CHAPTER – III

THE LESS DECEIVED: PORTRAYING ‘SAD – EYED’ REALISM
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The Less Deceived, published in 1955, is a collection of twenty nine poems of which thirteen were previously appeared in XX Poems which had been previously printed in Belfast in 1951. Two poems survive from In the Grip of Light to reappear in both XX Poems and The Less Deceived: they are ‘Going’ and ‘Wedding—Wind’. The poems in this collection show the poet Larkin as, to use Larkin’s phrase — “a poet capable of strong feeling” and of conveying strong feeling in poetry. Strong feeling and gloomy temperament are characteristic features of this book.

The collection was originally named as Various Poems, but on the objection of its publisher George Hartley, Larkin renamed it after one of the poems — ‘Deceptions’. William Shakespeare’s Hamlet could be its source: in his vicious mock-madness, Hamlet toys with Ophelia’s love for him, claiming firstly, ‘I did love you once’ and after some time, ‘I loved you not’. Ophelia’s reply was: ‘I was the more deceived’ (Hamlet, III. i.)

Larkin explained to George Hartley:

I especially didn’t want an ‘ambiguous’ title, or one that made any claims to policy or belief: this (The Less Deceived) would however give a certain amount of sad-eyed (and clear-eyed) realism, and if they [i.e. readers] did pick up the context they might grasp my fundamentally passive attitude to poetry which believes that the agent is always more deceived than the patient, because action comes from desire, and we all
know that desire comes from wanting something we haven’t got, which may not make us any happier when we have it. On the other hand suffering—well, there is positively know deception about that. No one imagines their suffering.


Though the explanation evokes in the mind immediately the poem ‘Deceptions’, but it has clear bearing on the whole collection. In line with Thomas Hardy, his poetic strategy includes a major role of personal experience of everyday life. Larkin himself said, ‘My poems are nothing if not personal’.

(Philip Larkin 1922-1985. A Tribute, 300)

Though Philip Larkin’s poems are full of personal experiences but his title-giving poem ‘Deceptions’ tells someone else’s story. It gives an account of past events he read about in Henry Mayhew’s pioneering work of interview journalism, London Labour and the London Poor published in 1851. Mayhew’s description of the young woman who was drugged, and discovered next morning that she had been ‘ruined’, and for some days was inconsolable, and cried like a child to be killed or sent back to my aunt’, is deeply moving. Larkin is sensitive to her pain. That is why Larkin says:

Even so distant, I can taste the grief,
Bitter and sharp with stalks, he made you gulp.
The sun’s occasional print, the brisk brief
Worry of wheels along the street outside
Where bridal London bows the other way,
And light, unanswerable and tall and wide,
Forbids the scar to heal and drives
Shame out of hiding. All the unhurried day
Your mind lay open like a drawer of Knives.

(Collected Poems—henceforth C.P.; ed. by
A. Thwaite, 32)

One can taste the bitterness of the girl's sorrow as "the cliché of the first line is converted into a vivid allusion to drugs in the second." [Christopher Levenson, 'Some More Practitioners', Delta, no. 8 (Spring 1956) P-27. This condition is invoked by the epithets 'bitter', 'sharp', 'stalks' and 'gulp'. As Salem K. Hassan says:

The girl's grief owes its depth and persistence to 'stalks': as her grief is the poisonous flower of the act of raping, then 'stalks' would support innumerable flowers of that kind.


Larkin's skilful manipulation of sound—structure is noticeable. The sound /g/ in 'grief' and 'gulp' gives a remarkable dimension to the girl's condition. To produce this sound, the breath is trapped and then released to go on the sound plane of the vowel /i/ and the voiceless sound /f/. Thus accumulated sorrow is conveyed through a trap—and—release device. A sense, choked with grief and thereby unable to cry is created through the word
‘gulp’ which starts and ends with stop sounds. The pathetic condition of the girl and the unsympathetic nineteenth-century London are expressly expressed in Larkin’s alliterative use of ‘W’ (‘worry of wheels’) which creates the rush of the carriage wheels ignoring the raped girl, the subject of the poem. The repetition of ‘b’ suggests the sound of the bells that booms ironically for a wedding. This community rejection heightens the girl’s suffering. The literal light of day and the metaphorical light of her understanding forbid her ‘scar to heal and drives/Shame out of hiding’. In Larkin’s another poem ‘Dry-Point’, as Seamus Heaney of the opinion that the image of light is bound up with the desire to escape identity (‘The Main of Light’ in Larkin at Sixty, 131-8.) but here the girl faces an appalling, self-tormenting exposure: ‘All the unhurried day /Your mind lay open like a drawer of knives’. (43, 32)

The message of the poem is emphatic, straightforward, and paradoxical. Larkin is compassionate; still he falls short of empathy. We are reminded of the distance:

Slums, years, have buried you.

(‘Deceptions’) This perspective shows his incapacity. Again he says:

.... I would not dare

Console you if I could. What can be said?

