CHAPTER - V

HIGH WINDOWS: OBJECTIFYING NOSTALGIA
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This is the last volume of Philip Larkin with two very popular poems like “To The Sea” and “Show Saturday.” High Windows is repetitive in themes, therefore share much similar strain of thought with The Less Deceived, The North Ship and The Whitsun Weddings. The common note of thought is undoubtedly, love and death - but presented this time with a mature experience. In his interview with Robert Philips, he says –

I think a poet should be judged by what he does with his subjects, not by what his subjects are. Otherwise you’re getting near the totalitarian attitude of wanting poems about steel production figures rather than. Poetry isn’t a kind of Paint-spray used to cover selected objects with. A good poem about failure is a success.

*(Philip Larkin and His Contemporaries: an air of authenticity, 94)*

Clive James says that High Windows

“... words are being reinforced or deeper rather than repeated”

*(“Somewhere Becoming Rain”. Newyorker, 17 July 1989, 19)*
This collection also raised the debate as to whether ‘thrift’, ‘handwork’ and reverence are the important social and moral virtues central to Larkin’s poetry.

The titular poem “High Windows” marks a wide gap between him and the young. A meditation on this gulf prevails there from first to fourth stanzas. The argument is much balanced and not lopsided as the temptation lurks far and wide. There is a marked appreciative sway from the poet’s attitude about envying them to the supposition that he might have been envied in his youth:

I wonder if
Anyone looked at me, forty years back,
And thought, That’ll be the life;
No God any more, or sweating in the dark
About hell and that, or having to hide
What you think of the priest. He
And his lot will all go down the long slide
Like free bloody birds ...

(\textit{CP, 165})

\textit{High Windows} compares the state of the poet sickened by existence yet continuing with life-giving suffering despairing and then rejeneveted in soul by a re-purified idealism. This old man dying in a dreary hospital with his face pressed to the window longing for the blue sky outwards.
In thought, the poem reminds a reader of Mallarme’s high windows (Les Fenêtres) though Mallarme is classic in treatment and Larkin metaphysical or ecclesiastical, too much extent. Barbara Everett in her essay Philip Larkin states:

... High Windows is ‘Les Fenêtres’ Englished and brought up to date. But that entails the violent random flatness with which the new poem modishly opens with a savage but hardly explicit irony –

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.

High Windows points to a new generation of writers who were sometimes, referred to as “The Movement Poets”. They were addressed to as “Angry Young Man” of which the key figures were Kingsley Amis, Philip Larkin, John Wain, D.J. Enright Thom Gunn, Donald Davie, Alan Sillitoe John Osborne, Arnold Wesker and those who share there traits to some extent were William Cooper, C.P. Snow and his wife Pamela Hansford Johnson, Colin McInnes, Barstow, Thomas Hinde, David Storey and, in precept if not in practice, Iris Murdoch. The most representative of this group were kingsley Amis and Philip Larkin who were also close friends at
Oxford. The two were born in modern era but were antimodernist in viewpoint, Larkin admitted –

I ... have no belief in ‘tradition’ or common myth –kitty or casual allusions in poems to other poems or poets ... separating the man who suffers from the man who creates is all right – we separate the petrol from the engine – but the dependence of the second on the first is complete.

*(Philip Larkin, 60)*


As a poet he upholds:

... the task of the writer is to communicate as accurately as he can in words experience which is initially non-verbal. Poetry is born of the tension between what (the poet) non-verbally feels and what he can be got over in common word-usage to someone who hasn’t had his experience or education or travel –grant. ... Form holds little interest for me. Content is everything.

*(Philip Larkin, 62)*

Here the binaries can be traced in the content in his generation’s envoy of the sexual freedom of the young in today’s permissive society to the supposed envy of the older people of his own apparent freedom in his youth, from superstitious religious fear.
And immediately,

........

The sun comprehending glass,

And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows

Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.

