CHAPTER IV

THE THEME OF CHOICE

_Horny dilemmas at the gate once more_
In many a poem Larkin deliberates over the existential issue of choice and its ultimate integrity. Series of failures in personal life, a ‘forgotten childhood’, unhappiness with the parents, romantic frustrations with more than one woman, and, the setback he experienced with thwarted aspirations, as well as, failure as a novelist, had prompted in the poet both, passivity and wryness. Larkin displayed scruples over options in matters of love and sex, marriage and bachelorhood, religious faith and agnosticism, work and leisure, sociability and isolation. Critics have often described this attitude as the extension of the post-war mood of insecurity, uncertainty and emotional bankruptcy. Only a thorough textual study of his work may determine the extent of the impact of prevailing social conditions, and private issues over his work. However, he attempts to delicately balance these apparently infirm alternatives cancelling their importance, and maintaining that the freedom to choose or prefer is itself an illusion. Circumstances coerce choices pursuading at the same time an assumption that the concerned individual is responsible for the right, or, wrong decision. Choices simply expose desires which results in branding the individual with a particular label for identification for the rest of their lives. Larkin asserts that human predicament is not the result of individual fault. Instead, it is a consequence of predetermined fate. Human beings are merely dis-concerted victims of a trap of choices. In one
of his letters Larkin writes:

My views are very simple and childish: I think we are born and grow up, and die... Everything we do is done with the motive of pleasure and if we are unhappy it is because we are such silly bastards for thinking we should like whatever it is we find we don't like. If we seriously contemplate life it appears an agony too great to be supported, but for the most part our minds gloss such things over and until the ice finally lets us through we skate about merrily enough. Most people, I'm convinced, don't think they want and the subsequent consequence keep them busy in an endless chain till they're carried out feet first. As for how one should spend one's time, that's usually decided for you by circumstances and habit.

There is one more thing he points out in his poems, that, individual encounters same fate on either side of the two options: the craving for the unattainable. Choices prove futile because expectations do not come true. Hence, life cannot be made happy and fulfilling by sheer exercise of choice. His poems reveal that the life of a husband is no better than that of a bachelor and "a flight is not worse than home." From Larkin's point of view, the apparent happiness in either case, that is, marriage or celibacy, is a bigger illusion, as it is yet another trap, for, the embrace is of an endless chain of choices. The ensuing circumstances preoccupy us all the way and
we fall prey and always meet a pre-determined end. Larkin appears committed to
the existential trauma of life in the following letter:

I refuse to believe that there is a thing called
life, that one can be in or out of touch with.
There is only an endless series of events, of
which our birth is one and our death another...
Life is chiefly an affair of 'life-force': we are
all varyingly charged with it and that represents
our energy and nothing we do or say will alter our
voltage or wattage...greatmen... are those lucky
beings in whom a horny sheath of egoism protects
their energy, not allowing it to be dissipated or
turned against itself.²

Larkin's reaction against Romanticism is evident in his total denial of the tran-
scendental, and, his conformity with the existential. The first pronoun 'I' in the in-
dividual experience of the Romantics is differed by Larkin by splitting human per-
sonality into multiple personae. This makes James Booth speak of the quest for
the 'negative sublime', in Larkin's poetry, a description which counters the
expression used by Keats for the poetry of Wordsworth. Keats character-
ised Wordsworth's poetry as an expression of 'the egotistical sublime'
which was an extension of the imagination into the phenomenon outside to
the extent of complete imaginative identity with it. Larkin appears so dis-
illusioned with the Romantics that through the different personae he insti-
tutes in his poetry, he completely debunks all notions of an egotistical sub-
lime. Rather, it becomes, with him, a matter of one personae cancelling out the
next. Thus, the cumulative effect of Larkin’s poetry is so instinct with multi­
farious versions of the Self, that an effect of ‘a sense of negative’ is created,
which, because it is communicated through poetry, catches the contingent sub­
limity peculiar to art generally, and, poetry in particular. Thus, it appears that
the term ‘negative sublime’ used by James Booth is critically quite appropri­
ate. Larkin’s poetry has just to be read for this feature of its ‘negative sublim­
ity’ to show itself a profound ‘imperative’. This also subdues the nihil­
ism considerably for ‘the negative sublime’ emerges as its primary con­
cept.

Consequently, even when it comes to choices, cancelling out each other, as do Larkin’s various personae, the effect is not as that of depres­
sion, or, despondency, because the personae are only dramatically visual­
ized, and, the success of the dramatic portraiture lies in the fact that
when a choice is cancelled, there comes more affirmation in the cancel­
lation than negation. This is so, because the dramatic construction of
each poem concludes, just where, the drama of each choice as-worked­
out-in-dramatic-terms stands concluded, as a plain much ado. Larkin is
often faced with a choice between the perfection of life and perfection
of work. Confronting this thorny dilemma, his choice falls on perfection
of work. Thereafter, deft upon perfection, he looks upon work as an art
form. Drama comes into play, and, a debate is launched. The choice is
worked out in a particular situation dramatically, in which, a decision is
always what the debate is all about. Different personae first uphold
the ethical side of the situation so emphatically that the reader is satisfied by the stance adopted. But, just when, the stance is about to be dramatically instituted as true, the last moments in the drama counter this righteous stand with the negative perspective. Of course, an element of irony had all along kept this ‘negative’ lurking behind the righteous ‘positive’. The negative counter-statement at the end of the poem rejects, in one thrust, all the righteous arguments, thus establishing that the obvious joy of an ethical option is illusory. The ultimate reality is negative. Going for marriage and begetting children, for instance, is also infused with the ‘negative sublime’. Reader’s agreement, or, disagreement with a point of view is not a matter of much concern for Larkin. What is significant in his poetry is his dialectic in the poem’s drama. And, it is not Larkin who forces the reader to accede. His personae at their colloquial best, debate, giving arguments and counter arguments, generating a creative tension in the process, which alone, is what carries the reader.

