CHAPTER II

SURVEY OF LARKIN CRITICISM

The North Ship, published by the Fortune Press in 1945, did not receive much critical response; and Larkin, prior to approving the republication of the anthology by Faber twenty-one years later in 1966, was outspokenly critical of the merits of the poems in it: "They are such complete rubbish, for the most part, that I am just twice as unwilling to have two editions in print as I am to have one."¹ The reissue of The North Ship, which appeared on 15 September, 1966, was reviewed "lightly but respectfully"² by John Carey in the New Statesman, Christopher Ricks in the Sunday Times, Edmund Blunden in the Daily Telegraph, and Elizabeth Jennings in the Spectator "as an interesting stage in the evolution of a poet they admired."³ In 1965 Larkin sent the Introduction of the reissue of The North Ship for perusal to Vernon Watkins, and said in a letter to him: "It is wonderful to look back to those days and see how you encouraged me. I think Yeats was a false fire as far as I was concerned, but he gave me great excitement at the time."⁴ The poems in The North Ship should not be taken up solely as products of "excitement" generated by the poet's compelling infatuation for Yeats; they "establish Larkin's major themes - time, frustrated love, unfulfilled desires and death - to which he is to return frequently in his later books."⁵ The only contemporary reviewer of The North Ship at its publication in 1945, however, appreciated Larkin with a note of caution. Larkin's inner vision, the reviewer articulated, "must be sought for with care." The review, as Motion stated,
appeared in *The Coventry Evening Telegraph* on 26 October, 1945. Motion quotes the reviewer:

'His recondite imagery is couched in phrases that make up in a kind of wistful hinted beauty what they lack in lucidity. Mr. Larkin’s readers must at present be confined to a small circle. Perhaps his work will gain wider appeal as his genius becomes more mature?' 6

The conjectural estimate of Larkin in terms of success in future made by the reviewer in *The Coventry Evening Telegraph* came true; when *The Less Deceived* was published by the Marvell Press in 1955. The publications of *The Whitsun Weddings* in 1964 and *High Windows* in 1974, both by Faber, heightened Larkin’s enjoyment of critical acclaim and impressive popularity. One of the reasons for Larkin’s popularity was his fidelity to experience, which constituted one of the major principles the members of the Movement in the fifties approved in their literary programme:

I write poems to preserve things I have seen / thought / felt (if I may so indicate a composite and complex experience) both for myself and for other, though I feel that my prime responsibility is to the experience itself, which I am trying to keep from oblivion for its own sake. Why I should do this I have no idea, but I think the impulse to preserve lies at the bottom of all art. 7
Larkin could feel the pulse of his era where “international” England of Yeats, Eliot and Pound dwindled into “national” England after the Second World War. The loss of empire, severe economic hardship and crisis in traditional social values urged him to be pragmatic in his attitude to life. Larkin, while remembering his Oxford days in the Introduction to the 1964 reissue of *Jill*, admitted: “At an age when self-importance would have been normal, events cut us ruthlessly down to size.” The vision of the three modernists, Yeats, Eliot and Pound, embracing the culture of the countries beyond the British Islands, could not influence Larkin. Larkin got himself rooted in the social and cultural realities of the post-War England, and registered his poetic voice in fears, anxieties, shortcomings and problems of the disillusioned English people. His poetry articulated the altered ideals and experiences of his society, generating the required sense of importance of being vigilant and realistic in the given situation. The lyricism of his poetry sharpened by ironic humour was in tune with “a new physical and mental landscape” of England. His clear-sighted realism, decency, rationality, self-restraint, tolerance, respect for work and “colloquial tenor,” as encapsulated in his poems, were construed as typical values admired by the English people. He was supposed to epitomize “an essential and enduring Englishness” and regarded as “the man next door.” Douglas Dunn memorably summed up:

Philip Larkin’s writing is very English indeed, and his coarseness is English too, characteristically so. What he has done is write with courage of his whole mind, giving us a slice of English sensibility, its crude laughter, its mock philistinism, as well as the tenderness, sadness, compassion and perception of
beauty, of which, perhaps, only an English poet at his best is ever entirely capable.

With the publication of *The Less Deceived* Larkin was recognized as a poet of national importance. It was adjudged one of the ‘outstanding books’ in the year 1955 by *The Times*, and drew the enthusiastic attention from the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *New Statesman*. Donald Davie, Anne Ridler, Roy Fuller and other reviewers “produced praising pieces;” and majority of them, “concentrated, as Larkin hoped they would, on the book’s emotional impact and its sophisticated witty language.” Larkin, however, was pleased “enormously,” when T. S. Eliot “made a benign comment” on *The Less Deceived*: “Yes – he often makes words do what he wants. Certainly worth encouraging.” Larkin was appreciated for “his credentials as an accessible anti-modernist” in the series “For Young Poets,” published in the *Times Educational Supplement* on 13 June, 1956. The almost critical consensus, which started gaining momentum with the publication of *The Less Deceived*, was that with Larkin English poetry was brought back to the ‘middlebrow public’.

