Chapter II: Philip Larkin’s Response to Post-imperial Space
Philip Larkin’s poems demonstrate his nuanced responses to the condition of England as depicted in Section II of the earlier chapter on the ‘post-imperial period.’ His attitude to contemporary England was perhaps more negative than those of the writers of the 1950s, most of whom belonged to ‘the Movement.’ He surveyed different aspects of the contemporary nation, and the resulting frustration and anger at the loss of energy and vigour were expressed in his poems. Larkin represented this England. He was realistic enough to sense that this was the only England available to him and he acutely felt the impact of the ‘rationed’ life style. In the introduction to his first novel Jill (1946) Larkin wrote:

Life in college was austere. Its pre-war pattern had been dispersed, in some instances permanently. Everyone paid the same fees, (in our case, 12s a day) and ate same meals. Because of Ministry of Food regulations, the town could offer little in the way of luxurious eating and drinking, and college festivities, such as commemoration balls, had been suspended for the duration. Because of petrol rationing, nobody ran a car. Because of
clothes rationing, it was difficult to dress stylishly. There was still coal in the bunkers outside our rooms, but fuel rationing was soon to remove it. It became a routine after ordering one’s books in Bodley after breakfast to go and look for a cake or cigarette queue. (qtd. in Required 17)

Probably more accurately than any other post-war poet, Larkin captured in his poems the flavour of contemporary England. Stephen Regan puts Larkin’s poetry in the context of its changing social milieu and contends that the cause for a continued concern in Larkin’s Englishness is not that his poems “dutifully parade some ideal, conservative vision of the nation, but that they prove in the end to be so responsive to the fractures and collisions in post-war English culture” (“Reputation” 67). Neil Corcoran too asserts that in Philip Larkin “the true spirit of post-war English dispiritedness quickly reached, and subsequently maintained, its most quintessential form” (87).

In this chapter, an attempt will be made to explore his poems to capture the various ways in which Larkin responded to the post-imperial Britain. While his overtly political poems will be discussed, it will also be argued that the predominance of ‘Englishness’ in his poems manifests his distrust of and distaste for contemporary social, political and economic condition of England. He evokes the supposedly quintessential Englishness by going back to the nation’s history, traditions, customs, landscape and seasons, pointing out in the process their fecundity and observing and implying the vacuity of the present. It will also be argued that the insularity of his poetic persona is the result of their inhabiting the contemporary space which fails to offer any succour and hope. The loss of the empire is a manifestation of the nation’s gradual weakening of
political prowess abroad, but it is also indicative of the collapsing foundations of

Englishness within the boundary of the nation itself.

Ever since the publication of Philip Larkin's volume *The Less Deceived* (1955), and of Robert Conquest's anthology *New Lines* (1956), which set out the aims and principles of the Movement, Larkin had been regarded as a spokesperson for post-war England. His ability to translate the new moods of the nation into a verse distinguished by a very English elegance was widely acclaimed. Donald Davie hailed Larkin as the "heir to the decent English liberalism of Thomas Hardy" (71). The melancholy, the sense of loss, the fatalism and weary determinism of Larkin's poetry were quite in tune with the anxieties and insecurities, hesitations and fumblings, frustration and disillusionment of the English suffering from an identity crisis as a result of the withdrawal from imperial and colonial power in the aftermath of the World War II.

The Movement, of which Larkin's work was seen as central, formed its ideas in reaction to previous movements in English poetry. The Modernists (T.S. Eliot being the leading figure) emphasized the value of difficulty and had opened themselves to new influences from the past tradition in English literature and more importantly from continental and American writing. This means that they made themselves rather cosmopolitan in their attitude. The Movement, on the other hand, stood for simplicity and even for colloquialism of expression and adopted English values and forms. Philip Larkin "readily dismissed the modernist endeavours of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound" (Motion 345). Katha Pollitt traces a "wogs-begin-at-Calais insularity" in Larkin (251). Thus we find Larkin quite obsessed with 'English', elements in his writing. Seamus Heaney gets a glimpse of the "Spiritual, Platonic old England" in Larkin (qtd. in Ingelbien 200).
Heaney, says Ingelbien, attempted to link Larkin with “various traditions in English poetry. *Everyman*, Skelton, the Cavaliers, the late Augustans, Tennyson, Hardy, Imagism, Hopkins, Shakespeare, and Sidney all follow in rapid succession” (189; emphasis original). In Larkin’s poetry, his ‘Englishness’ gets manifested in various ways or ‘themes’ such as political, pastoral, religious, social, and so on. In Section I, we shall discuss some of his poems, which have overt or covert political/national overtones, while in Section II we shall analyse how he deals with certain other aspects of Englishness in the post-imperial space which have strong cultural, ritual manifestations. In Section III, we shall consider the post-imperial withdrawal syndrome manifested in the incapacity, incompetence, angst and suffering in some of the Larkin personae.

I

A sense of withdrawal from public and political engagement characterized British poetry in the immediate aftermath of the World War II and Larkin’s poetry was typical and influential in this respect. Steve Padley contends that formally “conventional, understated in tone and diction, with a note on of muted despondency and a pervasive sense of nostalgia, Larkin’s works could be seen as emblematic of a crisis of confidence in national identity in a postimperial world” (56). British withdrawal from the role of the empire-builder, from the centrality of attention and activity, was something to which Larkin responded vehemently. Under the Anglo-Egyptian Agreement of 1954 which has
been mentioned in Section I of Chapter I, the British bowed to US pressure to evacuate, within two years, the Suez Canal Zone. Harold Wilson, the then Prime Minister of Britain, decided to remove troops from the British Colonial Base in Aden. The last British troops left in March 1956. There were in fact “two Suez wars in November 1956. The first was fought by British, French, Israeli and Egyptian forces in the Sinai peninsula, Port Said and along the banks of the Suez Canal. The second was fought in the Commons chamber, newspaper columns and everywhere where people gathered in Britain, and concerned whether or not the British government had acted wisely and honestly” (Lawrence 582). In reality, this move was prompted by the Labour Government’s strategy of saving money for people at home. Larkin satirizes this step of the government in his poem “Homage to a Government” as it is seen as a symbol of British withdrawal from a world role:

Next year we are to bring the soldiers home
For lack of money, and it is all right.
Places they guarded, or kept orderly,
Must guard themselves, and keep themselves orderly.

(Collected Poems 171; henceforth referred to as CP)

The sentinel image (‘Places they guarded’) and emphasis on the maintenance of the ‘civilized’ norms of ‘orderliness’ in far-off places reiterate the discourse of ‘white man’s burden’ in a subtle way, while there seems to be a sense of anxiety for leaving the ‘forsaken’ people and places to themselves. The sense of vacuity, the aftermath of the
withdrawal, may continue to haunt the places. Larkin satirizes contemporary Britain’s indifference to moral responsibilities and their sole concern for material expediency: “We want the money for ourselves at home/Instead of working. And this is all right” (CP 171). Rhetorical use of ‘and it is all right’ (l.11 ) or ‘And this is all right’ (l.15 ) suggests that all is not right, that the British abrogation of its ‘rightful’ place in the world politics for the sake of selfish interest in domestic material condition smacks of a sacrifice of its imperial duty. The soldiers or explorers brought peace and prosperity in the past by adding territories to the British Empire. Larkin laments the fact that though the statues of national heroes and military leaders will still be there in the parks as relics of the English honour, England itself will be different since happiness has been replaced by miseries:

Next year we shall be living in a country
That brought its soldiers home for lack of money.
The statues will be standing in the same
Tree-muffled squares, and look nearly the same.
Our children will not know it’s a different country.
All we can hope to leave them now is money. (CP 171)

Larkin projects the future (‘next year’, ‘our children’, ‘shall’ and ‘will’) which seems to be bleak in contrast to the past which was heroic (‘statues’). The iconic statues will just be a reminder of the past that was full of meaning. Larkin criticizes the contemporary decision makers who have been reduced to moral bankruptcy, insisting as they do on the saving of money which they can bequeath to their children, and not any tradition of
national culture. Larkin himself asserts, “I don’t mind troops being brought home if we’d decided this was the best thing all around, but to bring them home simply because we couldn’t afford to keep them there seemed a dreadful humiliation…” (Required 56). The phrase ‘a dreadful humiliation’ projects the scar in Larkin’s psyche. The very idea of Britain’s financial inability to support its off-seas locations (troops being brought home from various parts of the world) and its desertion of the heroic ideals of the past frustrate Larkin.

“At Grass”, written around 1950, is, unlike the poem discussed earlier, obliquely political as it evokes, by contrast, days of the empire. The poem presents the life of two ‘retired’ racehorses that had once enjoyed glamorous days but now leading a cloistered life, perturbed only by wind and flies. “The eye can hardly pick them out” as they live secluded from the outside world in ‘cold shade’. The poem transpires to be a post-imperial one, mourning nostalgically the loss of England’s bygone imperial grandeur. Tom Paulin observes that there is a “fusion of sunshine, empire and Edwardian nostalgia” (163) in the poem. The following lines bear evidence to the above observation:

Silks at the start: against the sky
Numbers and parasols: outside,
Squadrons of empty cars, and heat,
And littered grass: then the long cry
Hanging unhushed till it subside
To stop-press columns on the street (CP 29)
Here the two horses are heroic emblems. And if we see the images of ‘squadrons’, ‘heat’, ‘littered grass’, ‘stop-press columns’, ‘classic Junes’ and hear the ‘long cry’ of victory, a scene of battlefield is unmistakably evoked, suggesting imperial accomplishment. “The horses”, writes Paulin, are “heroic ancestors – famous generals, perhaps, who can now ‘stand at ease’ but who are also vulnerable, anonymous and largely neglected” (163).

