CHAPTER - IV

VOICES

Bakhtin’s pronounced reservation that poetry cannot arguably be dialogic is not conclusive. “Bakhtin”, as David Lodge has argued, “never claimed that verse as a medium was necessarily monologic. One of his favourite sources of examples of dialogic discourse was Pushkin’s verse novel Eugene Onegin.” True, the novel, in the considered opinion of Bakhtin, “reigns supreme”. He, however, thinks at the same time that “almost all the remaining genres are to a greater or lesser extent “novelized”: drama (for example Ibsen, Hauptman, the whole of Naturalist drama), epic poetry (for example, Childe Harold and especially Byron’s Don Juan), even lyric poetry (as an extreme example, Heine’s lyrical verse).” Larkin’s poetry, as suggested in the previous chapter in the study, may be interpreted dialogically. His poetry may be considered as a site where double and multiple voices interact and clash inconclusively subverting the authority of a single voice of the narrator or speaker or poetic persona. Human life, as presented in many of Larkin’s poems, has consequently achieved a kind of objectivity, which may be termed as “irreducible multi-centeredness” or “polyphony.”

Larkin’s poems may be defined as a space where the conflicting voices coexist. The same mode may be discerned in Larkin’s other writings such as his letters and novels. In a letter addressed to J. B. Sutton in 1940 Larkin articulates: “A poem is written because the poet gets a sudden vision”. “That is why a poet never thinks of his reader. Why should he? The reader doesn’t come into the poem at all.” But in “An
Interview with the Observer” (1979) Larkin contradicts what he has said earlier. He is of the view that poetry is an affair of “compulsive contact”. The oscillation between the opposites in Larkin’s novels Jill (1946) and A Girl in Winter (1947) sharpens the sense of uncertainty in terms of views on life and makes representation of human “voices,” which are not invariably “reduced into, or suppressed by, a single authoritative voice”. Katherine Lind, the heroine in A Girl in Winter, makes her adolescent trip to England as she has predominantly been interested in finding in her pen-friend Robin Fennel the image of an ideal friend with whom she dreams to develop a true relation. But, contrary to her fervent expectation, Robin keeps emotional distance which generates in her “the absurd feeling that the most important person, her real friend had not yet appeared”. True, Katherine who is a girl of finer sensibility “cannot overlook the gulf between her ideal vision of him and his indifference to her”; yet she continues to adore Robin emotionally with the hope that her ideal will be translated into reality. Robin’s sister Jane tries to dispel Katherine’s infatuation with Robin; but the girl from the foreign land at this stage shows no strong sign of departure from her ideal which she has constructed delicately in imagination:

“Well, I suppose I thought he would be…” Katherine searched for the English that would approximately express her feelings. “Rather ordinary.”

“And so you think he isn’t ordinary?” Amusement was bubbling again not far off. “Why not?” She thought it better to be firm at this point, and said:

“Because I have never met anyone like him before. I can’t understand him”.
“Robin is ordinary, down to the last button”.\textsuperscript{9}

What is of utmost importance to pronounce, as arguably observed by Andrew Swarbrick, is that “Every impulse in Larkin was met and matched by its opposites”. The “fundamental collision in Larkin” in terms of voices determines “the nature of his work”.\textsuperscript{10}

A number of Larkin’s poems attest to the fact that the impact of death on life can by no means be ignored. “Twentieth century British poet Philip Larkin,” William Kerrigan observes, “demonstrated an artistic fascination with death throughout his career and especially, in the last poem he wrote, ‘Aubade’.”\textsuperscript{11} That the speakers or the narrators or the poetic personae in Larkin’s poems are obsessed with the destructive passage of time or death is obvious in the impressive early poems like “This is the first thing” (1943-4 \textit{TNS}): “This is the first thing / I have understood: / Time is the echo of an axe / Within a wood”. The keyword in this short poem is “axe” which categorically and powerfully and, above all, without any illusion connotes that death is inevitably the prime reality in life. The same idea is elaborated in the poem “Next, Please”, (1951 \textit{XX, TLD}). The metaphor “Sparkling armada of promises,” which is a wonderful blend of history and imagination, is a pointer to the fact, as perceived by the voice of the poetic persona, that time stands as a stumbling block between the assurances in life and their fruitions:

Watching from a bluff the tiny, clear
Sparkling armada of promises draw near.
How slow they are! And how much time they waste,
Refusing to make haste!