Serious controversies, on the merits of Larkin’s poems, however, were triggered off since 1957; charges of insularity and bleakness were levelled against him. Positive appreciations of his “clear-sighted realism” came in clash with the accusations of “gentility” and “parochialism” or “provincialism”. Charles Tomlinson, “a poet right outside the Movement and opposed to it,” writing an article headed “The Middlebrow Muse” in *Essays and Criticism*, had criticised Larkin’s pessimism – his “tenderly nursed sense of defeat,” which was reaffirmed later by Eric Homberger,
when he called Larkin “the saddest heart in the post-war supermarket.” Tomlinson voiced his points of objections distinctly in 1959 in an article which he admitted he “composed polemically from a standpoint that felt itself challenged by the publication, in 1955, of a number of verse manifestos, from the group known as the Movement.” Larkin’s poems are, Tomlinson observed, “often beautifully phrased and yet where the possibilities of fulfilment seem almost wilfully short-circuited. Not that one is asking for facile optimism – defeat can also come to seem facile. Larkin’s narrowness suits the English perfectly.”

The charges Tomlinson framed against the Movement writers were that they retreated into a “self-congratulatory parochialism” or ‘provincialism’ and ignored the European “tradition.” Larkin reacted sharply to the attack by Tomlinson in a letter to Robert Conquest on May 7, 1957: “Oh dear, what a gunning from Chas Tomlinson! Why can’t these chaps emulate Yeats and say simply ‘It may be a way, but it is not my way?’ And why [does] he assume I haven’t read Tradition and the & c?”

Al Alvarez in 1962, compiling The New Poetry for Penguin, became, according to Motion in his Philip Larkin: A Writer’s Life, the first critic to articulate the popular “anti-Larkin” sentiments in the Introduction to his book. He accused the poets since Eliot of lacking “seriousness,” and “attacked” Larkin, “charging him with ‘gentility,’ neo-Georgian pastoralism, and a failure to deal with the violent extremes of contemporary life.” Larkin in a letter, and this time again, to Robert Conquest on 20 February, 1962, refused “contemptuously” to pay any importance to the charge brought by Alvarez: “Al’s intro- is just a reprint from some crappy paper, quoting a
whole ninth poem of mine he hasn’t paid for ... Says I’m badly dressed, too, which I take a bit hard”. 22

John Press in his book *Rule and Energy*, published in 1963, employed the concepts of “provincialism” and of “tradition” not as “terms of abuse or of praise.” His intention was not to pass “judgement” on the “merits” of “provincial” and “traditional” poets, but “to indicate the distinctive cast of their minds and the nature of their aesthetic principles.” 23 Press assessed Larkin as provincial, whereas he called Tomlinson traditional. Press unquestionably had Larkin in mind, while he defined a “provincial” poet who, according to him, is basically interested in his own “cultural society” and almost indifferent to other countries. “Thus he cares very little for the poetry and the civilisation of other ages and other countries, nor does he feel the need to justify his own practice by reference to the past. He values above all else sincerity of feeling, fidelity to the truth as he conceives it.” 24 Robert conquest almost echoed Press: “This insularity is one of the strengths of Larkin’s poetry, signifying a resolve to base himself firmly upon the experience, the language, the culture which have formed him in which he is ‘rooted’.” 25

A sensitive appreciation of the whole body of Larkin’s poetry proves that he is not a champion of provincialism in a disparaging sense; the truth is that his poems are not isolated from the European literary tradition; nor are they circumscribed narrowly to empirical tradition. Andrew Motion unequivocally made his point of view clear in his book *Philip Larkin* in 1982: “On many occasions he was made to seem (and often made himself seem) a pillar of the provincial establishment, prissily genteel and
creatively timid – a view that obscured his real achievement.” C. B. Cox and A. E. Dyson were brilliantly as well as sincerely right, when they praised Larkin’s poem “At Grass” in their book Modern Poetry: Studies in Practical Criticism, published in 1963, for investing the situation in the poem “with a richness of emotional effects,” using imagery “in a manner very different from that of Yeats and Eliot”; though in 1962 Alvarez complained that the fault of this poem was “gentility.” Donald Davie in his book Thomas Hardy and British Poetry (1973) stood in defence of Larkin’s poetry and insisted:

And this is just as true if we think of landscapes and weather metaphorically; we recognize in Larkin’s poems the seasons of present-day England, but we recognize also the seasons of an English soul – the moods he expresses are our moods too, though we may deal with them differently. On the literal level at any rate, no one denies that what Larkin says is true; that the England in his poems is the England we have inhabited.

But Davie too, as Andrew Motion implied in Philip Larkin, could not do justice fully, when he described Larkin as “a poet of altogether narrower range” and focussed it as a virtue and put him firmly rooted in Thomas Hardy, asking: “Are not Hardy and his successors right in severely curtailing for themselves the liberties that other poets continued to take? Does not the example of the Hardyesque poets make some of the other [modernists] poets look childishly irresponsible?” Larkin, in the judiciously
delivered opinion of Motion, is brilliantly a modernist, “welding together two previously antagonistic traditions” – ‘modernism’ and ‘English line’.