The consolation he can offer is dispassionate, not empathetic. The girl herself said that she was inconsolable. All of them are fundamentally isolated- “the girl in her desolation, the rapist in his
delusion, the speaker by history”. (Swarbrick, Andrew, Out of Reach, The Poetry of Philip Larkin, 59, Macmillan, 1995)

The desire has taken change of the poet, as well. Goode in his ‘The More Deceived’ (133) says ‘.....he is compelled to feel the disgusting violence of male desire and the desolation of its fulfilment’. Andrew Swarbrick says, “The poem refuses to traffic in easy sympathy and instead admits a more shameful identification with the man violently imprisoned in desire and the delusion that desire can be fulfilled.” The rapist’s sexual fulfilment is an illusion. He is more deceived than his victim.

....you were less deceived, out on that bed,
    Than he was, stumbling up the breathless stair
    To burst into fulfilment’s desolate attic

(‘Deceptions’ C.P., - 32)

Here lies Larkin’s ‘big finish’ (as he puts it) of the poem. He starts with an event (here, the rape of the girl) which develops into a general statement. This statement says more of a value than a consoling one. He uses past experience to explain a present condition; ‘Suffering is exact’. Suffering develops man’s awareness of life. Larkin found this in Hardy who ‘associated sensitivity to suffering and awareness of the causes of the pain with superior spiritual character’ (Larkin, Required Writing, -172). The girl will grow spiritually and mature by her knowledge. On the otherhand, the rapist’s fulfilment is disappointing, ‘a blundering into empty confusion’ (Timms, David; Philip Larkin, 59, Oliver & Boyd, Edinburgh, 1973). The deceptions of desire are brilliantly brought
out by means of a metaphor: ‘fulfilment’s desolate attic’... the attic where the girl was ‘ruined’.

Loss of identity, deceptions of fame are beautifully depicted in Larkin’s reflective poem ‘At Grass.’ It is a poem about oblivion, a poem about the penalties and pleasures of retirement. The retired, old racehorses are first seen in shadow...

The eye can hardly pick them out
From the cold shade they shelter in,
Till wind distresses tail and mane;
Then one crops grass, and moves about
The other seeming to look on—
And stands anonymous again....

(‘At Grass’)  

The first stanza offers the image of the existing background of the two retired horses. It is the background of the unmolesting meadows and the stable where they remain undistinguishable until the wind moves a tail or mane. Their present condition depicts the passage of time. They seem to be fading into death. We became conscious of the pathos of old age. The horses, as if, were the shades of human ambitions and triumphs. They have nothing which gave significance to their lives. Their movements are meaningless. One seems to look at the other horse with no purpose. They again get drowned to oblivion, to anonymity.

The second stanza describes the past triumphs of the horses but the mood does not change. The purity of language and the
clarity of evocation make the transition from a static present to a vigorous past smooth.

Yet fifteen years ago, perhaps
Two dozen distances sufficed
To fable them: faint afternoons
Of cups and stakes and Handicaps,
Whereby their names were artificed
To inlay faded, classic Junes...

('At Grass,')

The smallness of action is denoted in the phrase 'Two dozen distances'. The actions make fables. The word 'faint' suggests nostalgia. It reminds the hoary past indistinctly. The paintings of the old racehorses were used to hang in pubs or commercial hotels. The second stanza ironically comments on the way people attribute great meanings on their actions. The words 'fable,' 'artificed', and 'Classic' (referring to the classic races – the Derby etc) remind the creations of importance by man hint at their ephemeral nature.

Though the third stanza starts with colour and vitality of race-meeting, Larkin introduces pathos again here by making the shouts into a 'long cry'.

Silks at the start: against the sky
Numbers and parasols: outside,
Squadrons of empty cars, and heat,
And littered grass: then the long cry
Hanging unhushed till it subside
To stop-press columns on the street

('At Grass,'
The abandoned car-park, with its empty cars and littered grass suggests that the picnics just completed. The cry takes the shape of printed letters as newspapers headline the winner’s name in stop-press columns. But the sad-reality lies in the fact that newspaper fame is the most transient of all.

Larkin slows down the movement in the penultimate stanza. He uses nine syllables in the first three lines of the stanza and puts his own reflections.

Do memories plague their ears like flies?  
They shake their heads. Dusk brims the shadows.  
Summer by summer all stole away,  

("At Grass,")

In the fourth stanza, the horses are not without rewards. They are not ‘plagued’ by memories. Even they are not ‘molested’ by the meadows. They have got a kind of freedom which man cannot achieve. They are free from the burden of memory. Society cannot pressure them any more. The last line of the stanza has seven syllables.