In his pursuit of deflating the credibility of choice, Larkin polarizes work and leisure in Toads. He contrives to disfavour work. This is reflected when Larkin treats work as the much loathed toad. The argument about choice is always begun by Larkin with the alternative, which too is finally cancelled as the debate becomes dramatically persuasive. Thus, the first five stanzas of Toads rhetorically censures Larkin’s own kind of work, and thus, for many reasons. The poem is introduced with two questions sketching the caricature of a disgruntled speaker-

Why should I let the toad work
Squate on my life?  

(CP.p. 89)
Who comically suggests—

Can’t I use my wit as a pitch fork
And drive the brute off? (CP.p.89)

The image of the toad itself, and then, the procurement of a ‘pitch for’ to ‘drive the brute off?’ arouse the sense of the despicable. Noticeably, here ‘toad’ is not work in general, but, the particular work which the speaker is unwillingly obliged to do. Interrogatives make the argument colloquial and more emphatic. However, as in drama always, irony arouses scepticism. In the forceful interrogative, ‘should I let the toad work/squat on my life?’ there is felt the compulsion behind ‘the toad work’.

In the next three stanzas, the speaker discusses an alternative calling, which is of course, other than his own. Although there is no elaborate comparison, yet what transpires from the alternative arrangement of ‘Lecturers, lispers/losels, loblolly-men, louts’ portrays Larkin’s contempt and jealousy of university dons. These stereotypes are actually work-dodgers, who survive on wit to make a living. The poem makes these university dons stand in line with the common folk, in order to reinforce Larkin’s persistent attack on an excess of artificiality, on academicism, and, on genteel postures of the academia, which too had compelled Larkin to break off from the Movement poets. Incidentally, six of the eight among these poets were university teachers. Andrew Swarbrick, while discussing Whitsun Weddings says:

Whilst decrying the speaker’s attitudes,

Larkin treats him as he treated many of his
university lecturer colleagues, with a mixture of contempt and jealousy.

Of course, as is obvious, the speaker in the poem does not want to elaborate on the intricacies of a calling. Larkin's own unhappiness with his kind of work is portrayed as the most heinous of its kind with 'its sickening poison', and here, the toad image is quite frankly discernible. But then, there are external compulsions like 'paying a few bills' which does not let Larkin 'drive the brute off'. In this, the antipathy between desire and necessity becomes quite manifest and this helps the poem develop logically.

In the fourth and fifth stanzas, Larkin compares and contrasts himself with the folk who just about manage to survive. 'With fire in a bucket/Eat wind falls and tinned sardines' This, the speaker counters, for he too 'could' choose to live like them! Indeed, 'they seem to like it'. But then, their's is a despicable state, for, 'their nippers have got bare feet./their upspeakable wives/Are skinny as whippets'. Could there have been a preference for such a wretched life, for Larkin had always strongly felt the wish to opt for a way of life or vocation other than the one he at a particular time pursued? And, this counter comes as a self revelation, as well as, a self-deprecation when he admits his weakness blatantly—

Ah, were I courageous enough
To shout Stuff your pension!

Indeed, he does not have the courage. He cannot even opt out for other preferences. Consequently, if he still chooses, it will be under compulsion, and therefore, a forced choice! This is Larkin's style of looking at an exist-
tential situation, and, at the options available. He states a position, argues and counter-argues, and in this way communicates the difficulty of choosing an option. A choice is therefore, a dream indeed-

But I know, all too well, that's the stuff

That dreams are made on. (CP. p.89)

Next, two toads are imagined, one possibly symbolizing the nature of work, and the other could be human temperament itself. The sharp contrast between the two toads pinpoints the conflict between work and leisure, and between desire and need. But then, there is yet another toad, and, it is in the seventh stanza; it is not in fact a toad, but something very toad-like, personifying possibly the inner urge to work more persistently a feature hard to dispel-

It hunkers are heavy as hard luck
And cold as snow......................... (CP. p.89)

It is hard and heavy, as ‘heavy as hard luck’, and, it is passive and unfeeling, and, therefore ‘cold and snow’.

The main thrust of all these deliberations culminate in the second last stanza when the speaker articulates his real urge to achieve worldly success-

..................to Blarney

My way to getting

The frame and the girl... (CP p.90)

And, therefore, it becomes a dream which is thwarted by that inner urge to work! Yes, even be it a counter, yet it is there, and ‘something toad-like’. Of course, it is different from the ‘toad work’ which is how Larkin portrays his present occupation. The statement, the counter-statement, again another shade of
the statement, and, yet another counter-statement this is how the poem therefore appears to proceed till it ends as it should in 'a fog of abstraction', a Swarbrick description of the entire exercise. Larkin too appears at the same wave-length by then-

I don't say, one bodies the other

One spiritual truth;

But I do say it's hard to lose either,

When you have both. (CP.p.90)

However, the poem reasserts the blatant fact that one cannot ever choose, and has to work either out of inner compulsion or external pressure.

Larkin's poems can hardly be understood severed from his personal experiences. Thus, when he shifted from the Pearson park-house to the Newland-Park accommodation, in June 1974, he was unsettled irrecoverably. Andrew Motion writes about it in Larkin's biography for the poet found the new place quite uncomfortable for 'a writer's vocation'. But, Motion also maintains-

The misery of his move had in fact been comparatively productive.5

Larkin's Toads and Toads Revisited recall Yeats' Byzantium and Sailing To Byzantium, for, though the themes are different, the effort at thinking and re-thinking a proposition is identical. Toads Revisited written in October 1962, more than eight years after Toads, is a more explicit acknowledgement of the value of work than a debate between hectic life and quiescence. In Toads, Larkin's inner conflict, between right and wrong choices, is made manifest in a tone charged with desperation and even anger. But the speaker of this
monologue sounds rather subdued and self-pitying. In *Toads Revisited*, the speaker reconsiders previous conclusions and realizes that he cannot afford to be one of the work dodgers because such people are either 'stupid' or 'weak'.