The charge that Larkin is basically a poet of negative attitudes in life in a “world without generative fire” is misleading. “The impulse for producing a poem,” Larkin had sincerely believed, “is never negative; the most negative poem in the world is a very positive thing to have done.” His allegiance to the Hardyesque clear-sighted realism made him study life, keeping illusions at isolation; and thus, he could inimitably speak out in an Interview with the Observer in 1979 that it is “unhappiness that provokes a poem”; “after all most people are unhappy” and “Deprivation is for” him “what daffodils were for Wordsworth.” True, Larkin’s disgust at urbanization and industrialization, cheapstores and foul-smelling highways (“Here”), anger at the hypocrisy of the academicians (“Naturally the Foundation will Bear Your Expenses”), agony at the strange communicative isolation of the couple in the moments of intimacy, free from all sorts of physical obstacles (“Talking in Bed”) and resentment for the indiscriminate felling of trees as well as the removal of old beauty (“Going, Going”) are pointers, obviously on surface level, to the grim realities. But they have the profound implications, advocating the conservation of the traditionally cherished moral, social and aesthetic values that make life meaningfully positive. Larkin, like his predecessors Wordsworth, Hardy and Betjeman, as illustrated by Geoffrey Harvey in 1986 in his book The Romantic Tradition in Modern English Poetry, was apprehensive of “the moral, social and aesthetic breakdown that politically manipulated commercialism and bureaucratically organised collectivism alike threaten.” David Timms in his book Philip Larkin
(1973) defended emphatically Larkin’s positive attitude to suffering. Suffering Larkin thought, is “the intensely maturing experience”\textsuperscript{34} as well as a “continual imaginative celebration”;\textsuperscript{35} required absolutely for spiritual growth, which is possible to attain by man only when he can recognize and experience sufferings. Larkin’s poems, George Hartley believed in his essay “Nothing to be Said”, celebrate the moments of freedom to transcend the “limitations of human experience”\textsuperscript{36} The moments of transcendent beauty, as majestically explained by Motion in Philip Larkin, is most affirmative in Larkin’s work.

The focus on the liberating or transcendent beauty and visionary dimension in Larkin draw the reader’s attention to the truth that his poems are ‘much deeper’ and ‘more complex’ than his detractors thought of. J. R. Watson in 1975 broke fresh ground, when he contributed an article “The Other Larkin” to Critical Quarterly. Stephen Regan has rightly observed: “He found in the poetry moments of ‘epiphany’ and ‘deeply felt longings for sacred time and sacred space’.”\textsuperscript{37} What is important in this connection is that despite his professed rejection of modernism Larkin adopted symbolist strategy that gives his poems richness of depth beyond empirical foundation; and this new dimension to Larkin’s critique has been persuasively discussed by his admirers-cum-critics like Barbara Everett, Seamus Heaney and Andrew Motion.

Barbara Everett’s illuminating essay “Philip Larkin: After Symbolism,” that appeared in Essays in Criticism in 1980, offers deeper insight in Larkin’s symbolist device nurtured by the French Symbolists like Gautier, Mallarmé and Baudelaire. The
obscurity as noticed by a number of reviewers in some of the poems of Larkin’s final volume *High Windows* (1974) is not, according to Everett, from “a lack of plainness of language or from the esoteric concepts. It is rather from some failure, for this or that given reader, in the *availability* of the poem, some break-down in specific relationship with the reader, such as Larkin himself has spoken of as characteristic of modernism.” Everett argues that the charge of obscurity can arguably be answered, when these reviewers can realize that *High Windows* highlights “more explicitly a side of Larkin’s work” – “a poetic impersonality.” This “impersonality” can be understood only when it is considered in relation to “modernism”, which paradoxically enough Larkin himself had sharply censured. The most influential claim by Everett rests on the argument that Larkin’s poems bring into prominence his exploitation of modernist and symbolist aesthetics. Larkin’s use of symbolism is forcefully ironic and playful, and he accepts and rejects simultaneously the themes and techniques of the French symbolists. His “Sympathy in White Major” dissonantly parodies Théophile Gautier’s “Symphonie en blanc majeur.” The windows image in “High Windows”, Everett firmly believes, is Mallarméan: “The radiant colour and the ‘nothingness’ are too Mallarméan to be only coincidentally similar…his poetry is full of *De l’ éternal azur la sereine ironie* (the calm irony of the endless blue).”39 Larkin’s “High Windows” is considered to be written in an “ironic response” to Mallarmés “Les Fenêtres.” Stephen Regan has summed up that “Everett can claim very plausibly that Larkin is not simply anti-modernist but in many respects post-modernist.”40