(CP, 165)

Nevertheless this is one of Larkin’s most famous pieces, and is usually taken as one, the most representative. This starts out looking like a poem about sex, and becomes a poem about religion. Steve Clark points the binaries as –

This is a poem about origins – ‘fucked up’ takes on the sense of knocked up fortuitously concocted, a view of conception as mechanical, quantitative, and essentially meaningless continued in ‘fill’ and ‘add’ – but also about revenge about injuries inflicted and compulsively repeated. ‘Mum’ and ‘dad’ are subsumed into, an anonymous ‘they’, the family scene, the collective destiny; there’s an additional obscenity of molestation in the phrasing ‘they fuck you up your... they were fucked up in their ...”


To sum up, High Windows is Larkin’s effort to explore the paradoxes of involvement in desire more subtly and poignantly.
Taking the spread of binaries further, ‘The Trees’ provides a fine accuracy with which Larkin tackles the concept of death and rebirth of life through the language of paradox: A thorough reading of the poem shows that.

The spread of binaries encompasses’ “The Tree” also. Once again Larkin tackles the concept of death and rebirth of life –

The trees are coming into leaf
Like something almost being said;
The recent buds relax and spread,
Their greenness is a Kind of grief...

(CP, 166)

The poet expresses his surprise at the hidden power of nature which manifests itself in putting on leaves. This rebirth is clubbed with grief caused by the thought of death – for life grows the seeds of its renewal and death too –

Yet still the unresting castles thresh
In full-grown thickness every May.
Last year is dead, they seem to say,
Begin afresh, afresh, afresh. (CP, 166)

Hence life is tricky and elusive. Though trees seem to renew themselves every year, they age as we do. Their age may be calculated by the number of rings they have inside their trunks which increases yearly by one –
Their yearly trick of looking new.

Is written down in rings of grain.

Further the tree imagery has been powerfully dramatised, for the rings of grains bring to mind the cycle of nature and marriage keeps the continuity of natural and human life respectively. Stress on change in life is evoked through the concept of renewal indicated by the final line, 'Begin afresh, afresh, afresh'. Two purposes are served through it – first it depicts the chirping of birds in spring whereas the second hints at the seasonal cycle – the circle of the poem comes to a close.

"Solar" is next nature poem for it evokes the image of the sun. The poet paints his wonder at the utility of the Sun image – it establishes the affinity between nature and the poet and it creates a sense of wonder through thanks giving –

Suspended lion face
Spilling at the centre
Of an unfurnished sky
How still you, stand
And how unaided
Single stalkless flower
You pour unrecompensed...
The awed beholder in the guise of the poet find the sun, paradoxically both ‘a lion face’ and ‘a stalkless flower’. Salem K. Hassan illustrates this analogy as –

This assuage operates on two levels: first it gives the sun an attribute for its generosity which is like the flower, always giving without the attention of receiving: ‘unrecompensed’ and secondly it shows the power of the sun: ‘lion face’ and its splendour is compared with the fragility of our existence and our needs which ‘climb and return like angels’

*(Philip Larkin and His Contemporaries: an air of authenticity by Salem K. Hassan)*

The sound structure of the ‘Solar’ is equally impressive. The repetitive use of the fricative ‘S’ is crucial to the creation of its final effect. Alliteration through consonance like spilling, still stand, and single and stalkless prevails. The title is equally significant for it evokes the image of solar system and establishes semantic relativity. The pace of the lines is equally important in meaning. For Eg. lives from “Suspended lion face” to “Single stalkless flower” flow with almost equal pace but it noticeably slows down with the last lines – “You pour unrecompensed”. Apart from this the stanza has a whisper note through the use of fricatives. Variety in phoneme is another trait to be appreciated which affirms the innovative style of Larkin. For Eg. /s/ is brought forth to generate music by using the letter ‘C’ “like spilling at the centre”
Phoneme and letter juxtaposed this way is a fun to an alert reader. This enhances the beauty of the epithet "Unfurnished" clubbed to head noun "sky". The sun introduced as 'lion face' added more lustre by imagery like "stalkless flower". The Scandinavian 'K' is thereby retained to add more vividness to the imagery of the sun. Hence 'Solar' became solely suitable key image. The prodigality of the seen is ascertained.