\textit{(CP, 52)}
This articulation is a preparation for bringing to surface symbolically the bleakness 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 image of the ship which is “frankly intimidating”\(^\text{12}\) is suggestive of a state in life without any generative fire. In other words, the apprehension of formidable death transforms life into the grave of nothingness. Beleaguered by almost nihilistic attitude to life the speaker of “Dockery and Son” (1963) in The Whitsun Weddings surrenders to the fear of death accepting the failures and ennui of life:

\[
\text{Life is first boredom, then fear}
\]
\[
\text{Whether or not we use it, it goes,}
\]
\[
\text{And leaves what something hidden from us chose,}
\]
\[
\text{And age, and then the only end of age.}
\]

\[ (CP, 153) \]

The voice coming out of the poetic persona in “Aubade” (1977), a poem published in Times Literary Supplement, unambiguously defines the horrors of death, which religion can by no means remove from human mind. The speaker who is haunted by “the dread of dying” realizes ruthlessly and inconsolably the menace of death negating the positive significance of life:

\[
\text{And realisation of it rages out}
\]
\[
\text{In furnace-fear when we are caught without}
\]
\[
\text{People or drink. Courage no good:}
\]
It means not scaring others. Being brave

Lets no one off the grave.

Death is no different whined at than withstood.

(CP, 209)

The impression that strikes out of the discussion of these poems may be that the speakers who are different persons speak not in many voices but in “single” voice demonstrating almost the same idea of death. Larkin in a letter to Patsy Strang in 1954 articulates his disillusioned view on death: “The passage of time, and the approach and arrival of death, still seems to me the most unforgettable thing about our existence.”

The concept of death as conceived by the speakers in a number of Larkin’s poems is arguably not conclusive, as there are other poems where the complete bleakness of death is countered accepting the inevitability of the extinction of the physical existence. The poetic persona in “Toads Revisited” (1962), a poem in The Whitsun Weddings feels unequivocally that the acceptance of toad of work and responsibility can make a man endure the dreariness of life and, consequently, can prepare him to face the unavoidable: “Give me your arm, old toad; / Help me down Cemetery Road”.

Andrew Motion is justified in his comment on the attitude to work as revealed in Larkin’s poems: “For all its unavoidable tedium, work helps to combat the thought of impending death.” Another way of fighting the terror of death as suggested by the speaker in “The Building” (1972), a poem of High Windows, is the use of medical service in the modern hospitals. The poetic persona in “The Building” is disillusioned, and hence, pragmatic in his attitude to the service rendered by the medical
establishments to the ailing and especially to the dying people. He unambiguously feels that the hospitals cannot perform miracle by resisting death "everlastingly", but what they can definitely achieve by using the excellent medical science and technology is to infuse into the patients hope for comfort at least temporarily in the face of impending death. The medical establishments can admittedly delay the arrival of death and, consequently, become the effective agents in inspiring the "congregations" of the dying patients to face death patiently and boldly in "suitable circumstances":

All know they are going to die.
Not yet, perhaps not here, but in the end,
And somewhere like this. This is what it means,
This clean-sliced cliff, a struggle to transcend
The thought of dying,

(CP, 192-193)