The first two stanzas of the poem reveal a wry romanticism that Larkin maintains throughout his work. ‘Walking around in the park’, ‘the lake, the sunshine shine/ The grass to lie on definitely allure him for, they are ‘Not in a bad place to be’ but he deliberately refuses to admit that it suits him, for there is the ‘yet it doesn’t me’. Not only is there the fascination for a landscape of ‘Park, Lake, sunshine and grass’, there is also a deep attraction for life itself in the ‘Blurred play-ground noises, black-stockinged nurses’. All this could equally influence Larkin.

The two stanzas that follow sketch a grim and gloomy picture of old age. The horrible images, ‘Palsied old step-takers’, ‘Hare-eyed clerks with the jitters,/ waxed-fleshed out patients/ characters in long coats/ deep in the litter-baskets’ suggest Larkin’s fear of old-age as well as, the imminence of death. Larkin is quite afraid of ‘being one of the men’. The idea of passing time leisurely is bogus, be it through ‘Hearing the hours chime’, or, ‘watching the bread delivered’ or, as ‘the sun by clouds covered’, or, as ‘children going home’. Only weak and old people prefer this kind of life. This particular bent of mind exposes Larkin as he visualizes the old-age trauma and the fact of the approaching of death. To counter it, the speaker is made to develop a positive approach towards work and responsibility, which are put up against idleness and inactivity. The poem reveals that love for Nature might also be a defensive posture
against an acute sense of outright failure. While at it, the sense of deprivation plagues the speaker so much that he desperately seeks shelter in the commonplace routine of an ordinary living:-

No, give me my in-tray
My loaf-haired secretary
My shall-I-Keep-the call-in-Sir:... (CP.p.148)

Infact, it is felt that the time to discuss different alternatives that could alter the course of life is long past. Therefore, the speaker feels forced to remain occupied with old routine till life ceases-

Give me your arm, old toad;
Help me down Cemetery Road. (CP.p.148)

And so, the reality of death 'makes speculation about choice futile.' Taking stock of 'The men/you meet of an afternoon...', the speaker is inclined towards community, as he is frightened of being lonely and ignored;

No where to go but indoors,
No friends but empty chairs... (CP.p.147)

In this poem, Larkin shifts from his earlier stand on work and community, because by then the growing consciousness of death has become acute. Uncommunicativeness, in the last ten years of his life, conformed with this blatant reality of the fact of death.

Of course, all along, Larkin perfectly succeeds in portraying a person who is well at guard against all romantic indulgence. For, he cannot shut his eyes to the abject part of life, when, man becomes 'Palsied old step-takers'. In his own typical style, Larkin creates compound worded images
like ‘waxed-fleshed out patients’ that visualise old men in decay. And all this, when Larkin was beckoned by a life of glamour and ‘my-in-tray,/My loaf-haired secretary,/My shall-I-Keep-the-call-in-Sir,’ which does not only reveal Larkin’s interestingly minute observation of girls, but also, his allurement for glamour. The colloquial style and the dramatic presentation make the poem almost a performance piece.

In Dockery and Son, the speaker indulges in a comparative review of his own choice of bachelorhood, and, Dockery’s decision to get married. The reflections stem from the speaker’s visit to the Oxford College where he was a student some twenty years before. Andrew Motion records in Larkin’s biography that Larkin undertook this particular journey to attend a funeral. However, the event becomes a metaphor to portray his imaginative escape, and, simultaneously provides Larkin with an opportunity to assess the pros and cons of not only two alternatives but two sets of alternatives at a time: bachelorhood and married life on the one hand, and, isolation and community on the other.

Reaching College, the speaker is taken aback by the revelation that Dockery who shared accommodation with him, and, was junior to him in class, had now admitted his son into the same college! The unexpected intelligence prompts him into nostalgia. He re-collects and reviews the past, initiating a debate on earlier decisions that now haunt his own psyche.

The first stanza is a re-collection of his days at the University. The conversational tome makes it peculiarly assertive-

Dockery was junior to you,
Wasn’t he?..............  

Further, the information that his ‘son is here now’ significantly registers the shock which the speaker receives at being told by the Dean that Dockery’s son was now studying there! With this, the speaker is held by an irrepressible sense of loss and he turns back the leaves of his days of yore at the College:

........................................................................Or remember how

Black-gowned, unbreakfasted, and still half-tight

we used to stand before the desk.  

The expression ‘Death-suited visitant’ is very connotative being full of reverbrations of meaning. Thus, being a funeral, the mourners are in ‘black’ and ‘visiting’ too. Further, the occasion suits death whose own ‘visit’ had the black-suited mourners ‘visiting’. Also, not only is the speaker a mourner, suited in black, on visit to attend a funeral, but also, he is as close as can be to death, being as he is at a funeral. At death, all options close. There is no question then of altering the course of life. Now there can only be muted gestures like ‘I nod’, for, the speaker is dumbstruck and cannot defend his earlier mis-reckonings. The Dean also cannot be followed because the Dean’s is a choice the Dean definitely opted for. This is not so with the speaker, for whom, the human predicament leaves little to choose from. In any case, the alternatives are many, and, this apart, they literally cancel each other out. And, therefore, caught as he is in a perpetual existential predicament, the speaker tries the door where he used to live, but, as it turns out finds it locked. Indeed, the past is always lost and cannot ever be retrieved. Past mistakes too cannot ever be rectified!
However, ‘the lawn spreads dazzingly wide’ in the second stanza, makes the visitor a stranger to the place which once was quite familiar to him. ‘A known bell chimes’, but it alarms him of the time-lapse that had left him ‘ignored’. But, the allitrative arrangement—

Canal and clouds and colleges subside
slowly from view. (CP. p.152)
suggests that the nostalgia gradually recedes. While travelling back, the speaker wonders at what age Dockery decided to marry and thinks that it was Dockery’s very definite commitment to a decision without being carried away by alternatives that made him do so!