Now stripped of most of her former colonies, England has also become vulnerable and largely neglected with very few to attend her, just as the horses have only the groom and his boy to look after them. The expressions like ‘cold shade’, ‘distresses’, ‘almanacked’, ‘memories’ allude to the same imperial loss. They have ‘slipped their names’ and thereby have become ‘anonymous’. The former England also sank into anonymity after the loss of its colonies. Like ‘Next year’ (reversal of expectation) in “Homage to a Government”, the expression ‘Yet fifteen years ago’ in this poem is indicative of a time-shift. While the former looks forward to a bleak future, the latter is suggestive of a looking backward nostalgically, in the process gaining, or re-living, a life of imperial grandeur. The line may well refer to the gorgeous Georgian England wearing the imperial crown, with the jewel (i.e. India) intact. If one takes the horses as retired generals, as Paulin’s reading of the poem recommends, then the line, “Do memories plague their ears like flies?” may come out with another meaning – one that refers to the idealized memory of the Edwardian past against which England of 1950s appears “dull, pinched, banal and second-rate” (Paulin 164). They get haunted by this past with its rich memories of ‘faint afternoons’ and ‘faded classic Junes’. Blake Morrison, in his epoch-making book The Movement, opines that by “allowing the horses to symbolize the loss of power, Larkin manages to tap nostalgia for a past ‘glory that was England’: it is a poem of post-
imperial tristesse” (45). During the heydays of empire the English lion used to rear its royal head to its full height. One can take, for example, the following lines from Larkin’s “Long lion days”:

Long lion days
Start with white haze.
By midday you meet
A hammer of heat – (CP 219)

But gone are those days – the ‘midday’ of the empire is well past and that is why it is not possible at this time to feel the ‘hammer of heat’ – and in the following lines (from Larkin’s “Ignorance”) one can trace a ‘British national weakness’ (Williamson 6):

Strange to know nothing, never to be sure
Of what is true or right or real,
But forced to qualify or so I feel,
Or well, it does seem so: (CP 107)

This hesitation (“never to be sure/Of what is true or right or real,”) in all probability is the outcome of the loss of power and perception. What remains is the nostalgic mourning – we can glimpse Larkin’s love for the unchanging in his “In times when nothing stood”:

In times when nothing stood
but worsened, or grew strange,
there was one constant good:
she did not change.  (*CP* 210)

Actually, it was Larkin’s contribution to the Queen’s Jubilee, to be inscribed in stone outside the Faber and Faber offices in Queen Square, London. These are the lines with which Larkin “honours the Crown” (*Hibbett* 112).

The downfall of England’s national, social and cultural prestige at the end of the age of imperialism is mourned touchingly in the 1951 poem “The March Past”. The military band brings back to the persona the imperial splendour of England. The scene of a march past on the street of the city suddenly brought everything to a halt: “[c]ars stopped dead, children began to run.” It was a spectacle of discipline personified. It had all the paraphernalia of a well-trained, well-orchestrated procession of soldiers that pushed the “credulous, prettily-coloured crowd” to the sidewalk. The “stamp and dash of surface sound” emanating from the procession rendered their “[m]emory, intention, thought” momentarily inactive and evoked a “sudden flock of visions” of the imperial past: “[h]oneycombs of heroic separations, /Pure marchings, pure apparitions.” The emphasis on the word ‘pure’ repeated twice and on ‘heroic’ is significant in the present context. The phrase ‘heroic separations’ suggests the valour and commitment of the soldiers who never hesitated to dedicate their lives for the sake of their country. Such a heroic past, now embalmed only in ‘visions’, can perhaps never be repeated simply because of their unalloyed heroism, commitment and patriotism. The use of the word ‘honeycombs’ is also conceived in terms of the multitudinous and interrelated chains of
the heroic activities which were very usual during the imperial past. But as the music fades out, nothing remains for the persona except the lament on the English decline in status:

... And what came back to mind

Was not its previous habit, but a blind

Astonishing remorse for things now ended. (CP 55; emphasis added)

England as a nation and Englishness as preferred way of life have in fact characterized Larkin’s poems. This aspect is brought out clearly in his poem interestingly titled “Importance of Elsewhere” where the perspective is that of an ‘expatriate’ forced to live in Belfast in Ireland. The Englishness of the speaker is revealed most glaringly when he is not in England. Thus the ‘elsewhere’ redefines and reinforces his national identity more than anything else. Although Belfast is part of Great Britain, the speaker – an Englishman – feels estranged from his roots. This indicates the problematical relationship between ‘English’ and ‘British’ identities mentioned earlier in the ‘Introduction’ and to be discussed elaborately in the ‘Conclusion’. “Importance of Elsewhere” therefore is an interesting poem that speaks of the intensity of Englishness as embodied in an ‘Englishman’. Seamus Heaney thus rightly points out that Larkin is the “urban modern man, the insular Englishman, responding to the tones of his own clan, ill at ease when out of his environment. He is a poet, indeed, of composed and tempered English nationalism” (“Englands” 347). This observation assumes importance when we take into account
Larkin's affection for England in his "Importance of Elsewhere." The poem was written about the years he spent in Belfast in early 1950s. Raphael Ingelbien observes that the opening lines of the poem "dramatize what is now a commonplace of theories of nationhood, namely the fact that national 'identity' is always defined against a foreign Other" (192). In this case, England's 'Other' is, Ireland: "Lonely in Ireland, since it was not home, /Strangeness made sense..." (CP 105). Thus, faced with his experience of 'foreign' land, Larkin's sojourn in Belfast appears to have been a defining moment in the development of his sense of English identity. Larkin "gave thanks, by implication, for the nurture that he receives by living among his own,' that is the English" (Ingelbien 192). Heaney compares the 'expatriate' sensibility of Larkin with that of 'English' Hopkins "domiciled in Ireland." To Hopkins, "the speech, the customs, the institutions of England are... 'wife to his creating thought' " (qtd. in Heaney 347). In Dublin in the 1880s, Hopkins sensed that his individual talent was getting "divorced from his tradition." Larkin similarly felt alienated in the new space. Everything there reminded him of his own difference from the people and culture of the place. In the poem ("Importance of Elsewhere") the 'salt rebuff' of the Belfast people's speech insists on this 'difference'. Their 'draughty streets', the '[a]rchaic' scent of dockland, the 'herring-hawker's cry' prove him 'separate'. Hence, Larkin concludes:

Living in England has no such excuse:
These are my customs and establishments
It would be much more serious to refuse.
Here no elsewhere underwrites my existence. (CP 104)
In this stanza, Larkin emphatically establishes his rootedness in England as his national space and Englishness as his national culture. ‘These ... customs and establishments’ are part of his life and identity and he cannot go away from them. While in England no ‘elsewhere’ can really affect his existence. This note of Englishness is the most important part of his psyche, a fact manifested in the poems we have discussed so far.

The poems analysed in this section thus clearly demonstrate Larkin’s concern and remorse for the loss of the ‘lion’ days and his disenchantment with the present that has been rendered infertile.

II

In this section, we shall concentrate on some poems, which dwell on Englishness from the perspectives of English landscape, English social customs, conventions and habits, and then shall shift on to those dealing with the theme of how England is irretrievably changing in all its aspects. Culturally located in the post-war period of late 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, Larkin approaches these issues with a sense of nostalgia and longings, which, however, ends in a strong sense of remorse and frustration. We shall see how he views the march of industrialism and consumerism making inroads even into the pristine English countryside, destroying its beauty in the process. The presence of consumerist habits is present in every English county and the omnipresent billboards block a clear view of the open space and even of the graveyard, destroying its sanctity.

We shall first see how Larkin views a period that has already gone. In the poem
“MCMXIV,” he approaches the theme of the purity of England. But this is the England as it was in 1914. The very title of the poem (‘MCMXIV’) freezes the year of the outbreak of the First World War into the marmoreal stasis of a war-memorial inscription and thereby preserves his idea of the organic English community. By this title Larkin wants to hammer home the aspects of purity, simplicity, and innocence, prevailing in England up till the breaking out of the First World War. The carnage of the war turned everything upside-down so much so that from the post-War perspectives it seemed remote and distant. Actually it was as irrevocably remote as the ancient civilizations of Greece and Rome were and this justifies the use of the Roman numerals of the title. So long the war did not break out, people never knew what a havoc it would wreak on humanity. That is why we find volunteers standing in queue quite jovially as if they were to watch a cricket match at Oval or Villa Park. The ‘moustached archaic faces’ were ‘(g)inning’ in the ‘sun’ as though it were ‘(a)n August Bank Holiday lark’. We are presented with the physical details of an English street of that bygone age with the ‘bleached/ Established names’ on the ‘sunblinds’ of the ‘shut shops’. This actually refers to the contemporary practice of dating a shop’s origin along with its title. At that time the now obsolete currencies like ‘farthings and sovereigns’ were also in use. Children in sober dark clothes could be seen playing. These children were christened after kings and queens, which suggests how reverently the royalty was looked upon (we shall examine in the next chapter how important the royalty, as an icon, was in the national life in the world view of Hughes).

With his keen eyes Larkin scans, in the same poem, the pre-war rural England as well. The countryside remained rather unruffled under the threat of war (‘not caring’).
Almost everybody was well settled and knew each other so well that place-names became useless. That’s why place-names got obscure by ‘flowering grasses’. Landholdings had been intact. Intact was also the countryside peace (‘wheat’s restless silence’). England at that time strictly maintained class distinctions (‘The differently-dressed servants/With tiny rooms in huge houses’). The dust thrown up from rural roads behind ‘limousines’ symbolizes a past which still clung to the English way of life.

However, by the end of the poem the persona wistfully cries for the England described so far. The war changed it all in the blink of an eye (‘…changed itself to past/Without a word’). His agonized soul cries for the lost innocence (‘Never such innocence, / Never before or since’) that had been the hallmark of that age. Raphael Ingelbien, while discussing the poem, raises the issue of the “innocence of an England that stretched from mediaeval ‘Domesday lines’ to mythical Edwardian summers” (212). For Larkin this innocence was “irretrievable” (Ingelbien 212). It stood for a life free from gross materialism, commercialism, restless rat race devoid of human values, confusion, doubt, anxiety, stress and strain. Stylistically, the very structure of the poem helps the persona in his lament. The whole poem is a long single line, lacking any main verb excepting an implied copula. A sort of stillness is created by dint of this slowly unfolding sentence. With the long single sentence that lingers over the beatific features Larkin tries as if to preserve the pre-war pristine England spoiled by the war. The repetition of ‘never’ at the commencement of the three lines in the last stanza serves the purpose of a funeral bell tolling repeatedly for the vanished era. Thus “MCMXIV” becomes a dirge on the good old Edwardian England that the World War-I terminates.