The speakers in "Toads Revisited" and "The Building" are not overpowered by the bleakness of death; nor they glorify death in terms of religious or spiritual and romantic connotations; instead, they accept the grave reality and explore the means of facing it calmly and heroically as far as possible. Thus, Larkin's poems are not monologic accepting the dictatorship of a single voice; they are dialogic accommodating liberally multiple voices. The voice of bleakness on death in some poems is contradicted by the voice of heroic endurance in other poems on the same subject. His poems are not dangerously circumscribed in scope of interpretation by the narrowness of a single voice; instead, they are generously broadened by voices which come in clash with each other to strike indecisiveness for the better and required understanding of the various issues related to life.
Relationships in the personal context constitute another domain of importance in Larkin's poems where the matter is treated by the poetic personae dialogically. It is obvious that the emphasis in such poems is conferred not on a single voice but on double or multiple voices to achieve an "irreducible" comprehensiveness on the issues like love and marriage which principally construct the components for human bondage. The unhappy married life of his parents, Sydeny and Eva, has considerably shaped Larkin's extremely personal, almost idiosyncratic view on marriage: "Certainly the marriage left me with two convictions: that human beings should not live together; and that children should be taken from their parents at an early age".\textsuperscript{15}

In "Reasons for Attendance" (1953 \textit{TLD}) the speaker, apparently an elderly artist, usually maintaining isolation from social gathering, stops outside a dance-hall where the young couples dance to the tune of sexual excitement. True, the speaker through the lighted glass of the dance hall is drawn attracted to "The wonderful feel of girls"; but he is not convinced of their happiness as mere physical closeness cannot ensure ideally happy relationship:

But then, why be in there? Sex, yes, but what
Is sex? surely, to think the lion's share
Of happiness is found by couples – sheer
Inaccuracy, as far as I'm concerned.

\textit{(CP, 80)}

"Dry-Point" (1950 \textit{XX} – as "Etching", \textit{TLD}), "Larkin's most purely symbolist poem",\textsuperscript{16} articulates that carnal intensity, an "Endlessly time-honoured irritant",
stands frustratingly as an obstacle to ideal relationship between a man and a woman. "Male sexuality", Steve Clark argues, "becomes a simultaneous expressions of aggression and helplessness, summarised by Larkin with magnificent judgemental explicitness: 'Bestial, intent, real'."\textsuperscript{17} The poetic persona of "Dry-Point", the second poem of "Two Portraits of Sex," defines the horrific consequences of the excess of the sexual desire of man in terms of symbols:

But what sad scapes we cannot turn from then:
What ashen hills! what salted, shrunken lakes!
How leaden the ring looks,
Birmingham magic all discredited,

\textit{(CP, 37)}

Birmingham magic, as Andrew Motion explains, "refers to the fact that particularly cheap and tawdry kind of wedding ring was produced in Birmingham."\textsuperscript{18} Birmingham magic is in reality suggestive of fact that the prospect of "marriage of true minds" is not realisable. The ideal in relationship remains unattained as it can never achieve a balance between sensual aggression and purity of love:

And how remote that bare and sunscrubbed room,
Intensely far, that padlocked cube of light
We neither define nor prove,
Where you, we dream, obtain no right of entry.

\textit{(CP, 37)}

The mere sexual attraction minus any finer emotional involvement, or more precisely speaking, minimal fidelity is bound to be proved disastrous, as embodied in "Love Again", a poem (1979), published in \textit{Collected Poems}. The poem registers the
pungent feelings of the bitterly frustrated man whose woman has been taken away from him by the rival man for sexual enjoyment: “Love again: wanking at ten past three / (Surely he’s taken her home by now?).” He burns horribly within as he can clearly apprehend that “someone else feeling her breasts and cunt.” “Love” as Janice Rosseen has interpreted in the context of the poem, “is clearly an illness, a sickness ‘like dysentery’, and unable to confer pleasure.”19 This very dichotomy between the ideal and the real, which affects the true relationship, is bleakly brought to the surface in “Self’s the Man” (1958 TWW). The poem shows how the couple trapped by the drudgery of daily routines are doomed in their conjugal life. This is illustrated by giving some examples from the married life of Arnold:

He married a woman to stop her getting away
Now she’s there all day,

And the money he gets for wasting his life on work
She takes as her perk
To pay for the kiddies’ clobber and the drier
And the electric fire,

And when he finishes supper
Planning to have a read at the evening paper
It’s Put a screw in this wall –
He has no time at all,

(CP, 117)

The concept of marriage as defined by the poetic persona may be “seen entirely in the context of sexual drives, and it offers only another variation on the perennial theme of
frustration”. All these poems enact the insoluble dilemma, the unceasing swing between love and lust, in a word, the poet’s wavering.