The third stanza develops with fictional detail describing the type of boy Dockery was. The speaker is so engrossed in the thought that he continues to live with it even after he wakes up and takes another train for another station. His looking at ‘the ranged/joining and parting lines’ reassures him again of the various paths in life, but a hindered moon re-establishes the speaker’s own conviction that choices donot effect the ultimate at all. The moon is hindered, that is, or the personality is divided by unnatural inflictions. Therefore, what is natural for the speaker, choices being what they are, is to—

To have no son, no wife
No house or land. (CP. p.152)

Marriage, family, home, work, relations, faith are all infringements on individual freedom and therefore Larkin chafes at them all. The image of the moon could also suggest the loneliness and passivity engraved in Larkin’s
Justifying this foothold or toe-hold on life, the speaker attempts to get over the shock he registered in the beginning, rejecting it as a little attack of unconsciousness-

Only a numbness registered the shock. (CP.p.152)

The speaker at first does appreciate Dockery’s prudence and capability to take the right step at the right time, but, the dialectic style employed writes everything off immediately, as it appears, in self defence-

...No, that’s not the difference. (CP.p.153)

He insists that it is a matter of the perspective with which we look at things. Dockery must have believed that begetting children was an important step in life-

Why did he think adding meant increase? (CP.p.153)

For the speaker ‘To me it was dilution’. Larkin’s outburst against marriage reaffirms his iconoclasm of so-called inherited and dependable values, for which, his poetry is originally known. Cancelling out one viewpoint of view by another, is a pattern the speaker adopts to disapprove the illusion of choice, and, in the process establish the play of an individual capability. He insists that out preferences come out of definite assumptions that we would get happiness in such and such conditions. But then, the question ‘where do these innate assumptions come from’? cuts at the root of the proposition that assumptions are the determining factors in shaping our lives. Rather, Larkin proposes that it is only a matter of habit, hardening in due course of time into a style-

They are more a style. (CP.p.153)
These styles or habits determine definite choices and a life takes a shape accordingly—

They hardened into all we have got. (CP.p.153)

It is only which we look back, makes our decisions appear taken together, and solidly concrete. However, they remain as vulnerable and impotent as "send-clouds" which by themselves cannot build the stature of life. Life takes its own course disregardful of our preferences as circumstances triumph over personal will.

The last stanza absolutely rejects Dockery, for, what more did marriage get for Dockery but 'a son's harsh patronage.' The image of 'harsh patronage' countermands the idea of happiness which upholds the institution of marriage. The speaker concludes the debate harping on the harsh reality of life:

Life is first boredom, then fear

Whether or not we use it, it goes.(p.153)

Our choices come forth, from 'something hidden from us' and we meet our ultimate reality:

And age, and then the only end of age. (CP.p.153)

The conclusion to the poem throws all arguments about choice to the wind, whereafter fatalism rules the roost. It is an impersonal fatalism as Swarbrick remarks—

...the ending remained a problem as Larkin

worked towards an impersonal fatalism.⁶

The conclusion, however, seems partial, since Dockery is now almost absent, for, his point of view though heard is not given the opportunity to argue, like
the speaker-personae who gets the chance to defend his stand. The poet rhetorically impresses upon the reader the need to assent to his view of life. In fact, this poem has more autobiographical overtones than any other poem of Larkin. Calling the poem 'a compressed autobiography' Andrew Motion notes:

It encapsulates Larkin's view about the effect of his parents on his personality, it rejects spiritedly on his undergraduate career, it grimly sketches the attitudes which dominated his adult life.

This inference gets support from the fact that Larkin did not choose to marry and died a bachelor. The deleanation of the speaker-personae as 'death-suited' further strengthens the argument because the poem was written in 1963, when Larkin, at 41, was obsessed with the assumption that he too would die at the age at which his father had died, the age, that is, of 46 years.

Larkin's marked passivity towards life is all evident in his deliberate sketching negative images:

Black-gowned, unbreakfasted, and half-tight. (CP.p.152)

His positive images are limited to compulsive situations, and are either light-hearted, or toned down through the negative assertions that follow. Thus, the affirmative impact of "the lawn spreads dazzingly wide" and 'a known bell chimes' is countered by 'ignored'.

Similarly, "Convinced he was he should be added to!" (CP.p.152) is immediately cancelled by "why did he think adding meant increase?". Larkin de-
liberately opts for a technique that portrays a positive image through negatives as the ‘moon’ is ‘strong’ but it is ‘unhindered’. Also, discordant and eye-piercing concepts like ‘Those warp tight-shut like doors’ and ‘a son’s harsh patronage’ show Larkin’s aestheticism is made to acquire philistine overtones. In his typical style, Larkin philosophises and his rhetoric gives an epigrammatic colour to the poem:

Life is first boredom, then fear

Whether or not we use it, it goes.

....

And age, and then the only end of age. (CP.p.152)

The colloquial address, the dialectical development, the fictional detail, given with utmost brevity and syntactical compactness, marks the poem as typically Larkinian.