Andrew Motion’s *Philip Larkin* (1982), one of the major influential books on Larkin, was greeted by Larkin himself. Motion had sent duly the typescript of the
book, which he went through, and was very pleased for "the high level on which the survey is conducted." Motion's concern in Philip Larkin is to show that Larkin, in spite of his declared lack of interest in "foreign" poetry, was intensely interested in the works of the French Symbolists. He himself did not hide his feelings about his poem "Absences": "I fancy it sounds like a different, better poet than myself. The last line sounds like a slightly-unconvincing translation from a French Symbolist. I wish I could write like this more often." Motion has also made it convincingly emphatic that Larkin, despite his pronounced rejection of the symbolist Yeats in favour of the empirical Hardy, could not come all through his career entirely out of the potential impact of his mentor of early days. Larkin's poems, as Andrew Motion considers, expose typically "a debate between hope and hopelessness, between fulfilment and disappointment." Moreover, his poems momentarily break the disappointed empirical discourse to celebrate the romantic idealism through "imagination", which "frequently relies on symbolist strategy for its effects." The symbolist device liberates Larkin from the "familiar, circumscribed world," allowing him to "experience and convey a sense of transcendence." Motion illustrates amply how Larkin could effectively exploit the "dislocations, illogicalities and imaginative excitement of symbolism" in his poems to break with disappointments of drab realities towards a romantically idealized "unfenced existence," "attainable only in imagination, not in fact." Larkin in a letter to Anthony Thwaite acknowledged Motion's focus on his employment of symbolist strategy and said that Motion's "line on the poems is rather école d' Everett." Barbara Everett, however, differs from Motion, as she suggests that Larkin's use of symbolist device is not necessarily associated with transcendental idealism.
Seamus Heaney’s essay “The Main of Light,” appearing in Larkin at Sixty (1982), edited by Anthony Thwaite, was intended as a tribute of a poet to another poet. Heaney admits honestly that the first appeal of Larkin’s poetry lies in the fact that he is a poet of intelligence forcing us to recognize the conditions of contemporary life with its predicaments. But at the same time he discovers in Larkin a “repining for a more crystalline reality” and perceives: “When that repining finds expression something opens and moments occur which deserve to be called visionary.” This visionary or transcendental dimension of Larkin’s poetry, Heaney establishes unambiguously, is associated majestically with the ‘experimental modernism’ of James Joyce and W.B Yeats. The symbolist strategy in Larkin finds its expression brilliantly through the images of “stream of light” in the poems like “Solar” and “Deceptions.” The minute light images in “Water,” “High Windows,” “An Arundel Tomb,” “The Old Fools” and other poems spring from the romantically joyous and deepest strata of Larkin’s poetic self generating “another kind of mood that pervades his work and which could be called elysian.” The luminous images, which are natural corollary of Larkin’s symbolist strategy, are the most affirmative in the sense that they offer “one kind of brightness, the brightness of belief in liberation and amelioration.” Heaney thus makes departure from the older critical consensus prevailing since 1950s, and concludes by making illuminating observation that Larkin “does not completely settle for that well-known bargain offer, ‘a poetry of lowered sights and patiently diminished expectations’.”
Terry Whalen in his essay "Philip Larkin’s Imagist Bias" (1981), published in Critical Quarterly, illustrates elaborately the imagist bias in Larkin. "An overlooked impulse in Larkin’s poetry," Whalen asserts, "is its Imagist bias; Larkin is a poet of observation *par excellence*..." 52 Larkin’s rejection of the “modernists” is arguably a healthy reaction to their “pedantic and cryptic gestures;” and his poetry and his view of poetry are not alien to “an Imagist kind of wisdom.” 53 The empirical alertness of mind in Larkin makes him extraordinarily responsive to the visually observable physical world and translate admirably into art the “Imagists’ ability” 54 for accurate presentation of the “external world.” Larkin at the same time strikes delicately in his poems a note of epiphany. Larkin, as suggested by Whalen, writes in the tradition of “incidental wonder” which springs from the “physical world” in “moments of rare perception.” Crisp observations with ironic suggestion and moments of epiphany constitute Larkin’s imagistic bias. Larkin, the poet of doubt and wonder, thus, strikes a kind of balance coming from the “basically dualistic view of existence” which highlights the poet’s profundity of knowledge – “a great deal about heaven and a great deal about hell.” Whalen is convincingly emphatic, when he claims strongly: “That he could absorb the healthier aspects of Modernism in the from of an Imagist bias, without being absorbed by Modernism’s more cryptic and solipsistic gestures, is a feat which has too long gone unnoticed”. 55

Another article by Barbara Everett “Larkin’s Edens” pleased Larkin; he expressed sincerely his gratitude in a letter to Everett on 30 July 1981: “Many thanks for the *Edens* article ... I’m glad you pay attention to ‘Show Saturday’ and ‘To the Sea’: no one else does. Above all I’m grateful for the idea that there is something
poetic about my poems: I think there..." This "something poetic," Everett expounds, Larkin achieves in going beyond "literalism" evoked through accuracy of detail in social contexts, and then "creating the most potent contemporary images of Eden." The literalism of the apprehension of death in modern hospital associated with the poem "The Building" reaches out "further and deeper than any mere hospital building: so much so that we might say rather that the poem itself is 'built' or architectonicked according to the strength of that experience." "All Larkin's poems," Everett argues steadily, "however violent or ugly in detail (as some of the later ones are) pursue a faithfulness that will make them in some sense 'like a heaven': but this heaven is essentially a fallen Eden, a dwindling Paradise glimpsed always from the outside and through a vision of limits".