Another poem “Talking in Bed”(1960) from the same anthology, The Whitsun Weddings, pinpoints the futility of the relationship of a couple, which should have been fair and frank especially when they are in bed. The irony that pervades the entire poem is that the “two people”, who have supposedly been united with the understanding of sharing honestly each other’s joy and sorrow, in reality neither know each other nor show any interest in the matter. Therefore, when “Talking in bed ought to be easiest”, the lovers, who fail to achieve unity and harmony as expected in any ideal relationship, are unable to communicate to each other. The voice emerging out of the speaker in the poem expresses its surprise at such a miserable state of human relationship:

Nothing shows why
At this unique distance from isolation

It becomes still more difficult to find
Words at once true and kind,
Or not untrue and not unkind.

(CP, 129)

Andrew Swarbrick observes: “The poem’s final line suggests our predisposition for falsehood and selfishness. It is our nature to be solitary, deceived and deceiving, then our relationships are doomed to failure”.
The poetic persona in “Dockery and Son” (1963 *TWW*) adds a new dimension to the concept of relationships when he challenges the very “efficacy of relationships and kinship”\(^22\) in life. He finds no basic difference between Dockery, married and added to by a son, and himself, a lonely bachelor. True, both Dockery and the speaker have shaped the courses of life by their own choices; but their choices, the speaker realizes, are remotely governed by some force which leaves them only with the choice of surrendering first to the boredom of life, and ultimately to the bleakness of age or death. There can be no difference between Dockery, the family man, and the speaker, a bachelor, wife and child, who are traditionally supposed to construct the nucleus of a family suffusing a man with joy and happiness for enabling him to encounter any sort of trouble, will not give Dockery in reality any extraordinary emotional energy to combat the dreariness of life and the fear of death:

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)

The hiatus between the ideal and the real in love as perceived by the Larkinesque persona in “Wild Oats” (1962 *TWW*) serves to focus on the predicament in relationships. Steve Clark thinks that “Wild Oats” comes closer to “Dry-Point” as “it offers a narrative of disillusion, clinging to an unattainable ideal, with the recurrence of certain key images such as ‘spark’, ‘magic’.”\(^23\) “A bosomy English rose /And her friend in specs” are for the speaker centres of sexual attractions which may prompt him to go for a relationship in the social context. The “bosomy English rose” evokes
in the speaker the very image of an ideally perfect beauty sparking off in him “The whole shooting-match” of sexual longing. But the speaker decides to court the ordinary girl “in specs” with the pragmatic understanding that the ideal remains invariably unattainable in the world of banalities. What then follows between the speaker and the “friend” of the “bosomy English rose” is tiresomely mechanical process of courtship:

And in seven years after that
Wrote over four hundred letters,
Gave a ten-guinea ring
I got back in the end,

((CP, 143))

The speaker, however, happens to meet his ideal beauty twice; but “She was trying / Both times (so I thought) not to laugh.” The act of her remaining cold to the speaker is suggestive of the cruel fact that ideal cannot be translated into the world of gross reality. The courtship with the less attractive girl, showing the signs of being hardened into mechanical habits, consequently reaches the state of detachment both physically and emotionally between the two and culminates in separation with the accusation that the speaker-lover “was too selfish, withdrawn, / And easily bored to love.”

Larkin’s novel Jill (1946) and A Girl in Winter (1947) stress the realization of the protagonists that love which is an ideal condemns them to bitter failure. The frustrating as well as violent experience makes Kemp reach the conclusion that “love died, whether fulfilled or unfulfilled.” In A Girl in Winter Katherine, the young heroine, despite her unexpectedly unpleasant memories of her boyfriend Robin during her visit to England, remains emotionally attached to him as she has constructed in
imagination the image of an ideal friend in him. Her dream of ideal relationship based on mutual love and trust gets shattered when the drunken Robin prompted not by any feeling of love for her, but burnt by the intention of sleeping with her, comes at last to visit her slipping away from the army training camp. Katherine, now disillusioned, admits: “His manner was so unlike her recollections that he was still nearly a chance acquaintance to her”.25 Her detachment from the concept of ideal relationship, which she has so far harboured in dream, is now complete and, so, her physical contact with Robin, now fully a stranger to her, fails to produce in her any violently repulsive reaction:

She did not mind. Her spirits were rising higher. He could not touch her. It would be no more than doing him an unimportant kindness, that would be overtaken by oblivion in a few days. 26

The novel like other poems by Larkin is a pointer to the grim reality that choice cannot mould the relationship as desired by man and woman. Robin is the choice for Katherine, but he proves to be a misfit for her as an ideal partner.

“Love Songs in Age” (1957 TWW) is a poem where a widow mournfully realizes the failure of love in marriage. The widow, while discovering the old song-books of love, is suddenly engulfed by surge of emotion. She grows nostalgic and walks down the memory lane, recollecting how enthusiastically and optimistically she got absorbed in singing the love-lyrics in her days of youth. But at the same time she is forced to realize that the sentimentally romantic promises as encapsulated in the love songs have turned false upon her. “The glare of that much-mentioned brilliance,
love”, “promising to solve, and satisfy / And set unchangeably in order,” miserably fails in her married life and continues to do the same in her present state of widowhood. Larkin in “An Interview with Paris Review” (1982) has offered his personal view on marriage that he has “remained single by choice, and shouldn’t have liked anything else, but of course most people do get married, and divorced too”.27

The voices of the speakers in some of Larkin’s poems undeniably discover the same reality that failures in love and marriage shape the human relationships. This concept of failure is offset in other poems where the voices discern some positive values in love and marriage. Larkin’s poems can often be gracefully lyrical and richly unimaginative going beyond the “coercive force of sexual ideology”28 to impress upon the necessity of evolving an ideal and inspirational concept of love which is unquestionably required in the world where sex and money bring division in human relationships. The poem “For Sidney Bechet” (1954 TWW), written as a tribute to the jazz saxophonist, is a tenderly romantic celebration of love:

On me your voice falls as they say love should,
Like an enormous yes.

(CP, 83)

“Broadcast” (1961 TWW) shows no signs of sexual violence; on the contrary, there runs in the poem a lyrical flow of deeply-felt feelings signifying a mellow dedication to love: “I think of your face among all those faces, / Beautiful and devout.” This is the image of love the speaker emotionally as well as respectfully builds up in imagination, while “listening to a broadcast on the radio of a concert his loved one is attending.”29 True, this tenderness of love has not been kept unqualified as
speaker grows distracted by the music on the radio and fails to concentrate on the image of his beloved fully. Moreover, the “distinct individuality” of the loved one is consequently put at the distance producing the sense of being impersonal: “By being distant overpower my mind.” The speaker’s sense of shame or guilt towards the end of the poem, however, compensates amply for his loss of concentration on the image of regenerative love. “Broadcast”, though complex in the movement of thoughts, may be cited as a poem where tenderness of love is achieved. The consummation of sexual drive in marriage is emotionally explored in “Wedding-Wind” (1946 _ITGOL_, _XX_, _TLD_) where a young Victorian girl communicates her unprecedented joy and satisfaction generated by the bondage of marriage. This dramatic monologue delicately and complexly as well serves to register the romantically felt sensation of the girl saturated with the freedom of sexual joy achieved through marriage. Geoffrey Harvey has discerned in the poem the construction of a “Lawrentian Universe”. Lawrence has most powerfully presented such marital ecstasy in the Tom-Lydia and the Will-Anna couples in _The Rainbow_ and the Birkin-Ursula couple in _Women in Love_. The newly married woman strongly feels the unignorable presence of the high wind blowing constantly all her wedding day and attempts to correlate it the following morning with her newly-gained adult experience. Her happiness, she perceives, is shared by the wind. The wind embodies her joy of almost mystical nature “like a thread / Carrying beads”. The other images in the poem drawn from the world of nature such as “cattle” and “all-generous waters” are unique in the sense that they are emotionally exploited to give the required impression that nature “makes her love not personal but a universal principle of life”. What is of grater significance in this context is that the girl in her exalted state of happiness has not lost her feelings for the
animals like horses troubled by the wind, banging the stable door. She is sad: “That any man or beast that night should lack / The happiness I had”. The way she shows her sympathy to the animals attests to the truth that her newly-achieved love in marriage has turned towards universality in dimension. Moreover, the question framed by her seeking “some confirmation of the validity and permanence of her joy” in the context of the decaying world is suggestive of her high degree of maturity, conferring upon her the status of a sensibly married woman:

Can even death dry up

These new delighted lakes, conclude

Our kneeling as cattle by all-generous waters?

(CP, 11)

“The Whitsun Weddings” (1958 TWW), the title poem of Larkin’s third anthology of poems, serves to consolidate further the constructive attitude to marriage, which is registered by the bachelor-speaker in course of a train journey on a Whit Saturday. One should enter a caveat at this point, for the constructive or positive view of marriage is at moments undermined by an ironic, cynical contrary voice. The notion of marriage is constructed and deconstructed. The various wedding parties, large in number and colourfully lively in their activities, waiting at different stations on the way for boarding the train, have not received initially his critical attention. The speaker, however, feels gradually attracted to the human drama around him and turns critical, satiric or precisely speaking, ironic in his assessment of the wedding party. But as time passes, the speaker feels interested in the newly-wedded couples as they share the journey with him in the same compartment. With the sense of sharing he grows emotionally involved with the young men and women going to London for honeymoon and is overpowered by a sympathetically patronizing attitude towards
them. As the train gets closer to London, the destination, the speaker rapt in vision, forestalls, with the magnificent application of the fertility metaphor, the metamorphosis in life of the just-wedded couples towards a significant mission in the days to come. The process of procreation, which is a welcome ritual of marriage, the poetic persona feels, will ensure the creation of the new generation to people the world without interruption:

We slowed again,

And as the tightened brakes took hold, their swelled

A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower

Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.

(CP, 116)

“An Arundal Tomb” (1956 TWW) is believed to be a poem celebrating the triumph of conjugal love mainly because of its proverbial conclusion: “What will survive of us is love”. The poem brings to disclose the speaker’s or the visitor’s serious contemplation on an unnamed medieval couple of the Arundel family, a knight and his lady engraved “side by side” on a stony tomb. The figures of the couple represented as holding their hands spark off debate on the nature of their relationship in real life. The effigies putting on the posture of faithfulness cannot be accepted absolutely as a testimony to their reciprocal love and fidelity. The posture may be interpreted as “A sculptor’s sweet commissioned grace”. The love of the couple as suggested in stone is weighed paradoxically in terms of transience and permanence of nature and “the fleetness of time, as well as the assertion of continuing time.” 33 The speaker concludes the debate keeping in consideration the power of “faith and love” as an “ideal solution” to the problems particularly of the married life and generally of life as a whole:
The stone fidelity
They hardly meant has come to be
Their final blazon, and to prove
Our almost-instinct almost true,
What will survive of us is love.

(CP, 111)

True, paradoxically enough the solution that “What will survive of us is love” is heavily qualified by “almost true”; but the true power of love as a regenerative force against all the odds is not denied. In “Arundel Tomb” the subversive touches make the final equilibrium precariously shaky and fragile. Andrew Swerbrick is inimitably brilliant when he observes that “Arundel Tomb” “does at least seem nearer to truth than to falsehood.” 34