In the post-imperial England – particularly, after the independence of India in
1947 – Anglo-centric Englishness started losing its grip due to the large-scale immigration and the resultant multiethnicity in the nation. English cities were burdened more with these phenomena than their rural counterparts. This accounts for Larkin’s penchant for English countryside. In many a poem the Larkin-persona wants to go back to the rural England (for example in his “Here”) or laments the destruction of English countryside (as in “Going, Going”) for it is the countryside that still remains ‘English’. In his soul of souls, Larkin believed in the quintessential England, a fact which is explained by his active interest in Hardy whose poetry was essentially English. The smell of English soil in Hardy soothes the afflicted soul of Philip Larkin.

Larkins’s “Here” has been called “a superlative piece of landscape poetry” by Barbara Everett for its superb presentation of English landscape (34). The poem records the persona’s journey by a train from the city to the countryside. One may see “Here” as an expression of Larkin’s dislike for the metropolis. From ‘rich industrial shadows/And traffic all night north’ it describes the persona’s journey up through the north-east coast of England towards Hull. Leaving the industrial area far behind the train speeds through the rural landscape of gradually increasing solitude:

... swerving through fields
Too thin and thistled to be called meadows,
And now and then a harsh-named halt, that shields
Workmen at dawn; swerving to solitude
Of skies and scarecrows, haystacks, hares and pheasants,
And the widening river’s slow presence,
The piled gold clouds, the shining gull-marked mud, (CP 136)

The openness of the countryside with all its flora and fauna is foregrounded in the above extract. It is a country of farmlands, rich in agricultural produce ('haystacks'). The landscape is characterized by a meandering and 'widening' river with the sky overlooking the vast expanse below. The extract projects a plethora of colours – of the 'skies', of the 'piled gold clouds', of meadows, of haystacks, of hares and pheasants. In short, this is a beautiful description of the vast, wide landscape.

Amidst this picturesquely pastoral picture, to the surprise of the persona, there emerges a 'large town' (Hull). Along with the town there comes a typical English urban landscape: the poem highlights Hull’s separateness but it also relegates Hull to a metonymy for England:

Here domes and statues, spires and cranes cluster
Beside grain-scattered streets, barge-crowded water,
And residents from raw estates, brought down
The dead straight miles by stealing flat-faced trolleys,
Push through plate-glass swing doors to their desires – (CP 136)

It is a town in close proximity of the countryside, one which appears to be the centre of corn trade.

The consumerist 'desires' of the post-World War II, post-imperial, Welfare State England are also superbly manifest in the poem: "Cheap suits, red kitchen-ware, sharp
shoes, iced lollies, Electric mixers, toasters, washers, driers—" (CP 136). We get acquainted with the commercialism of the contemporary 'cut-price crowd' who are ‘urban yet simple’ and are visited only by ‘salesmen and relations’ (“A cut-price crowd, urban yet simple, dwelling/Where only salesmen and relations come”). Larkin’s portrayal of Hull’s “cut-price crowd”, as Ingelbien observes, also betrays a sense of class difference (203). The depiction of the English town with its inhabitants continues:

“Oh within a terminate and fishy-smelling/Pastoral of ships up streets, the slave museum, /Tattoo-shops, consulates, grim head-scarfed wives” (CP 43). The train may have stopped here (as the word ‘terminate’ indicates) but the persona’s journey well continues beyond the town’s ‘mortgaged half-built edges’ to the ‘Isolate villages’ cut off from even the outskirts of the town by ‘Fast-shadowed wheat-fields, running high as hedges’. This is a pastoral paradise, “where removed lives/Loneliness clarifies. Here silence stands/Like heat. Here leaves unnoticed thicken, /Hidden weeds flower, neglected waters quicken,/Luminously-peopled air ascends.” This is the place where the silent solitariness ‘clarifies’ the sense of existence beyond the mundane immediate. Finally, the land ends beyond a beach: ‘Of shapes and shingle’ in a ‘bluish neutral distance’ where there is an “unfenced existence: / Facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach.”

Thus the poem becomes a journey from the chaos of life to the cosmos of peace and finality, the ideal freedom of ‘unfenced existence’ symbolized by the infinite sea. This sea is the North Sea, the land stands for England and the last few lines comprise a speech for the post-imperial English nation. The significance of Hull’s remoteness, as observed by Tom Paulin, is that Larkin regards the whole of England as an isolated province. But this provincial Englishness is seen not as a challenge to but rather a
hangover from British Imperialism – Larkin is accused of hankering after a “rock-solid sense of national glory” that still draws on Imperialist militarism and of typifying a “terminal Englishness that feels tired and lost and out of date.” Paulin reads Larkin’s obsession with solitude as a metaphor for the sense of English insularity that Larkin both cultivates and resents. He further asserts that the closing lines of “Here” identify the “value of solitude with a vision of the North Sea, so that Hull … and the hinterland of Spurn Head build an emblem of England” (174). In fact, Larkin’s “Here” has been read as both a defiant Hull poem (by Robert Crawford), and a text where Larkin speaks for the nation (by Tom Paulin).

Like “Here,” Larkin’s “The Whitsun Weddings” also records a journey by a train, but this time the direction is just the other way round i.e. from the countryside to the city. The poem is about the persona’s train journey from Hull, a northern provincial city to London on a Whitsuntide Saturday and his observation of the newly married couples boarding the train at different stations on the way. We are presented with the sights and smells of English urban and rural landscapes captured, as if, in a series of snapshots taken from the carriage window. One can glimpse the industrial England in the very English climate: it is a hot afternoon; that is why the cushions are hot though all windows of the train are down. The train passes behind the backs of houses, the street of ‘blinding windscreens’, and also the ‘fish-dock’ stinking of fishy smell. Then it passes a river and the persona sees the estuary ‘where sky and Lincolnshire and water meet’. The persona keeps on his southward journey watching the essential English landscapes in which pastoral scenes are pitilessly destroyed by ‘floatings of industrial froth’. Then comes a ‘hothouse’, some hedges and grass, and then brakers’ yard full of ‘dismantled cars’
signalling the arrival of the next town, ‘new and nondescript’. According to Donald Davie, Larkin’s landscapes correspond to “the congested England that we have inhabited day by day” (64). Similar descriptions of English landscape can be found in Larkin’s novel *A Girl in Winter*: “white cottages, a very old church, grass –” (qtd. in Ingelbien 210). In the poem, we find a “near-comprehensive catalogue of England” (Ingelbien 213). By the end of his journey when the train is about to reach London we get a graphical depiction of the contemporary English landscape:

– An Odeon went past, a cooling tower,
And someone running up to bowl – and none
Thought of the others they would never meet
Or how their lives would all contain this hour.
I thought of London spread out in the sun,
Its postal districts packed like squares of wheat:

( *CP* 116) 

Crucial is Davie’s comment that Larkin’s landscapes stand metaphorically for “the seasons of the English soul” (64). Like “Afternoons”, “The Whitsun Weddings” also traces the changing landscapes of post-war England. This is the England where there is the coexistence of agriculture and industry and the juxtaposition of rural and urban landscapes. Thus the persona watches ‘Wide farms’, ‘short-shadowed cattle’, ‘hedges’, ‘rose’, ‘grass’ on one side and ‘Canals with floatings of industrial froth’, ‘acres of dismantled cars’, fields converted into building-plots on the other. In this England long
work is punctuated by leisure. Thus we find the insertion of 'a cooling tower' between an Odeon cinema and a cricket field ('someone running up to bowl'). One can also get the hint of the post-war English reconstruction in 'the next town, new and nondescript'. "The Whitsun Weddings" is a poem of social and cultural attitudes. As a social poem, it presents the English social ritual of honeymoon by newly married couples. But at the same time it shows the changes brought about by the vicissitudes of time in the post-war Welfare State England. The persona finds the girls, for instance, as 'grinning and pomaded' and in 'parodies of fashion'. The fathers are caricatures with 'broad belts under their suits' and 'seamy foreheads' and the mothers are 'loud and fat'. The persona's reaction to their dress and demeanour betrays the typical English snobbery and class-consciousness.  

The "just-marrieds are seen with relentless romanticism, in all their exotic trappings of their class background" (Bayley 12). He remains unimpressed by the gaudy second-rate products of the time – the gloves are nylon, not silk; and the girls wear not jewellery but 'jewellery-substitutes'. They seem rather ridiculous in their attempts to look fashionable. He gets virtually perturbed with their 'whoops and skirls' or 'An uncle shouting smut'. This kind of deportment reflects on their class. The poem ends with the imagery of the arrow-shower: "A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower/Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain" (CP 116). According to Larkin, the arrows shot by the English bowmen in Laurence Olivier's film Henry V gave him the idea for these last two lines. But significantly bows and arrows bear the typical English flavour in the sense that in England they are icons of patriotic devotion. According to Raphael Ingelbien, in "The Whitsun Weddings", "Larkin's most direct use of wartime English iconography (the arrow-shower in Olivier's Henry V) dissolves in a sense of separation, a fall into an
unknown somewhere” (213). Rain symbolizes fertility and regeneration. The couples will be spread over London and will fall on various new grounds of life the way rain drops fall on wheat fields. The specific occasion of the poem was Whit Sunday (Pentecost) when the Apostles thronged in one place with one accord.