John Bayley in his essay "Larkin and the Romantic Tradition" (1984) accepts the view of Harold Bloom, as enunciated in his book *The Anxiety of Influence*, that the poets absorb the past, and locates Larkin in the romantic tradition in which Keats with his romantic imagination, "at its most devout and inspired" may be considered as a prime example of absorbing the past that included Shakespeare, Spencer and others. The poet since Keats who is temperamentally most attuned to this ethos, according to Bayley, is Larkin, who "by temperament is straightforward romantic of the older school - the school that includes both Housman and Keats". Bayley expounds Larkin's art of absorption with reference to the French Symbolists as well as the direct heirs of romanticism - Baudelaire, Gautier and Mallarmé and English poets such as Donne, Yeats and above all Keats. Larkin in his first novel *Jill* "retells the story of Lamia, and *A Girl in Winter* originally called *The Kingdom of Winter*, is
organised with the same beauty as "The Eve of St Agnes" and ends with the same
dying fall. An early poem, 'Wedding-Wind' uses the 'elfin' storm from fairyland'
which blew for Keats's lovers, and subtly combines monologue with romantic
narrative."61 "Essential Beauty," Bayley thinks, is Larkin's full-length version of
Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn".

Geoffrey Harvey in his book The Romantic Tradition in Modern English
Poetry (1986) illustrates how Wordsworth has revitalized a tradition of equipoise in
English poetry recognizing two central concerns – the fundamental quest for visionary
transcendence and the pressing demand for stern realism, and the inseparable bondage
between the poet, the reader and experience. Harvey also very deftly states that
Hardy, Betjeman and Larkin have honestly contributed to the enrichment of the strain
within romanticism and on the development of modern English poetry. "Philip
Larkin," Harvey observes, "in spite of his clear-sighted view of the limitations and
savage ironies of modern existence, yearns for and sometimes gains moments of
epiphany, of liberation from the preoccupations of the self, which are nevertheless
placed within the context of a neutral and strictly hopeless universe."62

David Lodge's essay, "Philip Larkin: The Metonymic Muse," first published
in his The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, and the Typology of Modern
Literature (1977), aims at interpreting Larkin's poetry from the structuralist point of
view. Lodge follows the Czeck structuralist Roman Jakobson in making distinction
between metaphor, which "involves the substitution of elements from different
contexts" and metonymy, which "involves the combination of elements within the
same context." Romantic poetry, Lodge claims, is essentially metaphoric, while the "anti-modernist, readerly and realistic" poetry belongs on the "metonymic side" of bipolar scheme. The formal character of Larkin's poetry, as Lodge suggests, can best be defined as 'metonymic.' Larkin, the key figure in the Movement, remarkable for its empirical bias, makes effective use of metonymy in his poems with the skill of a novelist or a documentary writer, who is keenly eager for demonstration of realistic detail in his work. The excellent application of metonymic strategy by Larkin is noticed in "At Grass," which evokes "the past glories of race horses:" "Silks at the start: against the sky / Numbers and parasols: outside, / Squadrons of empty cars, and heat, / And littered grass" (CP, 29). Larkin, however, Lodge agrees, has not avoided metaphors fully; "To call Larkin a metonymic poet does not imply that he uses no metaphors - of course he does. Some of his poems are based on extended analogies - 'Next, Please', 'No Road' and 'Toads,' for instance." The introduction of unexpectedly sudden metaphoric mode gives Larkin's poems the majesty of transcendence. Lodge, thus, anticipates Heaney and Motion who recognize the moments of transcendence in Larkin's work from symbolist point of view.

Guido Latré, who is among other remarkable critics yielding significant structuralist insight into Larkin's poems, follows the arguments of David Lodge and develops them into a full-length structuralist approach in Locking Earth to Sky (1985): Latré at the same time recognizes the symbolic perception of Larkin's work as expounded by Andrew Motion and Seamus Heaney, and adds a third 'symbolic' "mode to Lodge's metonymic and metaphoric types" and "looks closely at the structure of syntax in the poems and also shows how the structuralist anthropology of
Claude Lévi-Strauss might be applied to the underlying myths and archetypes in many of Larkin’s poems.”65 What is of much greater significance in this context is that the structuralist critics, though essentially concerned with the language of Larkin’s poems, consider poetic language as the study of ‘rhetoric’ and ‘social discourse’.