Self’s the Man is another poem that falls in the category of Dockery and Son. Written in 1958, that is much earlier than Dockery and Son. Self’s the Man is more profound in its thought and approach. Once again, in a monologic utterance, Larkin seems scrutinizing ‘self’ as counter to a fictional opposite. Rather differently from Dockery and Son, this poem explores the psychology behind each choice, for, that is always governed by the question of selfhood. The fact that Arnold has got married does not acquit him of the charge of being selfish. However, there is irony in the fact:

Oh, no one can deny

That Arnold is less selfish than I

He married a woman to stop her getting away

Now she’s there all day. (CP.p.117)
But then, the speaker attributes his lonely life to an egoism where ‘self’ is centred to its own interests. Now, although there is hardly any metaphor in the poem for choice, yet, images built up in the process of argument contribute to the idea indirectly. Arnold is a middle class archetype whose hard earned money is wasted over his family. His wife vividly represents the typical middle class housewife who is quite indifferent to her husband’s concerns;

And the money he gets for wasting his life on work
She takes as her perks
To pay for the kiddies’ clobber and the drier
And the electric fire. (CP.p.117)

As a constant affliction, she deprives him of all leisure including a look at the evening paper. Still, despite self-effacing dedication to his wife and children he cannot claim that he has his self completely erased. Self-deprecatingly, the speaker-personae contemplates his celibacy as a reflection on his ‘selfhood’.

To compare his life and mine
Makes me feel a swine. (CP.p.117)

A sense of inferiority takes hold of the speaker-personae so firmly that he argues and even approves Arnold’s choice. Thus, the first five stanzas bloat in favour of Arnold’s decision to marry. But typically, and even very characteristically, in the last three stanzas, the poem recoils in Larkin-fashion and questions the very piety of selflessness:

But wait, not so fast;
Is there such a contrast?
He was out for his own ends
Not just pleasing his friends

The emotional impulse of the speaker-personae to remain a bachelor tends to be-little him before the fictional-opposite, though the final conclusion is that man is never selfless:

And it was such a mistake
He still did it for his own sake
Playing his own game
So he and I are the same.

Larkin’s polemic against orthodoxy and its tenets, was noticed as early as 1954, with the appearance of The Less Deceived, when, he first made his voice really felt. Poetry of Departures, written in 1954, was also unusual in the sense that it didnot attack the idea of society. Rather, it was against a very popular and sanctimonious concept of abandoning home in order to achieve excellence in a certain sphere of life. However, poetic convention, and, facile and ritualized spiritual gratification are the two butts of Larkin’s attack. Usually, Larkin targets all social anchoring, and prefers estrangement, because of which alienation becomes the second largest theme in his poetry. His notoriety, as a resigned, isolated soul, is justified because throughout his life as well as his work it is a stark presence. Therefore, his penchant for ‘home’ when contrasted with ‘flight’ in this particular poem invites closer attention.

Infact, Poetry of Departures characterizes Larkin’s incessant struggle against not only established conventions, but also, convictions rooted deep in
the social psyche of common man. As is evident in many of his later poems, if could ever choose it would always be isolation. For, what matters to him is the crass devoutness attached to the cliche and he wrote an epitaph:

As epitaph:

He chucked up everything. (CP.p.85)

In this intellectually argumentative poem, the stereotype is dramatised with petulance tinged with a comic undertone. The title hints at the facile trends in the poetry of easy escape into various worlds of imagination, a feature mainly associated with the romantics of the nineteenth century, and later, with slight variation, with the neo-romantics of the mid-twentieth century. Larkin seeks to discard this particular tendency, but first the speaker-personae is made to uphold the resolve to renounce the mundane:

This audacious, purifying

Elemental move. (CP.p.85)

But then, the mythological connotation ‘fifth hand’, already in the opening, neutralises the force of this statement. It turns out that the act was a kind of ceremonial event, socially approved-

And always the voice will sound

..............certain you approve: (CP.p.85)

The exaggerated delineation becomes comic in the last stanza when contrasted with -

‘If/It weren’t so artificial,

The shift from ‘you’ in the first stanza, to first person, ‘I’ and ‘we’,
in the second stanza, and, the endorsement of the generalization of the thought, also re-affirms the speaker-personae’s yearning for alienation from his surroundings- ‘I detest my room’. Also, the first person ‘we’ generalises the tendency to characterise the psychological phenomenon to disagree with the present arrangement of things into a ‘we all hate home.’ The speaker sounds dissatisfied with his kind of life and perceives the good books, the good bed’ as ‘specially-chosen junk which for many is supposed essential for a perfect life. The speaker is disillusioned that even ‘good books’ and ‘good beds’ do not help him achieve complete satisfaction from life. Therefore, the remark ‘And my life in perfect order’ is comically ironical. However, the not very unusual ‘He walked out on the whole crowd’ visualises a rebel who sounds bold and exciting to the speaker and as inviting as ‘then she undid her dress’, as also as challengingy hurting as ‘Take that you bastard’. When compared with a life at home, with books and bed, the alternative of renunciation no doubt seems to be quite daring. But then, the speaker wonders if he could accept the challenge, ‘Surely I can if he did’. It is indeed because of certain compulsions that a man cannot go out for a definite option though he could long for it very earnestly. Therefore, the idea of freedom of choice is questionable. This reflection keeps the speaker-personae at “Stay/sober and industrious”. But still, against all odds, he opts to experience abandonment:

But I’d go today

Yes, swagger the nut-strewn roads

Crouch in the fo’c’sle. (CP.p.85)
But then, this move could be as artificial and not make life perfect as ‘Books, china’ do. He thinks that it would be “such a deliberate step backwards/to evade an object”, and also, would be against time as well as his own existential predicament.

Next, two modes of perfection are suggested: One is achieved by giving up everything for spiritual virtuosity, and, the other is marked by material affluence of ‘the good books, the good bed’ and ‘china’. The question is which kind of perfection is to be chosen. The first option is portrayed as challenging as ‘He walked out on the whole crowd’, as well as timorous as ‘crouch in the fo’c’sle’. But, on the contrary the life of ‘books, bed, china’ turns out ‘a chosen junk’ and ‘Reprehensibly perfect’. The conclusion is that perfect life is something out of reach. Therefore, choices do not matter, however, prompt and appropriate they appear.