Finally, starting from an English provincial place to the English capital, the train journey offers a sort of continuity which is English in essence. In fact “The Whitsun Weddings” is often regarded as Larkin’s most tempting manifesto of post-war Englishness. In his Modern English Poetry: from Hardy to Hughes John Lucas, for instance, sets aside the social fastidiousness of Larkin’s account of the weddings and emphasizes the ‘intensely democratic’ character of Larkin’s final image in the poem. He is of the opinion that there is a politics implicit in the ending of “The Whitsun Weddings,” and for all the “aggressive, snobbish, or merely nostalgic little-Englandism” (204) Larkin has ever more displayed, the image with which he ends the poem is anything but that. However, Raphael Ingelbien finds that this view of Lucas betrays a more conclusive Englishness: “Lucas’s dissatisfaction with ‘merely nostalgic little-Englandism’ implies a belief in a more positive Englishness” (214; emphasis added).

The persona in Larkin’s “Going, Going” also laments the destruction of the rural England because of pervasive urbanization and the expansion of industry. In fact “Going, Going” is one of those poems that show Larkin at his “most conservative and nostalgic” (Ingelbien 219). John Powell Ward was one of the critics who did most to develop the concept of an ‘English Line’ in poetry. In Ward’s words, “Going, Going” is the poem where Larkin “anticipated Britain’s environmental emergency by two decades” (qtd. in Ingelbien 219). This very ‘English Line’, according to Ward, starts with Wordsworth,
and his placing of Larkin at the end of that line is really striking. The persona (in
"Going, Going") had a notion that the pristine pure rural English landscape would at least
last his time:

I thought it would last my time –
The sense that, beyond the town,
There would always be fields and farms,
Where the village louts could climb
Such trees as were not cut down; (CP 189)

He had thought that whenever the city-dwellers would get exhausted with the hustle and
bustle of the city, whenever the ‘bleak high-risers’ would suffocate them, it would yet be
possible for them to drive their car away from the city and go to the countryside for some
rest and relaxation:

In the papers about old streets
And split-level shopping, but some
Have always been left so far;
And when the old part retreats
As the bleak high-risers come
We can always escape in the car. (CP 189)

The persona had also thought that the ‘earth will always respond/ However we mess it
about'; even if men were to keep on their habit of tossing garbage into the sea, the seawater away from the shore would remain unsoiled: “Chuck filth in the sea, if you must:/The tides will be clean beyond” (CP 189). Nevertheless, to his utter disgust and dismay the persona found that more and more houses were being built, more and more open fields were converted into construction sites. Even the sea was getting dirtier each day. He had the apocalyptic vision that ‘the whole/ Boiling will be bricked in’. He watched the business-minded people of the contemporary England. Those English were mostly devoid of any aesthetic appreciation and cared only for material gain. Noticing the rapid pace of the process of commercial plunder, the persona could well sense that the greed of his fellow citizens would turn England into the ‘First slum of Europe.’

The industrial boom in the contemporary England was the chief source for pollution. The persona had the apprehension that this subsidence in the quality of the environment would certainly lead to a decline in the domain of morality (‘With a cast of crooks and tarts’). The poem virtually becomes an elegy for England. What the bachelor persona says (though in a different perspective) in Larkin’s “Places, Loved Ones” (‘No, I have never found/The place where I could say/ This is my proper ground,/Here I shall stay’) (CP 99; emphasis original) appears quite befitting to the persona here as well; the persona cries: ‘And that will be England gone’. The word ‘gone’ relates to the title, suggesting the finality of a hammer at an auction. After saying ‘going, going’, the auctioneer finally utters ‘gone’ to mean that the article in question is sold out. The implication is obvious – as if the country itself (i.e. England) was being auctioned away to the contemporary commercial community:
And that will be England gone,
The shadows, the meadows, the lanes,
The guildhalls, the carved choirs.
There'll be books; it will linger on
In galleries; but all that remains
For us will be concrete and tyres. (CP 190)

Actually, the persona's lament emerges crucial because, for Philip Larkin, rural England stands for the purity of the English identity.

A handful of Larkin's poems offer us a picture of secular, social rituals of English community life. In these poems we get what may be called the idea of tradition or, to use Larkin's own words, the "customs and establishments" of England (qtd. in Ingelbien 217). And in Seamus Heaney's observation, what we get in these poems is a:

desire to preserve indigenous traditions, to keep open the imagination's supply lines to the past, to receive from the stations of Anglo-Saxon confirmations of ancestry, to perceive in the rituals of show Saturdays and race-meetings and seaside outings, of church-going and marriages at Whitsun, and in the necessities that crave expression after the ritual of church-going has passed away, to perceive in these a continuity of communal ways, and a confirmation of an identity which is threatened. ("Englands" 341)
“Show Saturday” thrives more than any other poem in the Larkin oeuvre on English communal experience. The poem celebrates a yearly country carnival characterized by an assembled ‘show’ to the crowds of people for their visual entertainment and enjoyment. The ‘show’ incorporates a variety of people in a variety of activities. The ‘Show-day’ breaks early in the morning with the cars jamming the narrow lanes. The day presents the kaleidoscopic spectacle of ‘shows’ – dog shows, pony shows, sheep shows etc. – and competitions – ‘Chain Shaw Competition’, jumping competition, wrestling competition, ‘trick races’ etc. There are meetings of judges, ‘bead-stalls’, pony-jumping, displays and marketing of vegetables, dairy products, cooking, handicraft and needlework, etc. The show presents ‘a wide ring of people’ – men (‘The men with hunters’, ‘The pound-note man’), women (‘dog-breeding wool-defined women’), children (‘children all saddle-swank’), husbands (‘husbands on leave from the garden’), wives (‘mugfaced middleaged wives’), young people, folks, judges, wrestlers, hawkers, balloon-men, acrobats and so on. There are also several animals like dogs, horses, ponies, sheep etc. and a host of things – cars, jeep, truck, hedge, logs (‘squealing logs’), clothes stalls, a bank, a beer-tent, toilets, jackets, trees, food items, crafts, tables (‘wood tables’), leeks (‘blanch leeks like church candles’), beans (‘Broad beans’), cabbages (‘dark shining-leafed cabbages’), eggs (‘four brown eggs, four white eggs’), scones (‘Four plain scones, four dropped scones’), lambing-sticks, rugs, needlework, knitted caps, baskets, honeycombs etc. The whole ambience is fraught with the hustle and bustle of pulsating life: “Announcements, splutteringly loud, /Clash with the quack of a man with pound notes.” (CP 199). Indeed, the ‘Show Saturday’ world is filled with almost everything. The ‘Show’ showcases all forms of life – the human, the animal, the
vegetation and even the inanimate. It renews each year the human kinship (‘That breaks ancestrally each year into/ Regenerate union’). This annual ritual serves the purpose of a deeply needed communal union. And for Larkin, this long-standing English community life tradition is a very effective tool to counter the post-imperial English ennui. In fact, as Simon Featherstone demonstrates in his admirably researched book Englishness: Twentieth Century Popular Culture and Forming of English Identity (2009), festivals (like The Festival of Britain in 1951 and the Millennium Experience of 2000), like folk dances, songs, and similar performances, can act very well as medium for re-articulation of Englishness in the post-imperial period.3

The very last stanza of the poem is crucial in this regard:

Let it stay hidden there like strength, below
Sale-bills and swindling; something people do,
Not noticing how time’s rolling smithy-smoke
Shadows much greater gestures; something they share
That breaks ancestrally each year into
Regenerate union. Let it always be there. (CP 201)

In these few lines the need for social ties (‘union’) by means of social rituals is prayed for with almost a religious fervour (“Let it stay hidden there like strength”). But this religion is, what can be called a “social religion: the religion of an enduring Englishness” (Corcoran 93). This recurrence of the social ritual that “Show Saturday” is all about, renders a sense of human permanence reinforcing an English tradition (“Let it always be
there.") that enables the post-war English people to counter the post-imperial setback. Larkin’s poem competently expresses a “nostalgic pastoralism which is also an important part of this poet’s make-up” (Heaney, Government 19-20).

“To the Sea” is another such poem that shows the continuity of the spectacular sea-bathing tradition of the English. The poem re-creates the realistic picture of happy seaside family vacation: ‘The miniature gaiety of seasides’ which is ‘half an annual pleasure, half a rite’. What is important here is the continuity of this tradition marked by tenselessness of the initial infinitive – ‘To step over the low wall that divides/ Road from concrete walk above the shore/ Brings sharply back something known long before –’.

Standing at the present, it helps the persona to look both to the past and to the future and thereby form a continuum of time. Thus we find him recall his own childhood seaside lark: “As when, happy at being on my own, / I searched the sand for Famous Cricketers, / Or, farther back, my parents, listeners/To the same seaside quack, first became known.” Actually, the cricketing-tradition has always been associated with the Englishness. The imperial masters also took cricket to various colonies (including India). In those days cricket was not just the gentleman’s game, it was rather a kings’game.

The poet continues to draw our attention to the beach. The persona contemplates:

Strange to it now, I watch the cloudless scene:

The same clear water over smoothed pebbles,

The distant bathers’ weak protesting trebles

Down at its edge, and then the cheap cigars,

The chocolate-papers, tea-leaves, and, between
The rocks, the rusting soup-tins... (CP 173)

This sense of continuity connects the persona’s own past, the past of his parents and is extended to other parents as well: “Coming to water clumsily undressed/Yearly, teaching their children by a sort/ Of clowning, helping the old, too, as they ought” (CP 174). This is the culmination of English continuity passed down from generation to generation. Actually, stepping over the ‘low wall’ reminds the persona ‘something known long before’—we are presented with the snapshot details of the annual seaside holidaying:

Everything crowds under the low horizon:

Steep beach, blue water, towels, red bathing caps,

The small hushed waves’ repeated fresh collapse

Up the warm yellow sand, and further off

A white steamer stuck in the afternoon— (CP 173)

The word ‘repeated’ is crucial (‘repeated fresh collapse’) hinting at the continuity of sea-bathing. And this idea of continuity is set against the picture of permanence in the line “A white steamer stuck in the afternoon” (emphasis added). As if the gap between this line and the next one (“Still going on, all of it, still going on!”) presents the long flow of time from the previous to the present age and the continuity gets superbly reinforced both in the word ‘still’ and the progressive go-ing (‘going’) and further by the repetition of the phrase (‘still going on!’), leaving the persona in surprise. The litter on the beach includes
‘cheap-cigars’ (emphasis added), ‘chocolate papers’, ‘tea-leaves’, ‘soup-tins’ etc.