The narrators or the speakers or the poetic personae of Larkin’s poems are largely trapped in the “empirically observed world”; and consequently, the experiences they communicate are circumscribed to its attendant limitations of existence such as ugliness, bleakness, loneliness, sufferings and frustrations. Larkin has learned from Hardy the art of describing the reality of life in poetry. “Mr. Bleaney” (1955 TWW) typifies the bleakness and isolation of life as represented by Mr. Bleaney who has no desire within to go beyond the “hired box” of a room he occupies as a tenant so that he can avoid the ugliness of the drab routines of life. The “fusty bed”, “upright chair, sixty-watt bulb, no hook / Behind the door, no room for books or bags” confirm hopelessly Mr. Bleaney’s passive nature and consequently his fate. “Naturally the Foundation will Bear Your Expenses” (1961 TWW) which anticipates “Posterity”(1968 HW) exposes ironically the hypocrisy of a certain type of
"air-borne" academicians who can ignore academic honesty and social values for money and fame:

Hurrying to catch my comet

One dark November day,

Which soon would snatch me from it

To the sunshine of Bombay,

I pondered pages Barkley

Not three weeks since had heard,

Perceiving Chatto darkly

Through the mirror of the Third.

(CP, 134)

The first poem of the trilogy entitled "Livings" (1971) in *High Windows* "develops the persona" of a grain merchant carrying on the business of his father:

I deal with farmers, things like dips and feed

Every third month I took myself in at

The – Hotel in – ton for three days.

(CP, 186)

He is confined to the drudgery of rituals of routine such as:

One beer, and the 'the dinner', at which I read

The – shire Times from soup to stewed pears.

Births, deaths; for sale, Police court, Motor Spares.

Afterwards, whisky in the Smoke Room:

(CP, 186)
The man who is sick of his life as a small businessman wonders why he should continue it: “why / I think it’s worth while coming. Father’s dead: / He used to, but the business now is mine. / It’s time for change, in nineteen twenty-nine.” But the man who experiences the sea change in the socio-economic scenario caused by the post-War life “gives no convincing sign of escaping the life he was born into”. The man remains the prisoner of an unimaginative life devoid of any aspiration towards the achievement of something meaningfully finer in life. Even the glorious sunset fails to elevate his mind by exciting regenerative response couched in imagination; the poverty of his mind converts the beauty of nature into something shockingly mundane and dingy: “a big sky / Drains down the estuary like the bed / Of a gold river.” Andrew Motion has succinctly expressed the cultivated isolation of the grain merchant: “His loneliness induces a myopic boredom”.

The act of getting trapped by the down-to-earth activities and “myopic boredom” is offset or contradicted by the freedom of “transcendent imaginative fulfilment” or joy. This counterbalance may be defined as a nourishing release from the world threatened by boredom, disappointments and dinginess turning human existence into horribly meaningless as well as purposeless state. The concluding line of “Absences” (1952 TLD) celebrates in a symbolist mode the boundless joy generated by imagination. The poem records the naturalistic experience of a person viewing almost empirically the transformation of the sea within and above it caused by the tremendous roughness. “Rain patters on a sea that tilts and sighs, / Fast-running floors, collapsing into hollows, / Tower suddenly, spray-haired. Contrariwise, / A wave drops like a wall.” and so on. “Above the sea” the ships at distance also come
within the ambit of radical change in terms of their nature. The theme of transformation, however, reaches its climax in the final line standing isolated from the rest of the poem: “Such attics cleared of me! Such absences!” The conclusion, as Andrew Motion profoundly believes, represents “a joyous assertion of freedom” through the “most radical jump—from sea to attics and attics to absence itself.”39 The speaker by achieving a sudden release from his closely observed natural scene in “Absences” feels inspired by unbridled imagination and jumps into attics and from there dissolves into “absences” suggesting his complete departure from the mundane world into boundless joy. “Water” (1954 TWW) is another outstanding poem where the romantic imagination transforms commonly available water into a symbol of transcendental joy. The poetic persona right at the outset of the poem articulates his design of using water in a special context:

If I were called in
To construct a religion
I should make use of water.

(CP, 93)

He defines how water will serve the various functions of his newly-constructed religion. The speaker, however, feels bored by exposing the use of water to the constraints of religion. That is why he brilliantly exploits the metaphoric use of water to achieve liberation from the limitations of religion and the dreariness of existence:

And I should raise in the east
A glass of water
Where any-angled light
Would congregate endlessly.