The poem is a complete metaphor; a metaphor portraying two different individuals living at two opposed poles of life. One has given up his material world to live an isolated life. His move is generally acclaimed a pious one. The other, has opted for a scholarly, sophisticated life. Both are compared and contrasted with each pros and cons dialogically put out. The image ‘the nut-strewn roads’ visualises the primitive age when leaving home would be as difficult as to walk on the ‘nut-strewn road’. But the verb ‘swagger’ suggests pretension, for, in the present context it has become as irrelvant as a ‘crouch in the fo’c’le.’ The idea is also ridiculed by ‘stubby with goodness’. In his characteristic fashion, Larkin just throws up one of the two alternatives and lets it inflate as much as possible. Next, it is deflated as
quietly in the later stanzas as an apparent support to the other option. The climax comes when the concluding lines cancel both propositions and abruptly challenge the very integrity of choices as such. The speaker-personae in Poetry of Departures continues to support the option ‘He chucked everything’, until it is decided to rescue those who prefer to stay at home with their problems and prepositions:

If/It weren’t so artificial. (CP.p.85)

The last two lines just cancel both options-

Books; chine, a life

Reprehensibly perfect. (CP.p.86)

Reasons for Attendance has earlier been analysed at length for the theme of Alienation, but it shall be discussed in this chapter on Choice also. In the tradition of Poetry of Departures, this poem reverbrates the difficulty of choice between artistic accomplishment and sexual satisfaction. Thus, passing by a dance hall the speaker-personae is attracted towards, ‘the wonderful feel of girls’, and, ‘all under twenty five’. The pleasure of the words is in their sense, and immediacy. However, the speaker resists the temptation of imagined happiness in sexual communality, and opts for art, which however is formed rough-tongued.

What calls me is that lifted, rough-tongue bell. (CP.p.80)

The telling detail ‘to watch the dancers’ through ‘the lighted glass’ works through the subtlety of selection, for it is between the fleshy ‘beat of happiness’ in the dance hall, and, the play of the rough-tongued bell’ of art. The choice is indeed difficult but the speaker-personae appears determined to stick to his decision-
It speaks, I hear; others may hear as well. (CP, p. 80)

and therefore ‘I stay outside’. The speaker-personae is poised to counter the immediate physical sensuous pleasure with an impatient scepticism—

...Why out here?

But then, why be in there? Sex, yes, but what

Is sex?... (CP, p. 80)

Despite the tempting attractions of community living, the speaker prefers to stay solitary and lonesome for aesthetic reasons. However, the elaboration is diffused through the quick switch-ons and offs of the poem. These quick changes are registered expressions like ‘or so I fancy’, or, ‘as far as I’m concerned’, or, ‘if you like’. Twisting becomes unsettling when both preferences are equated and both are satisfied, and is further subverted in

If no one has misjudged himself. Or lied. (CP, p. 80)

It is generally accepted that Larkin suffered from schizophrenia. This is quite evident from his work also, for, it appears the effort of a profoundly divided sensibility, rooted in deep contradiction. Places Loved Ones is one other manifestation of the conflict between a ‘formal and reserved posture’ and a ‘spontaneous’ response to his own perceptivity. This poem is apparently about how dissatisfied and disgruntled Larkin was with the places where he had lived, as well as the people (specially women) he had met till then. Larkin wrote this poem when he was at Queen’s University Library in Belfast, where he had recorded a successful resurgence of poetic activity. After leaving Belfast in 1955 he wrote to one of his colleagues:-

I’d only been at Queen’s for four and a half years
but it was extraordi

nary, how at home I left there

and how much I disliked leaving. 8

Perhaps, it is because of this that Andrew Motion comments:

If Larkin wrote anything which...? to his statement

(made before leaving Belfast in Places Loved Ones)

That I have never found the place where I could say

This is my proper ground/ Here I shall stay. 9

Infact, what the poem reflects is the other side of his personality, which was terribly lonely and disillusioned. Maeve Brenman, one time Larkin’s sweet heart says-

...detested this division in the very look of him...

...understood that his humour was stretched over

a deep melancholy ‘...he was often somewhat at a

loss’ ................. ‘at times lonely, not a great

socializer. 10

This explains the frequent use of dramatised personae as a mask to articulate a perpetual other-self. The personae or speaker in this poem attempts to clarify the mis-
calculation people around him might have made about an apparent satisfaction:

No, I have never found

The place where I could say

This is my proper ground

Here I shall stay. (CP.p.99)

Thus, it is Larkin’s sensibility which could not find proper ground. While at

Belfast, vocational success apart, his literary achievements were also consider-
able, and yet his quest for ‘proper ground’ was forever unattainable. His bache-
elorhood also remained till the end, as incidental for this, as for many other
poems. He developed intimacy with a number of women, but chose to marry
none, perhaps because his demand was love-

Nor met that special one
who has an instant claim
on everything I own
down to my name... (CP.p.99)

Or, did the speaker’s problem lie in the apprehension that a definite choice would
label him committed, and this fear stuck as a perpetual threat through his life, a
threat to his anonymity-

An instant claim/on everything
I own/ Down to my name. (CP.p.99)

His fear was that he would immediately be identified with a choice, rather
named and labelled by it, as having taken because of it, a definite position,
or in short, had become committed.

Larkin also creates a silent listener, the second person ‘you’, who lis-
tens to what the speaker wants to say. Larkin’s is a pose, the pose of not
being able to, or, willing to choose, and, therefore feel both ‘relief and dis-
appointment’ that his anonymity is kept anonymous by not ‘choosing’ to
choose a home or family.

To find such seems to prove
You want no choice in where
To build, or whom to love; (CP.p.99)
Once a decision is taken the door is closed to all other options. First, a choice foreclose all choices and next, there is the responsibility of having made the right or wrong choice! Therefore, it is much better not to choose at all-

So that it’s not your fault

Should the town turn dreary

The girl a doll.  