Significantly the persona watches the ‘same clear water’ (along with the same sea-side activities as before). This sameness may come to him as a welcome relief – it reminds him that despite many negative developments, the English tradition of sea-bathing at least can go. The continuity of the sea-waves and sea-bathing (in “To the Sea”) and the continuity of community rejuvenation and kinship (in “Show Saturday”) contrast sharply with the post-Imperial stasis and ennui.

Continuity of an English tradition can also be found in Larkin’s “The Explosion.” The poem is about a coalmine explosion in which many miners died. At the funeral service in the local church the priest assures the mourners that:

\[
\text{The dead go on before us, they} \\
\text{Are sitting in God's house in comfort,} \\
\text{We shall see them face to face – (CP 175; emphasis original)}
\]

Moved by the assurance of the priest the recently widowed wives of the miners have the momentary vision of their dead husbands (‘men of the explosion’): “Larger than in life they managed – /Gold as on a coin, or walking /Somehow from the sun towards them” (CP 175). The significant thing to note in the poem is the solidarity with the tradition of English community life and more importantly its unending continuation. Stephen Regan reads “The Explosion” as an “unqualified affirmation of the instinct for shared protection and mutual survival in working class communities” (qtd. in Ingelbien 200). The miners (many of whom are now dead) remain very much rooted in the society in spite of their
underground toil. They are most probably left anonymous in order to highlight their social ties and family and community identities (fathers, brothers, nicknames, etc.). One of them ‘chased after rabbits; lost them; /Came back with a nest of lark’s eggs; /Showed them; lodged them in the grasses.’ As if the poet tries to bring home to us that despite the death and destruction, decay and devastation, such a life style goes on. The stylistic devices applied to the poem also add to this sense of continuation of tradition. For example, the very use of “Haiawatha” metre in the poem is described as the “rhythm of continuity” by Peter Hollindale (qtd. in Chatterjee 297). It is a metre that “causes nothing to stop” (qtd. in Chatterjee 297). The continuum between the past and the present is reinforced by the alternate use of the verbs in past form (‘pointed’, ‘slept’, ‘came’, ‘chased’, ‘lost’, ‘showed’, ‘lodged’, ‘passed’, ‘stopped’, ‘saw’, ‘managed’) and those in present progressive form (‘coughing’, ‘shouldering’, ‘standing’, ‘chewing’, ‘walking’, ‘showing’). The continuation is also facilitated by the circular narrative structure of the poem. For example, the ‘explosion’ comes at the opening of the poem (‘On the day of the explosion’), the tremor is again felt by the middle (‘At noon, there came a tremor’), and then the explosion is again hinted at by the ‘unbroken eggs’ (‘One showing the eggs unbroken’) in the very last line. The poem’s final image of one of the dead miners showing ‘unbroken eggs’ is immensely significant, for it evidently implies fertility, renewal, and re-germination of life. In its portrayal of a closely-knit and picturesque miners’ community “The Explosion” is in fact just as nostalgic and idealizing as “Show Saturday.” Larkin tries to bridge the gulfs that divide English society with a “sense of communal obligation and commitment, a desire to rebuild and renew a sense of collective life” (Ingelbien 200) traceable especially in his later poems.
For Philip Larkin, as is obvious, the very concept of Englishness serves as the
repository of value and identity. Many of his poems propose an idea of an English
community either already vanished or under serious threat. In a good many poems Larkin
falls back upon English elements. The microcosm of Larkin’s poetry reflects the
macrocosm of post-war British society. The liquidation of the British Raj in India
resulted in a mood of wistfulness, skepticism, and even self-doubt. This is the mood that
gave birth to the post-war, welfare state poetry with its undeceived, restricted, realistic
and rational idiom. It is no wonder that a very English and very insular poet like
Betjeman should become the Poet-Laureate (Larkin being a devout disciple of Betjeman).
A good deal of self-parody is discernible in the way the contemporary poets presented
themselves. John Lucas illustrates:

If you imagine the typical poet of the 1950s you are likely to picture a
young man in a belted mackintosh, which he wears over a shapeless tweed
jacket and corduroy trousers. The trousers may well be tucked into his
shocks or snared by bicycle clips.... (192)

We are immediately reminded of the Larkin-persona in “Church Going”:

Hatless, I take off
My cycle-clips in awkward reverence, (CP 97)

The following poems are indicative of the England that is fast transforming not
only in scenic beauty but also in social scenery and in worldview. After the World War II, religion seemed to have lost much of its validity and relevance. By 1950, less than ten per cent Britons were church-goers. The churches in contemporary England were in a desperate condition. In a letter to Patsy Murphy (18 June 1955) Larkin himself admitted that the poem “wasn’t conceived in a spirit of ‘attacking the Church’, but arose in part from reading an appeal made by the Archbishop of Canterbury ... for money, without which he said about 200 churches were in imminent danger of ruin” (Letters 244).

Larkin presents a realistic picture of the changes in beliefs in respect of religion in the poem “Church Going”. The very title of the poem hints at the near-collapse of the popular belief in established religion, the church being its symbol. The persona of the poem meditates on this decline of religion:

... some brass and stuff
Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;
And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,
Brewed God knows how long. (CP 97)

This silence is indicative of people’s lack of willingness to attend the churches because of which rituals are not being held. The people of earlier generations had strong faith in religion but the post-war populace moved away from religion to embrace gross materialism. Religion fails to receive the respect it used to do in the pre-war Britain. Out for a bicycle ride, the ‘(b)ored’ and ‘uninformed’ persona halts to visit the church, almost unwillingly. He enters the church only after making sure that no ceremony or ritual is
being conducted at the time (‘Once I am sure there’s nothing going on/ I step inside...’).
The neglected, dried-up flowers and the musty smell inside the church evoke the sense of
the nearly deserted plight of the church. The persona runs his hand around the font. To
his agnostic mind the building appears first as a mere piece of architecture. He ponders as
whether the roof that ‘looks almost new’ has been ‘cleaned’ or ‘restored’ of late. He
mounts the lectern, goes through a few verses in a Bible and apes a vicar’s voice like a
schoolboy. Then he goes back to the entrance, signs the book kept there for the purpose,
drops an ‘Irish sixpence’ into the charity-box and finally exits. What haunts him most is
the silence – ‘tense’, ‘musty’, and ‘unignorable’. The persona leaves the church
somewhat uncomfortably reflecting that ‘the place was not worth stopping for’. It now
occurs to him that he often stops outside a church building and also goes inside. The
reason is not very clear to him. He is not a believer and his attitude to religion is of
uneasy skepticism and cultivated disdain as evidenced by his ‘awkward reverence’. He
can no longer accept traditional religion. That is why his voice inside the church does
‘snigger’ briefly. Every time he goes inside a church, he feels that he has merely wasted
his time. The thought disturbs him and he is forced to fathom the real cause for his
stopping at the church. Several other questions also crop up in his mind. He asks himself
what purpose churches would serve when people would stop going to churches
altogether. Perhaps a few of them would be converted into museums with ‘parchment,
plate and pyx in locked cases’. The remaining church buildings will perhaps fall to ruin
(‘...let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep’). There is also the possibility that they would
become objects of superstition and people would avoid them as ‘unlucky places’. But
there are other possibilities too. ‘Doubtful’ women might come to those deserted
cathedrals and get their sick children cured of certain diseases (including cancer) by making them touch some particular stone or some holy object or spot there. But these superstitions would eventually reach their ends and the persona feels apprehensive about what would happen to the churches after the death of superstition. Only the crumbling edifice will remain with grass, weeds and shrubs in it. The persona wonders who would be the very last person to visit a church for spiritual edification. People now pay only a perfunctory visit to churches. Religion is in decline and church-going has become casual like cinema-going. Churches will henceforth be visited by some antique hunters (‘Some ruin-bibber, randy for antique’) or some Christmas-visitor (‘Christmas-addict’) or some ‘bored’, ‘uninformed’ person like the persona himself. Written in 1954, “Church-Going” presents us with the inadequacies of religion in the post-1945 Britain.

The poem also brings home to us a portrait of the post-World War II Welfare State Englishman who is under-fed, under-paid and over-taxed. It is the picture of a scruffy person unconcerned with his outward appearance (‘Hatless’, as has been already mentioned). He is rather clumsy and poor who cannot afford a car, or even a bike but uses bicycle instead (‘I take off/ My cycle-clips...’). He is wry, world-weary and utterly hopeless.