'The Building' is a fresh and different theme in the web of death-life poems. Here man and his made world is put side by side with the conscious exclusion of vegetative world. The building is a pathetic world of the sick, the groaning mouths and the hopeless old waiting for the lurking and the hovering death.

Women, men;
Old, young, crude facets of the only coin
This place accepts. All know the are going to die.
Not yet, perhaps not here, but in the end,
And some were like this. That is what it means,
This clean – sliced cliff; a struggle to transcend
The thoughts of dying, for unless its powers
Outbuild cathedrals nothing contravenes
The coming dark, though crowds each evening try

With wasteful, weak, propitiatory flowers.

Going to the hospital is here equalled to going to the church. Just as church betters quality of living, hospital helps to
transcend the idea of death. In terms of binaries the hospital is a symbol of birth or death, hope or despair, happiness and unhappiness. If the church stands for three stages of life – birth, marriage and death ‘hospital for only two-life and death’.

The poem is universal in appeal. The addition of the world is squeezed in a short line-

“women, men / old, young …”/ (192)

The equation of the hospital with the church evokes a feel of reverence held for the doctors and the medical staff.

The poem ends in the image of flowers – the décor of the grave. Flowers are also symbolic of life; the destructive power of life is juxtaposed with that of flowers. In short, flowers like hospitals, are too weak to contravene ‘The coming dark’.

‘To the Sea’ describes an afternoon at the seaside with family outings that remind the poet of his own childhood. It fuses the themes of experiencing the seesaw and recalling the past –

To step over the low wall that divides

Road from concrete walk above the shore

Brings sharply back something known long before-

The miniature gaiety of seasides.

‘To step’ immediately transports us to the poet’s past when he used to go to the sea. Climbing “the low wall” needs labour to transcend the different phases of time, leading to new experiences here, of recalling the past – “The miniature gaiety of
seasides”. It unfolds the slow passage of time making striking effects on man, and things in nature reminding us of Hardy’s ‘The Self – Unseeing’:

Here is the ancient floor
Footworn and hollowed and thin,
Here was the former door
Where the dead feet

Walked in ...

If “Ancient” evokes the dead past “footworn” and “hollowed” and “thin” evokes the qualitative nature of life through concrete images. The “former door” again evokes antiquity and “the dead feet” is a revocation of the image of his first wife Emma who died untimely.

Hardy evokes glamorous past but Larkin makes a descriptive catalogue of his familiarity. The details named by the poet as landscape of the sun, people and water set the mood of happiness and transience too. The image of the lost youth is evoked through “A white steamer stuck in the afternoon .../”. The white steamer has gone ... ‘Afternoon’ suggests the poets growing in age and also emphasizes the poet’s sharp pangs at having lost the best phase of his life. The mood of loss also fills him with a sense of strangeness being distant from youth –

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...

'Cloudless scene' is poet's ability to look into his past
with clarity of mind likewise "clear Water" of the sea paints the
vividness with which the poet recalls his past. Lost time evokes
death whereas water of the sea stands for eternity. "Cheap Cigars"
"Chocolate-Papers", 'tea-leaves', 'the rusting soup-tins' represent
the business of life in hours of fun and relaxation.

'Sad Steps' is another poem of nature. Once again
astronomical image is used – the moon is the central imagery with
the idea of the solar system reinforced. The moon image like the
sun reinforces the poet's loneliness and the flux of time.