True, the diversity in critical reception to Larkin’s work is achieved more effectively and illuminatingly with his poems being interpreted in terms of modern literary theories. Graham Holderness’ “Reading ‘Deceptions’ – A Dramatic Conversation,” first published in Critical Survey (1:2, 1989), is an imaginary debate in a mock seminar style showing how poems of Larkin such as “Deceptions” may be responsive to cerebral discussion by critics embracing variety of theoretical persuasions. Cleanth, a formalist, is concerned principally with the “dramatisation of mood and atmosphere” and imagery befitting of “saturating surrounding physical objects”66 in which the drugged girl was ruined. Raymond, a marxist, contradicts Cleanth’s “serene detachment from reality,” and asserts that the true value of the poem is rooted in “history” and “unpalatable social realities”.67 The arguments of Kate on the sufferings of a woman at the hands of a man are feminist in approach. The story of her suffering is told first by a man Henry Mayhew, and “then by another male writer, Philip Larkin.” Kate strongly demands a feminist rereading of the poem as the “female experience” in the poem has been “so densely encoded into varying registers of masculine discourse.”68 Colin, a post-structuralist, agrees with ‘certain details of analysis’ made by Cleanth, Raymond and Kate; but the poem, as Colin suggests, is “about” something. “What the poem is about is languages”.69
The chapter "Difficulties with Girls" from Janice Rossen’s *Philip Larkin: His Life’s Work* (1989) has been reprinted as an essay of strikingly feminist interest in *Philip Larkin*, edited by Stephen Regan. Janice Rossen explains the factors leading to Larkin’s misogyny – his “fury against women.” One of the reasons, she claims, is the distance that the speakers in Larkin’s poems often maintain towards women: “One aspect of the inaccessibility of desirable women – and its frustrating effect on men – is in their artistic representation.” Larkin’s wild anger, as Rossen unwaveringly believes, springs from his inner conflict raging between “sexual fulfilment and artistic creativity” which are “mutually exclusive entities”. Rossen, who articulates that Larkin’s heroes exaggerate “a masculine, egotistical view” exulting in “The women [they] clubbed with sex,” however, finds something redeeming in Larkin. The “largely negative and hostile view of women,” in Rossen’s considered opinion, “is countered by the lyrical, tender side of his poetry, which sees women as inspirational and pure” in some of his poems like “Maiden Name” and “Broadcast.”

Steve Clark, after the publication of Andrew Motion’s biography of Philip Larkin, revised his essay “‘Get out As Early As You Can’: Larkin’s Sexual Politics,” first published in *Philip Larkin 1922–1985: a Tribute* (1988) ed. George Hartley, and included it as a chapter in his book *Sordid Images: The Poetry of Masculine Desire* (1994). True, Clark draws considerably on the insights generated by the heat of feminist and psychoanalytical debates of the recent times; but he declines to accept Larkin’s poems as merely misogynist texts. Clark feels heavily interested in discerning the paradoxes the speakers in Larkin’s poems face between their sexual identity and sexual desire. This perception, Clark thinks, can be linked to what he
would venture to call the epistemological Larkin, whose unsparring meditation on ageing, death, 'endless extinction' aspires to a kind of agnostic sainthood.”

Larkin's poems revealing the suppressed elements of male erotic discourse advocate the preservation of male autonomy. The seemingly cruel as well as selfish option of the male speakers in Larkin’s poems in their cynical aloofness from sexual pleasure and process of procreation is, Clark insists, positively of importance in conformity with socially conditioned contemporary sexual “norms”.

"Into the Heart of Englishness," an essay by Tom Paulin, first published in the Times Literary Supplement (July, 1990) as a review of Janice Rossen’s Philip Larkin: His Life’s Work, is refreshingly original; the historical and postcolonial approaches of the essayist combine together his estimation of Larkin’s poetic form and political insight into the work of the poet as well. The elegiac lyricism in Larkin’s poems, Paulin elucidates, is rooted in the post-War British cultural history. The “real theme” of Larkin’s poems, he has not missed to articulate at same time, is “national decline” caused by the British “colonies dropping out of the empire” like the “autumn leaves” falling “in ones and twos.” The poems like “At Grass” and “The March Past,” evoking nostalgia define Larkin’s deep distaste for England’s “modern social democracy,” which is largely responsible for the decline of the empire and of the social and cultural prestige of the nation as well. Blake Morrison, studying the history of the Movement writers in his pioneering book The Movement: English Poetry and Fiction of the 1950s (1980), could anticipate Paulin’s mode of critiquing Larkin’s poems.
James Booth and Andrew Swarbrick, however, are opposed to the historical and political readings of Larkin's poetry; they have rather, on the other hand, turned towards new formalism or aesthetic criticism in interpreting Larkin's work. James Booth in his essay "Philip Larkin: Lyricism, Englishness and Postcoloniality", taken from Larkin with Poetry (1997) edited by Michael Baron, contradicts the concept that Larkin's "Englishness" is a "limiting factor," and rejects the suggestion of some critics to fit Larkin's work into certain ideological strategies: "He [Larkin] would have denied that his work embodied anything as ideological as imperialism, Toryism, patriarchy, Englishness."76 Larkin's themes as he defined them in a letter addressed to Patsy Strang in 1953 "are the universal commonplaces of lyric poetry."77 These are what Booth values most in Larkin's poetry; and he questions at the same time the validity of searching by some critics beneath Larkin's lyricism for a key to his nationalism. He defends Larkin strongly against the charges of misogyny and racism: "It is important to recognise however," Booth argues, "that the attitudes towards women which he [Larkin] expresses in both letters and poems is not predatory, but defensive. It would be a mistake to read his jokes about having the evening to himself rather than spending it with a woman as the arrogant misogyny of his generation and class. He is no more anti-woman than Walker is anti-men."78 Stephen Regan in his editorial Notes on Booth's essay observes: "The most surprising and unusual aspect of Booth's essay is its comparative study of Larkin's work and writings by Alice Walker and Salman Rushdie."79

Andrew Swarbrick's essay "Larkin's Identities" is a part of his stimulatingly critical study entitled Out of Reach: The Poetry of Philip Larkin (1995). Swarbrick's
essay is immensely valuable in sounding required warning to the readers to avoid any simple correlation between the biographical speculations and the work of the poet. Larkin’s poems may be interpreted in terms of Bakhtin’s dialogic theory; his poems strategically construct “many voices” and “selves”. Larkin’s poems, Swarbrick considers, exploit “a multiplicity of tonal registers which undermine authorial stability. In a simple sense Larkin’s poems, together and separately, are multivocal. Explicitly or implicitly, an ‘I’ addresses a ‘you’ and they thus take on the condition of speech acts.” 80 What is of utmost importance to note in this connection is that “every impulse” in Larkin is met and, matched by its “opposite.”