A changed picture of the English society is found in “High Windows.” In the post-war England, this change is perceptible in the domain of sexual freedom brought about by contraception. The persona of the poem sees a young boy and a young girl together and imagines that they make love. He guesses that the girl must be taking contraceptive pills or wearing a diaphragm lest she gets pregnant. Their enjoyment appears paradisiacal to the persona. This pleasure, he feels, was denied to his generation
during his youth though the desire was very much there:

When I see a couple of kids
And guess he’s fucking her and she’s
Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm,
I know this is paradise

Everyone old has dreamed of all their lives — (CP 165)

The poem focuses on the contemporary English social picture which makes it representative of the post-war England. The changing social aspects of the 1960s England is also noticeable in “Annus Mirabilis”, a poem that shows the breaking down of social prohibitions. In fact it presents us with the spirit of sexual liberation of the ‘Swinging Sixties’ when pre-marital sex became socially acceptable:

Sexual intercourse began
In nineteen sixty-three
(Which was rather late for me) –
Between the end of the Chatterley ban
And the Beatles’ first LP. (CP 167)

The two incidents mentioned here are crucial. The space between the lifting of the ban on D.H. Lawrence’s novel, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (on 2 November 1960) and the release
of the first long-playing record of the Beatles (on 22 March 1963) was the period when Victorian morality dwindled. In the wake of the sexual revolution of the early 1960s, pornography was legitimized and sex finally reached the public cinema. The Beatles were actually the first incarnation of the all new, freer spirits of the ‘Stormy Sixties.’ The Beatles’ first LP began playing to a “new breed, miniskirted, barefooted, long-haired and bearded; and who revolt on college campuses, dodge the draft, wear Afro hair styles, smoke grass, rock-and-roll under psychodelic lights, ‘blow their minds’, ‘do their thing’, and would consider the very term ‘free-love’ a laughable archaism” (Kuby 259). This pop group epitomized popular culture in England in the 1960s and 1970s. The persona of the poem also looks back to the immediately post-war years of austerity both in economic and moral domains. It was a time of a ‘wrangle’, a struggle for scarce economic and emotional resources within the constraints of a ‘shrunk’ England. But things started changing with the advent of the 1960s when the restraints were lifted. The persona compares and contrasts the permissiveness of this present with the sexual repression of the past:

Up till then there’d only been
A sort of bargaining,
A wrangle for a ring,
A shame that started at sixteen
And spread to everything. (CP 167)

There is a group of poems that may be termed ‘advertisement’ poems (e.g.
“Essential Beauty”, “Sunny Prestatyn”, “Send No Money” etc.). In these poems Larkin shows his concern with the socio-cultural realities of the 1960s England. This was the time when the British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan coined the famous slogan, “You never had it so good” and there came a boom in commerce and advertising as part of the widespread consumerism. Larkin’s “Essential Beauty” has its origin from commercial advertisements:

They dominate outdoors. Rather, they rise
Serenely to proclaim pure crust, pure foam,
Pure coldness to our live imperfect eyes
That stare beyond this world, where nothing’s made
As new or washed quite clean, seeking the home
All such inhabit. (CP 144)

So many ‘pure’s (‘pure crust’, ‘pure foam’, ‘Pure coldness’) only highlight the fact that the present is not that pure. The poem shows how huge hoardings, in ‘frames as large as rooms’, obscure the sordid realities of ordinary life: they ‘block’ streets, ‘screen’ graves and ‘cover’ slums. These hoardings ‘face all ways’ not only in the literal sense but also in that they entrap us at every point – and there is no way we can escape their clutches. The ‘ends of streets’ that are blocked signify the natural avenues of development that are blocked by the lies of those advertisements. Thus the ‘good’ (as asserted by Prime Minister Macmillan) was achieved at the cost of the immaculate England – the huge billboards gradually taking over the scenic beauty of English countryside. They seduce
us with the dream of a life of perfection by promising everything we desire to be perfectly happy. There are advertisements for almost everything: for bread (‘loaves’), for ‘custard’, for ‘motor-oil’, for ‘salmon’ and almost everywhere: they throng streets, graveyards and slums. They form as if well-ordered ‘groves’ where ‘silver knife’ sinks into ‘golden butter’, a ‘glass of milk’ stands in a meadow. The images promise everything – contentment (‘smiles’), prosperity (‘cars’), peace (‘Well-balanced families’); even perpetual youth is available in ‘that small cube’ towards which each hand ‘stretches’. Advertisements cash in on our eternal desire to transcend the dreariness, the drabness, the dullness and the shortcomings of life (‘of how life should be’), to ‘stare beyond this world’. The images on the billboards parody the Platonic concept of the ‘Eidos’ of things alluded to in the title by Larkin. Thus though ‘groves’ are supposed to be possessed of sacred halo (as they remind us of the sacred groves of ancient religions), in reality they turn out to be hollow. The idealized images of the hoardings, ‘these sharply-pictured groves/Of how life should be’ are in sharp contrast with those in the mundane imperfect world, ‘where nothing’s made/ As new or washed quite clean.’ The essential truth about advertisements is its exploitativeness. They represent, “a crudely exploitative economy . . . the coercive ideology of modern consumerism” (Swarbrick 115). These romantic lures for the exploitation of human desires can only offer frustration. The boy ‘puking his heart out’ in the pub toilet ‘(just missed’ the company of the smart people in their tennis clothes. The pensioner who pays ‘A halfpenny more for Granny Graveclothes’ Tea’ receives only the taste of ‘old age’. The sexy lady of the cigarette-ad would forever elude the smokers. The ‘dying smokers’ may well ‘sense’ an enticing, mysterious figure approaching them but smoking never makes her palpable
('unfocused she'). Thus "Essential Beauty" lays bare the deceptive face of consumerism in England of the 1960s.

Larkin's "Sunny Prestatyn" presents a railway station poster advertising the pleasures of Prestatyn, a Welsh coastal resort, through the alluring image of a girl in swimsuit:

\[ \text{Come to Sunny Prestatyn} \]

Laughed the girl on the poster,
Kneeling up on the stand
In tautened white satin.
Behind her, a hunk of coast, a
Hotel with palms
Seemed to expand from her thighs and
Spread breast-lifting arms. (CP 149; emphasis original)

The poster-girl, an object of male fantasy, promises a life of absolute happiness with the tantalizing lure of sex. She is dressed quite revealingly in 'tautened white satin' (symbolic of virginal purity) and her 'kneeling up' signifies a gesture of voluntary submission. The very word 'tautened' evokes a sense of male arousal. 'Behind her' is placed a 'hunk of coast', a "hunk" being the slang for a strong and sexually attractive male. The coastline and the hotel along with the 'palms' seem to 'expand from her thighs' and thereby add to the eroticism of this Eden. The 'palms' are as though phallic symbols, but more significantly imply 'hands' that seemingly come from between the
girl’s thighs to ‘spread breast-lifting arms’. Thus the girl on the billboard is at once “exploited...and exploitative” (Swarbrick 116-8). Advertisements entice us to look beyond this sordid world of actuality and the lady here is the most unfailing bait for the ideal of a world of erotic bliss. She prods our libido with the fake promise that an amorous weekend in this resort would be the passport to that world. But the exaggerated promise falls far short of our expectations and that is why Titch Thomas, symbolizing the common men of the world of reality, defaces the poster. He knows it full well that her promise of the paradisiacal pleasure is fundamentally fraudulent and hence his declaration, ‘She was too good for this life.’ The “laughing frozen image of happiness” (Day 58) of the opening is replaced by the stark reminder of pain and death in reality. The advertisement’s cliche sex symbol is part of the advertisers’ untruths, a utopian world of perfection that contrasts starkly with the real world we live in. The poem represents, as King asserts, “the tension between fact and fantasy, reality and illusion” (20). Thus the crucial clarion call – ‘Fight Cancer’ urges us to fight the trap of fantasy world by not willingly submit ourselves to them and more importantly to fight the cunning contrivances of the commercial advertisements. The paradise promised by the marketing paradise is a sheer impossibility.

The falsity of the advertisements is also noticeable in “Send No Money.” The discrepancy between the ideal and the real can be traced in what they (advertisements) promise to offer and what they really give (or don’t give). The concluding lines of the poem read:

What does it prove? Sod all.
In this way I spent youth,
Tracing the trite untransferable
Truss-advertisement, truth.  (CP 146)

The expression ‘Truss-advertisement’ is crucial here. It actually takes us back to the title of the poem – “Send No Money” which is the catchy and crafty instruction tagged by the advertisers to the flashy product they are out to launch. Usually these petty, mail-order advertisements offer a free trial before buying, though the article is often found meretricious. But apart from this a ‘truss-advertisement’ also means an advertisement for a device for helping the hernia patients. It is meant to be a buttress for the disabled, though in reality the promised comfort is hardly fulfilled. This is how Larkin’s ‘advertisement’ poems reveal the consumerist face of contemporary England.

Larkin’s “Going, Going” also reviles the consumerist and commercial code of contemporaneous England. England around 1960s was crying for ‘more’:

...The crowd
Is young in the M1 café;
Their kids are screaming for more –
More houses, more parking allowed,
More caravan sites, more pay.  (CP 189)

This is consumerism at its worst. So many ‘more’s (“screaming for more”, “More houses”, “more parking”, “More caravan sites”, “more pay”) bring to the persona only
less – less peace, less purity, – less pristine conditions. In the post-war period England may well thrive in material domain but that does not compensate for her loss of pristine qualities of the past.

III

It is, however, absolutely impossible to go back to the past all the time. Even if one goes back to past in imagination, one is ultimately to come back to the reality. England at present was characterized by a sense of void in every sense of the term. This void was not just the result of the loss of empire; various other factors also contributed to it. For example, the contemporary social landscape of England was very much a place of depravity. Empire was undoubtedly the mainstay of English nationalism, but it was not its sole source. The post-imperial Britain went through various crises – political, social and so on. These resulted in a sense of insularity. Moreover, this insularity is not isolated from emotions or senses of impending death, darkness, loneliness, singleness so on. An overwhelming sense of isolation, depression and death permeates through some of Larkin’s poems. In fact, it is a recurrent theme in his oeuvre. Larkin’s characters are often found to be affected by a sense of insularity. This may be regarded as a post-imperial withdrawal symptom. Neil Corcoran observes, “Larkin’s idea of England is as deeply and intimately wounded by such post-imperial withdrawals as some of the personae of his poems are wounded by sexual impotence, incompetence, anxiety or distress” (87). In this section, we shall analyse some such poems depicting the withdrawn psychic condition of
Larkin’s “Dockery and Son” recounts the persona’s visit to his old college at Oxford and his reminiscences on his return train journey home. What should have been an occasion for sweet nostalgia turns out to be a quite disheartening one, as he feels isolated not only from his former Alma Mater but also from his own past. He is uncannily ‘death-suited’ (possibly he is coming from a funeral). On his visit to his room in his former college, he significantly finds it ‘locked.’ The lawn once so familiar to him is now ‘dazzlingly wide’. Disappointed and ignored, he catches his train back and watches his past gradually disappear: “Canal and clouds and colleges subside / Slowly from view”.