Groping back to bed after a piss
I part thick curtains, and am startled by
The rapid clouds, the moon's cleanliness ...
One shivers slightly, looking up there.
The hardness and the brightness and the plain
Far-reaching singleness of that wide stare
Is a reminder of the strength and pain
Of being young; that it can't come again,
But is for others undiminished somewhere.
The quality of the cleanliness and brightness of the moon has been transmitted skillfully and with a delicate precision through the ‘moon clouds’ metaphor. Clouds, as is common to Larkin, is once again in motion. This time the movement of the clouds against the surface of the moon adds polish and brightness to it. The lone movement of the moon in the firmament adds to the poet’s loneliness. The movement of the moon is also a reminder of the life left behind. The quick passing of life into old age adds frustration to the poet. The loss of time and energy along with a sense of discontentment unregrettably makes the past make inroads into present. The word ‘startled’ in the first stanza shocks the poet upon the discovery of a terrifying reality that he did not make the best of his life and time. “Thick curtains” separate him from the past by the brilliance of youth and the sorrow upon knowing that it can never return to him. The effect of time on him is a more personal agony than a merely general feeling of life as growing older was something that intensely worried him.

The subject of old age is again dramatised in ‘The Old Fools’. In addition ‘The Old fools’ is one of his most disturbing poems:

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?

............................

Why aren't they screaming?

(C.P. 196)

Age is treated with an acute sense of immediacy and man's worries about the brevity of life is put into focus. The mode of address makes a harsh and brutal opening. The quick succession of interrogation reflects upon the poet's anger at the puzzle of ageing. His grief at the brevity and changeableness of life strengthens to suffering. Life sliding down to oblivion are a continuous and a repetitive image.

The use of second person pronoun 'you' makes the problem and suffering of ageing of general concern rather than specific:

At death, you break up: the bits that were you
Start speeding away from each other for ever
With no one to see. It's only oblivion, true;
We had it before, but then it was going to end,
And was all the time merging with a unique endeavour
To bring to bloom the million - petalled flower
Of being here ...

(C.P. 196)
This stanza clearly paints the oblivion ‘The old fools’ are sinking into with the advancing age. The shift of the time is named as ‘unique endeavour’ and the realm of forgetfulness is the land where blooms the million -petalled flower to imply ‘Life is slow dying’ at old age. The premonition of the approaching death is emphatically suggested and in this the poet sees his own looming death—

Perhaps being old is having lighted rooms

Inside your head and people in them, acting ...

(G. P. 196)

The conclusion of the poem, establishes Larkin stoical for he awaits what life has in store for him. ‘The Old Fools’ also portrays the emotional strength capable enough to celebrate the beauty of life despite its inevitable degeneration. The last two stanzas of the poem convey a sense of reverence to the ‘old’ who have attained a poised wisdom and is not perturbed like the poet at the mention of death. A sense of compassion for others is what the poet learns from the ‘old fools’ who hold a sense of ‘positivity’ even though ‘the large darkness’ is sure to add gloom to their lives. Life and death as binary once again makes the key idea of the poem with ‘age’ and ‘youth’ at two opposite poles.

‘The Card-Players’ is another poem that celebrates life with a spirit of exhilaration attainable through uninhibited living. The poem has three characters – Jan Van Hogspeuiw, Dirk Dogstoerd and old Prijck–playing cards in a comfortable inn. These vulgar named characters denote vomit, excrement and penis and are picture of animal activities like pissing, belching, farting and gobbing. Each of the action of card players is made suggestive as—
Jan Van Hogspeuw staggers to the door
And pisses at the dark. Outside, the rain
Courses in cart-ruts down the deep mud lane
Inside, Dirk Dogstoerd pours himself some more,
And holds a cinder to his clay with tongs,
Belching out smoke. Old Prijck snores with the gale,
His skull face firelit; someone behind drinks ale,
And opens mussels, and croaks scraps of songs
Towards the ham-hung rafters about love.
Dirk deals the cards. Wet century-wide trees
Clash in surrounding starlessness above
This lamplit cave, where Jan turns back and farts
Gobs at the grate, and hits the queen of hearts.

Rain, wind and fire! The secret, bestial peace!