(CP, 93)
Water by the magic touch of imagination gets transformed into the endless source of liberal and secular knowledge inviting mankind into the sunny domain of wisdom with the mission of inspiring endless quest for the unknown. "Water" exemplifies Larkin's secular use of Christian imagery. "Dublinseque" (1970 HW) is a magnificent creation of "imaginative gaze" which wonderfully converts the physical world of the everyday town of Dublin with its joyous rhythms, sad inevitabilities of life and the uninterrupted flow of time into the lyrical grandeur of revelation or epiphany. The occasion of the poem is a funeral which passes:

Down stucco sidestreets,
Where light is pewter
And afternoon mist
Brings lights on in shops
Above race-guides and rosaries,

(CP, 178)

The culture of "physical-spiritual reality" as embodied in the poem by way of telescoping the two contrasting images "race-guides and rosaries" makes preparation in imagination for the moments of epiphany. This telescoping of the contradictions may also be noticed in the funeral procession where "an air of great friendliness" is followed by "great sadness also". The revelation of epiphany, bringing closure to the procession of the mourners, who deeply feel the absence of their loved one "Kitty, or Katy", is heard not in the form of a grave declaration but in the lyrical grace of a song:

As they wend away
A voice is heard singing
Of Kitty, or Katy,
As if the name meant once
All love, all beauty.

(CP, 178)

Terry Whalen has discovered in the singing voice "a very Irish version of a Wordsworthian 'still, sad music of humanity', one which is as poignantly beautiful as it is also energetic".42 What is of striking significance as embodied in the concluding line is that "love" and "beauty" which "Ketty, or Katty" symbolizes exclusively are the required inspirational components that purify all the mundane drosses and sorrows and sufferings of life investing it with transcendental joy and vision. The poem accommodates both Hardy and Yeats in the structure of its reflection. In short, "Dublinseque" is undeniably Larkinseque.

Larkin's poems are, thus, constructed essentially not by a single voice, but by voices. True, the voices emerging out of the various speakers in a cluster of poems may appear like voice, not voices, as they sound identical on a particular topic like death or love or marriage. But they are strongly challenged by the cluster of opposing voices in other poems on the same subject. These basic contradictions suggesting the inconclusiveness of the views on the various issues of life as ventilated by the voices in Larkin's poems are governed by the principle of dialogicity and objectivity in a balanced way. The chapter that follows will serve to show how the concept of conflicting voices or "polyphony" necessarily and majestically operates in Larkin's poems, when they are judged separately or individually.
NOTES & REFERENCES


   Bakhtin, as Wayne C. Booth in page xx of his Introduction has clarified, insists that the artist's essential task is to achieve "a kind of objectivity" or "a universally desirable quality," which becomes a reality only when he can free his readers from "narrowly subjective views." By artist in this context Bakhtin obviously means the novelist.


5 Philip Larkin, "An Interview with the Observer," Required Writing (London: Faber, 1983) 56.


8 Andrew Motin, Philip Larkin (London: Methuen, 1982) 52.


11 William Kerrigan in his abstract of the article “Larkin and the Difficult Subject” in Essays in Criticism (Oct 1998 v.48 i.4 p. 291) has made this illuminating remark.


14 A. Motion, Philip Larkin, 68.

15 qtd. in A. Motion, Philip Larkin: A Writer’s Life, 15.

16 Ibid., 76.


18 A. Motion, Philip Larkin, 77.


20 Ibid., 148.


22 Ibid., 8.


26 Ibid., 243.

Larkin’s Interview with *Paris Review* was taken in 1982. Some years back in 1979 Larkin unfailingly had held the same view obviously in terms of his personal belief when he told Miriam Gross in an Interview with the *Observer*: “I don’t want to sound falsely naïve, but I often wonder why people get married. I think perhaps they dislike being alone more than I do” (*Required Writing*, 54).


29 A. Swarbrick, *The Whitsun Weddings and The Less Deceived by Philip Larkin*, 45.


38 A, Motion *Philip Larkin*, 78.


40 qtd. in S. K. Hassan, *Philip Larkin and his Contemporaries*, 106.

42 Ibid., 39.