(CP.p.99)

The poet is so sceptical about the idea of a choice that in the last stanza he makes the speaker reverse all that the poem has said so far, and remarks that much more than an option or choice, it is a matter of facing a predicament! The human predicament itself leaves little room for a choice, rather, it positively forecloses all options-

Yet, having missed than, you’re

Bound, none the less, to act

As if what you settled for

Mashed you, in fact.  

(CP.p.99)

Therefore, choosing or refusing to choose is absolutely meaningless, because, we cannot even avoid the responsibility to have chosen or to have refused to do so. Celibacy or marriage are both choices which circumstances compel us to take a stand on in life, after having decided either way, for good, or bad. Thereafter, other options are closed. Thus, it is pretentious to think that “you still might trace/ uncalled for to this day/ your person your place.”

Arrivals, Departures implies the limitation of choice in the title itself. By refraining to use the conjunctions between two options, Larkins elimi-
nates the concept of preference. Here, the clear option is a coming, or, a going, which are not two alternatives, but life itself, and therefore, both are to be taken up as part of life. The poem has got the phenomenon of life crystalized into three phases; birth is one, and death is another; what lies in between is the trauma of existence. Existence is always a suspension between duality and dilemma. Larkin, accordingly, divides the poem into three stanzas.

The opening stanza introduces the traveller who lands with a load, which is ‘bag of sample knocking at his knees.’ His arrival, impregnated with many expectations, is proclaimed at day break:

His advent blurted to the morning shore. (CP.p.65)

Next, implying, the intervening period between a coming and a going, that is, birth and death, the second stanza has the speaker-personae encounter ‘horny dilemmas’ marked by a ‘come and choose wrong’. ‘Dilemmas’ are the very stuff of the human predicament, because, a choice has compulsorily to be wrong. Existential predicament is a veritable trap. Either choice ends in futility. Thus, choice itself is an illusion. In the circumstances, the call, ‘O not for long’, is quite unsettling, for, what of the future.’ However, a sense of insecurity and lack of knowledge about the future too causes discomfiture which is the central idea in the poem:-

We are nudged from comfort, never knowing
How safely we may disregard their blowing. (CP.p.65)

The first stanza is full of hope and aspirations. The middle stanza portrays the existential trauma when one is apparently faced with a gamut
of decisions. However, the right decision itself is the big question! In any case, a choice eliminates options. The future, too, is insecure and uncertain, though 'the blowing' cannot be disregarded for long.

The poem may also have the impermanence of happiness as a theme. Even Swarbrick explores the possibility of 'the anxieties of love' as the basic theme of the poem. He perceives a 'sexual pun' in the 'Horny dilemmas', for the traveller, as for the 'couple in bed', who are unsure of the permanence of happiness in that condition. Because, the call signifies a leaving, and, it is emphasised that happiness is transitory:

O not for long they cry, not for long... (CP.p.65)

What is ultimately emphasised is the fact that permanent happiness is something beyond human access.

Thus, the poem re-asserts a permanent feature of Larkin's poetry. It is the question of an identity. Identity determined by a choice, and integrity of choice itself is challenged by 'come and choose wrong'. Therefore, since choice is an illusion, so is identity. All in all, human predicament is an existential trap. The expressions 'boats come sidling', the traveller-like-seller with 'his bag of samples', and 'doleful distances', altogether build up the atmosphere of transitoriness, while 'Horny dilemmas' asserts the difficulty of choice as a sustaining force of life. The image 'boats come sidling' is a connotation for an intrinsically intriguing matter of expectations, for which, 'water lanes' appear 'tame', as if poised to bring them in ever so quietly. 'Bag of samples knocking at his knees' could be illusory promises making the poor man's knees knock 'waking up in, the morning
we come across arrivals of boat’, but ‘leaving doleful distance’ counters the illusion. It is a mirage ultimately, though one fails to notice it and falls prey to ‘Horny dilemmas’. Provision of only two alternatives disintegrates the very notion of freedom of choice. In The Life with a Hole in it, written as late as August 1974 expresses the anger Larkin must have experienced with yet another counter-productive shift in the declining years of his life, and therefore, wrath fell on the issue of free choice.

The opening stanza of the poem comes as a response to those who hold Larkin responsible for his own predicament:-

When I throw back my head and howl
People (Women mostly) say
But you’ve always done what you want,
You always get your own way
- A perfectly vile and foul
Inversion of all that’s been.

What the old rat-bags mean
Is I’ve never done what I don’t. (CP,p.202)

At one place Andrew Motion observes:

Larkin knew there was something ‘disproportionate’
in his ‘depression’ and said so whenever friends
(Larkin’s) like Monica,...,told him things were
not quite as bad as he made them out to be.11

The misogynist in Larkin is also reflected in the licentious metaphor of ‘old rat bags’ he used for women and the poem at first appears to be a mockery of
women. In—

A perfectly vile and foul
Inversion of all that’s been—

(CP.p.202)

The image of women is bitter and the opening line ‘when I throw back my head
and howl’ reminds us of his indignation over his failures in achieving whatever it
was that he always wanted.

The next stanza is about Larkin’s own disappointment at his lot. He has
dreamt of being a novelist but he failed to become one. That is why resignation
and fatalism is compounded with fury sounds in such lines—

So the shit in the shuttered chateau!
Who does his five hundred words.