(CP. 177)

The card-players find a secret peace in their bestiality because it links them with the elements a human body is made up of. For E.g. Jan “Pisses” and outside it rains, old Prijck “Snores” and outside the “gale” roars. Jan ‘farts’ and his action is matched by the wind in the trees. The three characters/ card-players are away from the pretentiousness of the world and bask in the primitive and the disgusting. The normless, the formless and the
grotesque are set against ‘peace’ – the feel that eludes the most.
The animal in man is juxtaposed to the human substance that
asserts the superiority of the best of God’s creation.

“The Card-players” is unique as it brings the painting to
life by making its figures life-like animate, moving and performing
actions and by giving details especially of sounds which no
painting can convey. As many as fifteen kinetic verbs in simple
present tense are used to denote action, giving an effect of
immediacy to the verbal painting.

“Money” examines the efficacy of money as a means of
attaining happiness in life. The clink of money is a call to the world
of false hopes – a dirge of contentment, a bell to happiness.
The dirge bewailing of the money is detailed as –

I listen to money singing. It’s like looking down
From long French windows at a provincial town,
The slums, the canal, the churches ornate and mad
In the evening sun. It is intensely sad.

(CP, 198)

The speaker finds money, a tool to success to consumerist
ethos for procuring the best of ‘food and sex’. Besides, it is money
that establishes social hierarchy and makes a person different from
the other in terms of position. He finds money a lure for each and
the best way to preserve happiness is to put money in one’s bank
account. But the thought that money brings transient happiness and
provides no escape from the pain and drabness of actual
circumstances fills him with a sense of no-hope. In short, the poem resounds the idea that though money may be universally worshipped God, it can never give a lasting happiness in life.

‘Show Saturday’ expresses Larkin’s feel for the beauty of human community. The ordinariness of life is set against the celebration of communal rituals. The poem is a cornucopia of events and makings like dog shows, pony shows, sheep shows, pony jumping, displays of vegetables, dairy products, cooking, handicraft and needlework. The whole place is busy with life and festivity, marked with maddening and deafening noise of the people.

With Hopkinsian expansiveness, the poet details the homes they are returning to after the show being dismantled. The show is sharing and renewal of human kinship.

To winter coming, as the dismantled show
Itself dies back into the area of work.
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)
The poem ends into a note of epiphany – a revelation based on a close observation of ever changing life and the unending flow of time. The show ends with the close of summer. The word ‘back’ brings into learning the cyclical changes of seasons and along with new festivities and new crop. The end of show is poet’s loss of joy and hope. With the show dying back into the ordinariness of everyday life, the poet is once again lost in bitter loneliness. The dispersing of the crowd is the death of solidarity death of their togetherness. Passing time adds to his agony which in general is man’s perpetual source of sorrow. The strength of “Show Saturday” is also its symphony of detail effects.

The show is peopled with the human, the animal, the inanimate and the vegetation. It also amasses beauty and ugliness, the big and the small, children and adults and also innocent and experienced. These multiple elements make an epical canvas patterning the wholeness of life. The poem has not only social but religious connotations. Words like “ancestrally” and “regenerate” connect the “show” to a Christian past. It exhibits what Whalen calls “... ability to notice and record that there is beauty in the commonplace which persists, also a dynamic and spontaneous unity which can ... preside.

*(Philip Larkin and English Poetry, 91)*

‘Going, Going’ deplores the debilitation of rural English landscape. The invasion of pervasive urbanisation and the expansion of industry has spoilt the English countryside. The advancing development with over crowding masses and suffocating pollution shudders the poet –
The crowd
Is young in the MI café;
Their kids are screaming for more –
More houses, more parking allowed
More caravan sites, more pay.

*(CP, 189)*

The title “Going, Going” means the article in question is to be handed to the last bidder – an indication that England is being auctioned away to the business tycoons who suffer from insatiable greed for money.

The despoilation of pastoral England is the repeated idea exhibiting the poet’s intense contempt for the materialistic demon –

Most things are never meant.

This won’t be, most likely: but greed’s

And garbage are too thick-strewn

To be swept up now, or invent

Excuses that make them all needs.