True, there are a large number of writings of considerable merit containing a diverse range of topics on Larkin; but it is not possible to discuss all of them here. Attention, however, to only a few of them may be directed to show how critical responses to Larkin, despite all the controversies involved in his life and art, continue to be numerically encouraging and enviable as well.

Roger Craik in his essay “Animals and Birds in Philip Larkin’s Poetry” (2002) is unusually fascinating in highlighting how Larkin’s feelings towards birds and animals like pigeons on roofs and hedgehog in the long grass find voice in a “small but highly accomplished body of poems” that includes notably “At grass,” “Wires,” “Myxomatosis,” “Midwinter Waking,” “Pigeons” and “The Mower.” The poem “Pigeons” is unique in the sense that it reveals the speaker’s acutely sensitive looking out for the pigeons at different times, especially at night “which few would do” and the birds huddling together are perceived “anonymous yet individual.” It is, however, “on the pigeons’ apparent suffering,” Craik feels, “that Larkin dwells: the dismal rain,
which does not threaten them, has given way to an icy winter cold (hinted at by the moon’s intensity) that does.” The poems “Wires” and “Myxomatosis” in their different ways picture animals, cattle and rabbit, enclosed, not free. “Perhaps there passed between Larkin and animals,” Craik thinks, the “living vibration” that Jessie Chambers records as passing between D. H. Lawrence and “wild things”. Craik adds emphatically: “Larkin’s poems about animals are – whatever other resonances they may have for the reader – principally poems about animals and display a craft feeling and empathy unequalled since D. H. Lawrence.”

Salem K. Hassan in his highly illuminating essay “Women in Philip Larkin”(1996) discerns “a close relationship between the development of Larkin’s style and his attitude towards women.” Young Larkin’s concept of total purity and innocence of love in its absolute freedom from all notions of sexuality finds voice in most of the love poems of The North Ship. These poems are rooted deeply in the world of fantasy, much like Yeats’ early poems. They are constructed by the “abstractness of the words.” The theme of love asserting “neither the girl’s identity nor the reality of the experience,” as suggested in all the poems of Larkin’s first collection of poems The North Ship, excepting the poem “XXXII”, is echoed marvellously in his first novel Jill. The young Larkin, Hassan articulates, is influenced by the poetry of early Yeats for female characterization, showing the “mixtures of vague emotions and passionate yearnings.” Larkin’s struggle, as initiated in his early poems, to identify women and express his emotion to them, bears fruit in “Waiting for breakfast, while she brushed her hair”, the final poem of The North Ship. The poem, voicing the mature individuality of the poet, signals “a clear departure, both in
technique and presentation of women, from the earlier poems. Here the concreteness of the verse gives legitimacy of a real girl in a real place." Larkin turns more subtle in terms of unsentimental approach to women in his second novel, *A Girl in Winter*. The absurdity of life as reflected in Larkin's purely personal view of life has its impact on his "relationship with women." The poem, "Talking in Bed," uses deceptively simple but evocative language, and strikes "Kafkaesque obsession with loneliness." The essence of the poem lies at the ironic level; it is the speaker's difficulty of communication in the most desired moments of intimacy.

William Kerrigan in "Larkin and the Difficult Subject" (1998) takes issue with the idea that Larkin throughout his career had revealed his obsession with death. Kerrigan makes his point of view arguably impressive with special reference to "Aubade." He explores death's multiplying meanings in works of poets and philosophers since classical time, and specifies Larkin's reflection on it. The short poem, "This is the first thing" (*The North Ship*) attests to Larkin's acute awareness of the devastating effect of time: "This is the first thing / I have understood: / Time is the echo of an axe / Within a wood." The poem "Aubade," in the judiciously considered view of Kerrigan, "has been thought the final triumph of a mordant author who was from the beginning obsessed in the manner of a medieval or Renaissance poet with the blunt theme of death and decay". Kerrigan further thinks that Larkin's morbid sensibility in its richness bears comparison with that of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. But the point of distinction that he perceives is that Hamlet by the end of the play "has found a sort of guidance in the Christian God. Horatio wishes him a choral journey to the
'rest' of heaven: peace at last seems compatible with afterlife."87 But Larkin declined to accept such a view on death.