(CP.p.202)

The romantic ideal cherished in this dream—

Then parts out the rest of the day
Between bathing and booze and birds
Is far off as ever............... (CP.p.202)

did not, of course, materialise. The poet next visualizes other possible op-
tions. Characteristic as it is to his style, he perpetually counters one argu-
ment by another. Thus, he would not like to be a ‘spectacled school teach-
ing sod’. This belligerence against the teaching profession as is obvious in
this image, has also been explained earlier in the analysis of Toads. The
bracketed ‘six kids and wife in pods/And her parents coming to stay’ has
the school teacher much more disdainful. Next chosen for ridicule are the
institutions of marriages and family. Disillusionment with both these ways
of life is there in any case, but it also obliquely hints that he yearned for
both. However, he once again remains critical of both, as he realizes the inertia in them-

Life is an immobile, locked

Three handed struggle...! (CP.p.202)

Thus, all in all, man is trapped in “the unbeatable slow machine/ that brings what you’ll get”, and, this people call choice! The “three-handed struggle appears deceptive because ‘you want’ and ‘the world’s for you’ are oppressed by ‘the unbeatable slow machine’ of Time where there is no room for choice. Life is ‘a sollow stasis’ which cannot be altered. Hence, ‘Hole’ in ‘the life’ is the illusion of choice.

Unsophisticated imagery, and even crude language, together used to full artistic concentration in the poem, establish a relationship between art and ordinary life. James Booth aptly sums it up-

...this is brilliantly effective ‘bad’ writing.\(^\text{12}\)

Larkin dramatises the trauma of his life, particularly vis-a-vis, the starkly barren illusion of a so-called choice. In a number of poems with unbridled freedom given to a counter option, he reviews his past decisions, which after all did mould his life. As is the characteristic feature of his poetic technique, he institutes in his poem a personae, who is often given a silent listener also, to make the poems alternatives have dialogic features. Use of colloquial language and style also gives to the poem its relentless counter-argument, and to the argument, an insistent immediacy. The personae is ofcourse not one. Infact, there are many who carry the argument and its counter along. The dialectical technique reveals the theme of choice in its
various ramifications, till ultimately, it is cancelled out as a mere illusion. For, the poems reflect a life style which is immediately countered to make the choosing an illusion. Thus, part of human predicament which is little else than an existential trap, with option or choice positively out of question, deliberates on the problems of choosing between celibacy and marriage. The argument and its counter are suffused with tell-tale imagery. The poet castigates the pious institution of marriage as something forfeiting freedom of choice. Vitality of character-sketches who appear living on contradictory planes of life, transforms abstraction of choice into concrete realizations. While portraying married individuals with discordant but concrete images, the poet doesn’t forget to incorporate glimpses of character-representations of wife and children. The argumentative technique of the poems gradually concentrates on the nuptial tie. Self is the Man, illustrates married Mr. Arnold, in contrast to, the celibate speaker-personae. Realistic representation of the hectic and exasperating life of Mr. Arnold is also authenticated through the visual images of family-life. The speaker-personae as a prototype of the poet is worked out with least detail. In Dockery and Son Dockery is featured as the father of a son, and becomes a shocking encounter for the personae in the poem, on a visit to his own alma mater, twenty years later, for, it finds its college-mate’s son studying at the same college! A sense of loss and lack of foresight is reinforced through impressionable images of an irrecoverable past. Incorrigibility of foregone reckonings is concretized in the form of hardened realities. Loneliness is crystalized as a totality to counter the divisibility of matrimony.
Similarly, Toads and Toads Revisited employ the metaphor of work in opposition to idleness. Caricaturing some kinds of works contemptuously, Larkin asserts the inevitability of work. Larkin employs disdainful idiom for work, but the tenacity of work is also accentuated by the same imagery. Toad is a scornful creature in appearance but is also steadfast in its stance. Toad Revisited is a realization which recognizes the worth of work, and helps counter the curse of worthlessness and futility. Work also helps face the intimidation of the imminence of death that gripped the poet intensely. Further, the illusory nature of choice is communicated through nasty figures from other callings, when these professions are contrasted to the nature of the speaker’s own work.

The theme of Poetry of Departures, and, Reasons for Attendance is the strained relationship between sex and art, as well as, between communality and alienation. The former places a metaphor of a recluse against the sophistication of materialistic world. Articulate because of its idiom of hermitism, the poem tends to doubt the efficacy of modern culture to provide completeness to life.

The thought of abandoning society and opting for an ascetic’s way of light is energised in the poem with the help of visual and sensory images. The poet depicts materially accomplished life by employing precise but solid and tangible imagery. A compact idiom and condensed language portrays the two alternatives; appearance and reality. Reasons for Attendance has an arrangement of a dancehall, charged with excited moments. It is very alluring. Work is used as a metaphor for sexual indulgence and communality, as against, the pursuit of aesthetic integrity grounded on asceticism and alienation. The speaker-personae of the poem,
an accidental passerby, is subjected to the waverings between these two extremes. Vitality of images makes the experience almost seen, felt and heard.

Still, on the theme of choice Places Loved Ones bespeaks non-fulfilment of desire, as well as, the insistence on the compulsion to choose. Refusal to choose also amounts to a kind of choice. The poem suggests that denying a woman the comfort of being a wife or a place, and, the worth of having a house too in place is also, in each case, an affirmation though, through negation. Therefore, altogether, the predicament is an existential trap. A choice is expressed even though you refuse to choose. The rhetorical mood of the poem dominates. The poem, as a whole, builds up the image of a person who declines to take any decision on his own, but still cannot escape responsibility of having shaped his life. The Life with a Hole in it is the poet's last word on the futility of choice. The word 'hole' is a conceit that visualizes life quite incomplete, potentially susceptible to all kinds of predicaments and possibilities, least secure at least at the level of fulfilment. Consequently, desire is reduced to a nullity, a thought to which the images of the poem give appropriate expression. Life indeed is a futility. because, when it began, there was 'hole' in it already.

So much for Choice. The next chapter which is the last chapter, works on three themes: the themes of Agnosticism; of Time and old Age; and of Incompleteness. It is to be seen how these three themes and the four already considered in the first chapters inter-relate. For this, let us turn to the fifth chapter.