An encounter with the college Dean he meets just before his departure brings to him the more disquieting news that one of his junior contemporaries, Dockery, now has a son at the college. He starts brooding on how Dockery might have been when he became a father. Pondering over the difference between the life of married Dockery and his own celibacy he finds that the “(h)igh-collared public-schoolboy” must have made a definite choice about the course of his life. Dockery must have decided what he required from life and achieved it accordingly (“...he must have taken stock /Of what he wanted, and been capable / Of...”). The social background of the poem shows the poet’s idiosyncratic attitude towards facts and ideas about class. Dockery’s class position enables him to become a father, to “carry on the line”; while the persona’s own position is shown by the fact that it is “quite natural” for him not to do so. But though the persona appears to be quite unruffled by his bachelor status (“To have no son, no wife, /No house or land still seemed quite natural”), a further look at the lines betrays the agonized cry of a lonely soul. It only seems natural; and does never guarantee to be natural in the true sense of the
term, for in the very next line Dockery says: "Only a numbness registered the shock / Of finding out how much had gone of life, / How widely from the others." If everything is natural, then why is 'numbness' and why 'shock'? True, the persona finds out that having children may well mean 'increase' for Dockery, but for him it is nothing but 'dilution': "Why did he think adding meant increase? / To me it was dilution" (CP 153). But if the persona is really not bothered, then one may well ask him why he mulls it over so deeply! Actually, these two lines emerge rather consolatory in nature and consolation, as we know, is nothing but consolation i.e. at the deep-structure, there remains always the cry of not having something. The persona speculates that though their lives (his and Dockery's) started alike, later on they flowed along two widely different courses. This difference is caused by the difference in their 'innate assumptions' about the way their lives should be lived. But again: "Where do these / Innate assumptions come from?" The persona questions the very source of their assumptions and reaches the conclusion that they themselves are hardly responsible for those 'assumptions' — for one does not act on what he thinks he ought to or wants to do ("Not from what / We think truest, or most want to do"). Life does not accommodate our most basic desires. We are only left with our habits to fall back upon and our sum total of life becomes the accumulation of those habits: "habit for a while, / Suddenly they harden into all we've got." Thus, despite life having brought 'For Dockery a son, for me nothing,' in the ultimate analysis there has been no essential difference between them, for in both the cases it is the circumstances that triumph over and not the individual will. Our apparently free will to choose is one of our most fundamental illusions. It would be self-deceiving to believe that by having acted differently at some crucial juncture in our past we could well have changed our present.
Hence both the bachelor persona and the family-man Dockery are subject to the same inscrutable, ungovernable forces that make us what we are:

Life is first boredom, then fear.

Whether or not we use it, it goes,

And leaves what something hidden from us chose,

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

But throughout the poem, the persona gets haunted by a deep sense of isolation, exclusion, alienation and impotence.

Loneliness, bareness, and a sort of metaphysical impotence can be traced in the poem “Mr Bleaney” included in the volume *The Whitsun Weddings*. The persona of the poem is a man looking for accommodation. The potential landlady of the house describes to the persona the previous tenant (Mr Bleaney) of the room he is now to occupy. Alongside the landlady’s prattle, details of the room, which the persona perceives, reveal a good deal about the character of Mr Bleaney, a middle-aged lonely bachelor. His life is marked by scantiness, shabbiness, dirtiness, and worthlessness. The very name ‘Bleaney’ calls forth the impression of ‘bleakness’, ‘leanness’ and ‘meanness’. The room is unpleasant – cheap and not cared for. The flowered curtains are thin and worn-out (‘thin and frayed’) and also shorter than what is required for a window of the size that this room has (‘Fall to within five inches of the sill’). From the window can be seen a small strip of land with grass and much rubbish on it. According to the landlady, this is her ‘bit of garden’ that Mr Bleaney used to take care of. The room is cramped and bare. The bulb is
of low-wattage ('sixty-watt') and the bed is 'fusty'. There is no hook behind the door and no space for books or bags. Even the ashtray is makeshift ('saucer-souvenir'). Bleaney's life, as if in parity with his surroundings, was equally drab and dull. It was a routine life, fraught with monotonous regularity. He always used to come down at the same time and eternally preferred sauce to gravy. This life of monotony was punctuated by foolish and futile expectancy (he played the football pools without ever winning – "He kept on plugging at the four aways"). To crown it all, sameness and loneliness was the staple of Bleaney's life for he always spent his summer holidays with 'the Frinton folk' at the same coastal resort and Christmas with his sister in Stoke. There was bareness both inside and outside the room. And the same bareness was the crux of Mr Bleaney's life. Actually Mr Bleaney represents the sordid life of a marginal man in the post-war British society.

Larkin is speaking of another kind of depravation in his poem "Deception." Set in Victorian London, this poem about a rape is based on an actual incident recorded by the nineteenth-century sociologist Henry Mayhew in his book *London Labour and the London Poor.* It is about the psychological impact of the incident on the poor girl and her sense of isolation. But what is more revealing in the poem is the impact of the incident on the rapist himself. It is not the girl, but the rapist who is the more 'deceived' when he does 'burst into fulfilment's desolate attic.' This is so because the girl's suffering is 'exact' and may have had a maturing effect unlike that of the rapist who does not even know the reason of his suffering. More importantly, the girl knows that her suffering is imposed on her. It is not nor inherent in her. While the girl is duped by somebody else, the rapist is deluded by none but himself. His deception is constitutive of his very own experience, by his illusory idea that the consummation of his lust can lead
him to fulfilment. His suffering is barren and nameless as his desire ends only in
disappointment and despair. It leads him to a sterile sense of nothingness. He falls prey to
the illusion that desires ultimately get gratified. The poem therefore deals with the theme
of psychological bankruptcy and moral depravity, which is symptomatic of the age.

Katha Pollitt talks about Larkin’s “relentless focus” on “illness”, “old age” and
“death” (Pollitt 251). Many a Larkin poem indeed deals with these issues. The persona in
“The Old Fools,” for example, conveys his dismay, disgust, and even anger at the senile
breakdown and the concomitant humiliation:

What do they think has happened, the old fools,
To make them like this? Do they somehow suppose
It’s more grown-up when your mouth hangs open and drools,
And you keep on pissing yourself, and can’t remember
Who called this morning?

(From CP 196)

‘Ash hair, toad hands, prune face dried into lines,’ the ‘old fools’ have been reduced to a
mere caricature of their former selves when they ‘danced all night, /Or went to their
wedding, or sloped arms some September?’ The gradual dissolution of identity leads to
the loss of self-consciousness (‘Not knowing how, not hearing who, the power/Of
choosing gone’). It is appalling, for ‘these are,’ asserts the persona, ‘the first signs’ of that
ultimate end when ‘At death, you break up: the bits that were you/ Start speeding away
from each other for ever/ With no one to see’. Apart from the physical ageing and
physical death, there is mental ageing as well:
That is where they live:

Not here and now, but where all happened once.

This is why they give

An air of baffled absence, trying to be there

Yet being here.  

This is yet another manifestation of his obsession with the past as the site of meaningful activities and the present as one of hollowness. This is the keynote of many of Larkin’s poems.

The decrepit persona in “The Winter Palace” suffers from memory loss:

Most people know more as they get older:

I give all that the cold shoulder.

I spent my second quarter-century

Losing what I had learnt at university

And refusing to take in what had happened since.

Now I know none of the names in the public prints,

And am starting to give offence by forgetting faces

And swearing I’ve never been in certain places.  

(CP 211)
The expressions like ‘my second quarter-century’, ‘what I had learnt at university’, ‘the public prints’, ‘certain places’ and ‘happened since’ point to the psychic collapse of the persona. And eventually, these losses lead to naught. Hence the cry: “Then there will be nothing I know” (CP 211). The speaker’s interaction with the world outside that took place in the past is now denied any entry into his memory. What is more important is that he does not know – or refuses to know – the public figures who have gained importance in politics. This is perhaps his personal strategy to shut himself out from the real world, a forced insularity, one that refuses to acknowledge the outside world which has become void and meaningless.

Even the twenty-six-year old persona in “On Being Twenty-six” finds himself prematurely old:

I feared these present years,
The middle twenties,
When deftness disappears,

[...]

I thought: this pristine drive
Is sure to flag
At twenty-four or -five; (CP 24)

What is more striking is the fact that the young ‘chap’ knew it beforehand that he was
going to be untimely aged ("As I foresaw"). His former command is well gone, gone is the earlier agility ("deftness disappears"). What remains is only doubts and uncertainties ("Freighted with a source-encrusting doubt"). Larkin’s "Next Please" shows how all the time we badly expect good things to happen in our lives. We are like persons who stand upon the top of a cliff ("bluff") and watch a multitude of ships coming towards us with the hope that the 'Sparkling armada of promises' would soon unload its cargo for us. The ships of promises approach very slowly ("How slow they are! And how much time they waste, / Refusing to make haste!") and, though they reach us finally, they do not anchor ("it never anchors") but just pass by ("Arching our way") and 'leave us holding wretched stalks/ Of disappointment.' There is, however, only one ship which never fails to anchor— the ship of death:

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. (CP 52)

The persona in Larkin’s "Going" also senses the approach of the cruel, comfortless death. Death comes (a)cross the fields' in the form of an unprecedented 'evening' that 'lights no lamps'. Consequently, the persona feels the threat of death, nothingness and impotence:

...What is under my hands,
That I cannot feel?