I just think that it will happen, soon.

*(CP, 190)*

The poem is a cry against commercialization of England and with an indirect pray to preserve the rural English scenario – the pastoral England.
'Annus Mirabilis' is the poet's question about the need of sexual liberation. Pre-marital sexual relations were first widely advertised by the best selling paperback *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* and the best playing gramophone record of the Beatles in the 1960s and 1970s:

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)*

This socio cultural newness is described by Lolette Kuby as:

... the two incidents he points out to mark the point of significant alterations in society and culture, although seemingly trivial, are actually historical milestones. During the period between the end of Chatterley ban and the Beatles’ first LP Victorian morality finally and absolutely died; pornography was legitimized; and sex arrived at the public cinema. 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
psychedelic lights ‘blow their minds’ ‘do’ their things’ and would consider the very term ‘free-love’ a laughable archaism.

(An Uncommon Poet for the Common Man: A Study of Philip Larkin’s Poetry, 169-70)

The first two stages compare and contrast sexual freedom of the present with sexual repression of the past. Earlier, marriage was essential for access to sexual experience and sex outside marriage often led to social condemnation and life-long remorse. The next stanza details the new sexual mores whereas the last is a formal closure through rounding off.

‘Annus Mirabilis’ is a compact piece of mature writing with dexterity in words and images –

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)

The title is borrowed from a poem of the same name by Dryden, published in 1667. The phrase means “Years of wonder” or “extraordinary year” whereas Dryden’s poem celebrates the year 1666- the victory of English over the Dutch, Larkin’s poem pinpoints the year 1963 – the year that marks the beginning of “Sexual liberation”.
‘The Explosion” which concludes this last volume of poems, records a tragic incident in which a group of miners coming down the lane in a happy mood to work are killed. The explosion takes place at noon and it kills the miners. A funeral service is held in the local church to mourn the death. The widowed wives of the miners strongly believe in the priest’s assurance of their husband’s resurrection whereby they see their husbands, “larger than in life” –

Larger than in life they managed—

Gold as on a coin, or walking

Somehow from the sun towards them,

One showing the eggs unbroken.

(CP, 175)

Being metamorphosed into, a luminous halo, they radiate ‘gold’ as a coin. It implies that the miners have perished physically but spiritually they have transcended to eternal glory. This visionary element in the poem links Larkin to the visionary tradition of English poetry beginning in the fourteenth century.

‘The Explosion’ modifies Larkin’s fear of death by merging it with a vision of after life and thereby making the moment of death continuous. The word ‘Explosion’ is thrice stressed to signify romantic significance – it is mentioned in the beginning, indicated in the middle and set off against this apocalyptic event, the symbol of the “Unbroken eggs” at the end acquires an assertive value.
Another bleak poem of this collection is “Vers de Societe.” Here the speaker has received an invitation to a dinner party which strikes a debate between sociability and solitariness. Being sociable demands doing a number of things which a person may not approve of as an individual. Sociability demands putting up a mask of politeness and indulging in waste of time by paying attention to nothingness. Socialising is indulging into “forks and faces” and participating in ego-bound conversations. Solitariness, on the other hand, is basking into the state of solitude in the external presences of the light, the wind, the moon and the fragrance of flowers. Yet, in the end, the speaker changes his mind and accepts sociability because –

... sitting by a lamp more often brings

Not peace, but other things

Beyond the light stand failure and remorse

Whispering Dear Warlock- Williams: Why, of course.

(CP, 182)

Although the speaker is bitingly satirical about social gatherings yet he says that it is difficult to resist as one grows older. With age, social intercourse becomes means of escaping solitary living. The speaker’s satire on partying is therefore less harsh as it would save him from the feelings of fear and failure. The final impression thereby drawn “solitude is selfish and anti-social” and is opposed to ways of human solidarity. This Larkin’s
poems speak to us and for us in their unique and representative individuality.
WORKS CITED