Raphael Ingelbien in his essay, "From Hardy to Yeats? Larkin's Poetry of Ageing" (2003), offers a persuasive account of the rival influences of Hardy and Yeats on Larkin from a specific point of view. Ingelbien observes: "A closer look at Larkin, Hardy and Yeats as poets of ageing ... reveals unsuspected complexities in Larkin's relation to Hardy, and also clarifies his continued engagement with Yeats."88 Larkin was only in the "middle-twenties," when Hardy unquestionably started shaping some of Larkin's poems about ageing, which turned to be one of the central themes of the young poet. Age, for Larkin, was more a "state of mind than a biological reality," and so the allegiance to Hardy made him assume the persona of an "older, sadder and wiser." But gradually, as Larkin was "overtaken by the reality of age," he "turned away from Hardy, and began again to draw on the poet he had earlier repudiated, rediscovering a version of Yeats for which his youthful self had found no use."89 Ingelbien elucidates how Larkin, who had officially discarded symbolist-modernist Yeats in favour of Hardy for his reliance on personal experience, paradoxically enough came back to Yeats long after his official rejection and felt increasingly the presence of Yeats in his work chiefly "as a poet of personal experience, and of ageing in particular."90

A survey of Larkin criticism since 1957 leaves scope for further study in new directions. The proposed study attempts to show Larkin's poetry as a site where double and multiple voices meet and clash. I intend to incorporate in my analytical
strategy the insights derived from the dialogic approach. The voices in his poetry are either at once, or, in turn, romantic and cynical, sentimental and ironic, involved and detached. Kingsley Amis made him feel “irony was just as important as affection.” The total effect of their interactions is a semantic indeterminacy which resists closure. Larkin uses different tones of voices in the same poem. A discerning reader can not miss the tongue-in-cheek mode of wry humour in, say, the last lines of three remarkable poems: “Nothing, like something, happens anywhere” (“I Remember, I Remember”), “Books are a load of crap” (“A Study of Reading Habits”) and “What will survive of us is love” (“An Arundel Tomb”). In this last poem the tomb’s evidence is not about the marriage but about conventions (‘hand-in-hand’), evidence – neither confirms nor denies – it sits between – neither half of the balance is allowed to dominate – the equilibrium between faith in love and the threat to it is struck.

Poems like “Church Going” and “The Whitsun Weddings” represent Larkin’s true mode: the juxtaposition of sentiment and scepticism, intensity and irony, solemnity and satire. Larkin’s romanticism is tempered by realism and, more often than not, the romantic core is subverted or undercut by ironic strokes. Irony is a mode of discourse conveying a latent meaning different from the ostensible one. It covers understatement, naivety, hyperbole, pun, paradox and in fact, any ‘contrast’ or ambiguity – to cover anything other than the plain literal statement. Larkin in his poems extended the territory of poetry in his generous, wry and emotionally complex treatment. For example, Larkin seems to suggest in “Water” that he has constructed a new religion and a new symbol. But water has already many connections with Christianity. The irony that his ‘new’ idea is not in fact ‘new’ underlies the whole
poem. In "Annus Mirabilis" again the apparent celebration of sexual liberation in 'the swinging sixties' is subverted by scepticism.
NOTES & REFERENCES


Larkin at Sixty is a commemorative volume. It was published by Faber and Faber, when Philip Larkin turned sixty.


3 Ibid., 359.


6 qtd. in A. Motion, Philip Larkin: A Writer’s Life, 132.


Larkin’s brief statement of his view on poetry was first published in Poets of 1950s (Tokyo: Kenkyusha Press, 1955) edited by D. J. Enright. It is reprinted in Required Writing.


11 A. Motion, Philip Larkin: A Writer’s Life, 269.

12 A. Thwaite, ed., Selected Letters of Philip Larkin, 255.
Montieth recalled in his writing that he passed *The Less Deceived* on to T. S. Eliot who “made a benign comment” on Larkin’s use of words in his anthology.


18 *Ibid*; 457.


29 A. Motion, *Philip Larkin*, 20.

31 qtd. in A. Motion, *Philip Larkin*, 59.

32 Philip Larkin, “An Interview with the Observer,” *Required Writing*, 47.


34 David Timms, *Philip Larkin* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1973) 58

35 *Ibid.*, 59


38 Barbara Everett, “Philip Larkin: After Symbolism,” *Essays in Criticism* vol. XX X no.3 (July, 1980): 229


41 A. Thwaite, ed., *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin*, 656.

42 qtd. in A. Motion, *Philip Larkin*, 74.

43 A. Motion, *Philip Larkin*, 72.


53 Ibid., 29.

54 Ibid., 45.

55 Ibid., 45.


57 Barbara Everett, "Larkin's Edens," English (Spring 1982): 41

58 Ibid., 44.

59 Ibid., 45-46


61 Ibid., 64.


64 Ibid., 76

65 S. Regan, Introduction, Philip Larkin, ed. S. Regan, 10-11


67 Ibid., 86.

68 Ibid., 89.

69 Ibid., 91.


71 Ibid., 157

72 Ibid., 139
73 Steve Clark, "‘Get Out As Early As you Can’: Larkin’s Sexual Politics," Philip Larkin, ed. S. Regan, 95.
75 Ibid., 164.
77 Ibid., 187
78 Ibid., 198.
82 Ibid., 396.
83 Ibid., 397.
85 Ibid., 144.
87 Ibid., 291.
89 Ibid., 264.
90 Ibid., 275.
91 qtd. in A. Motion, Philip Larkin: A Writer’s Life, 143.