What loads my hands down? (CP 3)

The sexual anxiety of the persona turns into a fear of death. (The very title of the poem i.e. “Going” suggests decrement of vigour). Apart from death and its concomitant loss of consciousness, the existential questions (“Where has the tree gone, that locked/Earth to
the sky?”, “What is under my hands, / That I cannot feel?”, “What loads my hands
down?”) are raised by the persona. In Larkin’s poem “Wants” the persona reminds us of
the fact that we plan much for the future. ‘Despite the artful tensions of the calendar’ we
seemingly try our best to ward off death – we take out life insurance as protective
measure, beget children to carry on the family line and above all refuse even to
contemplate death. All our efforts notwithstanding, asserts the persona, the thought that
we can escape the inevitability of death is sheer illusion. The persona in Larkin’s
“Nothing to be Said” depicts life as a perpetual approach to death. For all the diverse
sorts of people (e.g. ‘nations vague as weed’, ‘nomads among stones’, ‘Small-statured
cross-faced tribes’ or ‘cobble-close families’), ‘Life is slow dying.’ All their ‘separate
ways/Of building, benediction, / Measuring love and money’ are nothing but ‘Ways of
slow dying.’ All the forms of life steadily ‘advance/On death equally slowly.’ And
ultimately death ‘leaves/Nothing to be said.’ Thus the poem portrays the omnipresence
of death. That the terminus of life is death is reinforced by Larkin’s “Ambulances.” The
very appearance of an ambulance makes us aware of the insignificance of everything that
we do. Always associated with illness, disease, accident and death, ambulances are the
menacing messengers of impending death. Watching them, the onlookers are brought closer to the tenuousness of their own lives. When the women of the locality see somebody on stretcher being ‘carried in’ and ‘stowed’ in the ambulance, they momentarily sense:

\[
\text{...the solving emptiness}
\]

That lies just under all we do,

And for a second get it whole,

So permanent and blank and true. \textit{(CP 132)}

Actually, they are afflicted not by someone else’s fortune, but because they are keenly reminded that their own lives might, at any moment, be so terminated. In the post-imperial period, whatever she does, England gets always haunted by a sense of emptiness (“...the solving emptiness/ That lies just under all we do”). This is the ultimate, bleak reality that she has got to come to terms with (“So permanent and blank and true”). Suddenly, everything they have done is threatened by the ultimate nullity of death.

Nobody can escape this threat and the omnipresence of death is superbly brought home to us: “All streets in time are visited” \textit{(CP 132)}. \textit{The appalling awareness of death is also present in Larkin’s “Days.”} Generally it is during the day time that we lead an active, vigorous and cheerful life. Thus we find the persona in the poem asking: “Where can we live but days?” \textit{(CP 67)} When our day of life approaches its dusk there comes the doctor for our health and the priest for the survival of the soul. But all their efforts are in vain, for neither of them can checkmate death:
Ah, solving that question
Brings the priest and the doctor
In their long coats
Running over the fields. \(\text{\textit{(CP 67)}}\)

Actually, the fields are the shiny, sunlit fields of day and as if the doctor and the priest come over it as the harbingers of the ineludible death. The horror of death haunts the patients waiting in the waiting room of the hospital in Larkin’s “The Building.” The hospital-building emerges a sort of veritable prison:

For past these doors are rooms, and rooms past those,
And more rooms yet, each one further off

And harder to return from; and who knows
Which he will see, and when? \(\text{\textit{(CP 192)}}\)

Death is the great leveller, for being in hospital deletes all distinction of age, of gender. Even if everyone is not going to die in this particular hospital, but being in hospital always reminds us of the ineluctability of death:

... All know they are going to die.
Not yet, perhaps not here, but in the end,
And somewhere like this. That is what it means,

This clean-sliced cliff ... \( (CP \ 192) \)

The high hospital-building ('Higher than the handsomest hotel') becomes the precipice of death.

To the persona in "Aubade" even the refreshing, ever-soothing dawn appears a frightening reminder of the inescapability of death:

... the total emptiness for ever,
The sure extinction that we travel to
And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,
Not to be anywhere,
And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true. \( (CP \ 208) \)

The persona deems death as 'a special way of being afraid,' devoid of any antidote ('No trick dispels'). Neither religion ('That vast moth-eaten musical brocade/ Created to pretend we never die'), nor courage ('Courage is no good'), nor bravery ('... Being brave/ Lets no one off the grave'), nor any other conventional counteragent (e.g. philosophy, drink, daily chores or spare time etc.) can counter it. Death does reduce us to an absolute nought:

... no sight, no sound,
No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,
Nothing to love or link with,  

Death is that ‘anaesthetic from which none come round.’

To the persona of the 1953 poem “Triple Time” the present appears: “A time traditionally soured, /A time unrecommended by event” (CP 32). What adds to the worry of the persona is his shocking realization that this drab and dreary present was once supposed to be a prosperous future that he as a child avidly looked forward to:

This is the future furthest childhood saw
Between long houses, under travelling skies,
Heard in contending bells –
An air lambent with adult enterprise,  

Actually, the post-1945 England could no longer hand down a legacy of tradition to her children. At present, the past is remembered only with nostalgic regret. The ‘neglected chances’ in days of yore are deemed as sheep having grown ‘fat’ by cropping the lush greenery of the ‘valley’ of the time gone by, which we carelessly abstained from using. Actually, in the past we failed to utilize the rich and fecund opportunities surrounding us. After the loss of empire when the English lion grows old, the persona can only rationalize the missed chances and the present failures (‘Thread-bare perspectives’). Things grand and glorious are gone (with the empire) leaving the dregs behind. What remains is only the vision of the past splendour. This is the present England is left with.

In this chapter we have journeyed through Larkin’s poetic landscape and surveyed
the corpus from the point of view of Englishness as an ideology as prevalent during the post-imperial period. We divided the corpus into three sections in order to examine the various manifestations of Englishness. While in the first section the direct impact of the loss of empire on the English mind is clearly evident, in the second section we proceeded to analyse how Larkin’s nostalgia operates through his representation of the English habits and pursuits of English customs and conventions. The poems depicting the English landscape are the results of Larkin’s strong desire for English countryside. The pristine beauty of the countryside is strongly lodged in his mind and it acts as a refuge and succour. But it is also a fact that the countryside is fast changing as a result of growing industrialism and this Larkin disapproves with an emphatic sense of irony and skepticism. In Section II, we have discussed some such poems, particularly the ‘advertisement’ poems. In Section III, the withdrawal symptom is discussed in terms that are more psychological. The loss of power and authority, which had been so much prominent during the imperial days, had been quite apparent in the late 1940s and the two or three decades that followed it. Much of the sense of loss has been internalized by Larkin characters as a result of which psychological ‘aberrations’ in his characters range from sheer feeling of loneliness and alienation to the obsession with an overriding sense of darkness and death. Such insularity is symptomatic of the depression that was prevalent in the post-imperial period. In a sense, therefore, this chapter on Philip Larkin makes a critical assessment of Larkin’s selected poems with the focus on his response to the post-imperial space.
Notes

1. The English class-consciousness is also traceable in Larkin's poem "Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album" where the persona passes a disparaging remark about the 'chaps' seen around the lady: "Not least through these disquieting chaps who loll/At ease about your earlier days:/Not quite your class ..." (CP 71; emphasis added). In his 1979 interview with the Observer, Larkin told Miriam Gross, the interviewer:

... You see nobody had anything in those days, in the war.

Everybody wore the same utility clothes. There was one kind of jacket, one kind of trousers; no cars; one bottle of wine a term. The distinctions between different classes of undergraduates were really pruned back (Required 49).

In Larkin's poem "The Large Cool Store", we also get a glimpse of the class-consciousness of contemporary England. At the same time the poem presents the consumerist ethics of the 1960s. The poem shows how 'cheap clothes' (in a large department store) are meant for factory shift workers ('Timed for factory, yard and site') or daily labourers, 'Who leave at dawn low terraced houses.' The 'Knitwear', 'Summer Casuals', 'Hose' etc. only look like their haute couture equivalents, but in reality they are cheaply made, mass
produced and thereby inferior in quality. In fact, Larkin cherished a "gleeful horror at lower-class bad taste" (Pollitt 251). Moreover, these synthetic, 'Machine-embroidered', 'thin', throwaway products are not made to last (the material is 'Bri-Nylon', not silk), so that there will always be a need to buy more. This need to keep buying is further augmented by the fact that these clothes will rapidly go out of fashion. This is how consumerism is at work in the commercial landscape of 1960s England.

2. It may be mentioned here that Larkin's "Going, Going", deemed to be a representative poem in respect of post-war English pollution, served as a preface to "How Do You Want to Live," a Government report on the environment, published by HMSO in 1973.

3. Featherstone's book analyses some popular forms to show the role they have played in England's transformation from an imperial power to a 'postcolonial' country. He has devoted full chapters to popular forms and performances like Festivals (47-65), Journeys (66-83) and Sport (121-139), besides dealing with others like songs, dances, and even elocution. This book is a significant contribution to the debates about Englishness from a new perspective.

4. Even in India the cricketing stars in those days were 'Rajas', 'Maharajas', or 'Nababs' (e.g. Maharaja Ranjit Singhji, the Nabab of Patoudi and so on). The famous cricket-writer Neville Cardus was all praise for Maharaj Ranjit Singh and his royal background.

5. Larkin wrote the poem ("The Explosion") in 1970 and only after four years, in 1974, the English miners led by Arthur Scargill overthrew Edward Heath's
Conservative government (Corcoran 95).

6. The Greek word 'eidos' means "visible form, a subjective presence in the mind, a timeless form or concept" (Blackburn 177). According to Plato, poetry imitates a real object, which is a copy of 'eidos.' Aristotle contended that poetry imitates 'eidos' itself. According to Plato art is a copy of copy, twice removed from reality i.e. 'eidos', therefore false. Aristotle argued that art or poetry is not copy at all because imitation implies recreation in a different medium.

7. Published in 1861-2, Mayhew's book is actually a record of his investigations into the life and work of the poor and underprivileged of the Victorian London. According to this record, an innocent girl was drugged heavily before being raped, so that she did not regain her consciousness till the next morning. When she discovered that she had been violated, she got horrified and, for some days remained in a state of utter despair, crying like a child, and wishing either to be killed or to be sent back to her aunt.
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