no belief in tradition or a
common myth-kitty.... To me the whole of the ancient world, the whole of classical and
biblical mythology means very little, and I think that using them today not only fills
poems full of dead spots, but dodges the writer’s duty to be original.” These lines,
originally written for D.J. Enright’s *Poets of the Nineteen Fifties* Larkin later elaborated
as follows:

My objection to the use in new poems of properties or personee from
older poems is not a moral one, but simply because they do not
work, either because I have not read the poems in which they appear
or because I have read them and think of them as part of that poem
and not a property to be dragged into a new poem as a substitute for
securing the effect that is desired. I admit this argument could be
pushed to absurd lengths, when a poet could not refer to anything
that his readers might not have seen .... but in fact poets write for
people with the same background and experiences as themselves,
which might be taken as a compelling arguments in support of
provincialism.51

“Church Going” cannot be accused of being provincial, but it certainly does
not rise to a meditative poem as one might have expected. What the poem says in fact is
that the church will continue to serve certain human needs even in a secular period. This
poem is said to have originated from John Betjmin’s “Sunday Afternoon Service in S.T.
Enodoc Church Cornwell” and Norman Camerions’s “The Disused Temple” which
Larkin has included in his *Oxford Anthology.*
References

2. *The Whitsun Weddings*, p. 38
7. *The Less Deceived*, p. 16.
10. Ibid., p. 18.
18. Ibid., pp. 8-9.
19. Ibid., p. 10.
22. Ibid., p. 13.
23. Ibid., p. 16.
24. Ibid., p. 29.
25. Ibid., p. 31.
26. Ibid., p. 33.
27. Ibid., p. 37.
28. Ibid., p. 39.
29. Ibid., p. 44.
32. George Hartley, “Nothing to be said”, Larkin at Sixty, p. 97.
34. The Less Deceived, p. 37.
36. George Hartley, “Nothing to be said” in Larkin At Sixty p. 88.
37. The Less Deceived, p. 37.
42. The Less Deceived, p. 20.
43. Ibid., p. 20
46. The Less Deceived, p. 28.
47. Ibid., pp. 28-29.
48. Ibid., p. 29.
50. P.R. King, Nine Contemporary Poets, p. 35.