Almanacked, their names live; they

("At Grass,")

The word ‘Almanacked’ suggests dignity and pomp with its heavy stresses but contrasts with the ending of the line. ‘They’ in the line is short and lacks emphasis. It slips into a minor key. Thus a quietistic mood starts and runs in the last stanza.
Now, ‘they/Have slipped their names and stand at ease/only
the groom, and the groom’s boy/with bridles in the evening come’. The horses are lapsing into oblivion and then death. No one stands by to measure their attainment. They use their powers and they please. At the end of the day, the groom and his boy come with bridles to take them home. C.B. Cox and A. E. Dyson in Modern Poetry-Studies in Practical Criticism (London, 1979, 141) says:

The placing of the simple word ‘come’ at the very end of the poem suggests the inevitability of the horses’ fate. As they are taken back to the stables, it is as if, as with all men, they are submitting to death.

(Modern Poetry-Studies in Practical Criticism, 141)

The poem deals with the loss of fame and power. But it finds consolation in the diminution of power and embraces anonymity rather than fame in a positive manner. ‘At Grass ‘holds a crucial position in Larkin’s writing when creativity flows from an acceptance of deprivation. In Required Writing (47) Larkin remarked:

Deprivation is for me what daffodils were for Wordsworth. (Required Writing, 47)

Larkin’s use of images is different from that of Yeats or Eliot. The horses are not, like Yeats’s Swan or Eliot’s rose, symbols that embody the poet’s unique insights into the nature of reality. C.B. Cox and A. E. Dyson puts in that book:

Larkin thinks himself not as a gifted seer, but as a man speaking to men. In his view, the poet’s
uniqueness lies mainly in his technical ability, his power to compose sequences of words that express fully and adequately the human situation. (Modern Poetry—Studies in Practical Criticism, 141)

‘At Grass’ is a fine example of technical ability. Simple words are joined together in a most distinctive, melancholy rhythm and the lines are carefully constructed to suit the sad and resigned tone.

In 1973, without identifying the poem, Larkin said in an interview—“I wrote my first good poem when I was 26”. Peter Ferguson suggested the reference is to ‘At Grass’ which grew out of a newsreel films about a retired racehorse that Larkin saw in 1948 when he was 26.[Quoted in Peter Ferguson, ‘Philip Larkin’s XX poems: The Missing Link’, in Philip Larkin 1922-1985: A Tribute, ed. George Hartley (London: The Marvell Press, 1988) P-156]. Andrew Motion said that Larkin saw the film on the 3rd January, 1950 and wrote the poem on the same day (the day given as its completion date in the Collected Poems). In spite of the confusion over dates, the publishing history of the poem shows Larkin’s attachment to it. He used the poem to conclude three volumes (XX poems, The Less Deceived, and the Fantasy Press Pamphlet published in 1954). He made the manuscript drafts available for publication in 1973 for the celebratory issue of Phoenix.

‘Wires’, written on the 4th November in 1950 is a poem about maturing. It works like an animal fable. Cattle learn as we learn. The ‘prairies’ in the poem may be the widest one. But it has wires which enclose. Old cattle know about the confinement
through experience. ‘Young steers’ always try to transgress the confinement of electric fence:

Beyond the wires
Leads them to blunder up against the wires
Whose muscle-shredding violence gives no quarter.

(From The Less Deceived, 48 in Collected Poems
ed. A. Thwaite)

The ‘young Steers’ learn their limitation through pain. Suffering matures the sufferer, though we have no feeling of the actuality of the cattle. It is an intellectual apprehension.

The poem has two stanzas of four lines each. No rhyme within each stanza is present. Surprisingly, the rhyme scheme of the second stanza is a mirror image of that of the first. The last line of the poem rhymes with the first...

The widest prairies have electric fences, (first line)

............... Electric limits to their widest senses (last line)

The next last rhymes with the second and so on. The rhyme scheme is abcd dcba. The rhymes close round gradually like the electric fence until the circle is complete.

We live in a constant alteration of promise and disillusionment, as future becomes past and hope turns to
disappointment. And this kind of despair is dealt with in ‘Next Please’. It starts with a statement of the emotional concept:

Always too eager for the future, we
Pick up bad habits of expectancy.

The idea of this poem has been expressed by means of a metaphor. We watch for the future as someone might watch for ships from a cliff (‘bluff’ in the poem):

Watching from bluff the tiny, clear,
Sparkling armada of promises draw near
How slow they are! And how much time they waste,
Refusing to make haste! (C.P. 52)

The word ‘bluff’ carries both its meanings: a promontory, but also a pretence. The ships approach like hopes... slowly, but growing clearer all the time. The poem describe the ships as glittering sailing vessels with ornamented figureheads... the objects of our desires are always more attractive to us before they are realised. After the realisation, they begin to pale. The ships reach us but do not anchor. They recede into the distance. Larkin tries to point out that our hope are never fulfilled. The fulfilment that we have is temporary.

The failure of time to fulfil its ‘promises of armada’ has been evoked by a set of poetic devices. The first one is its title. The colloquial title creates an experience –the experience of what man thinks of what is to come. Andrew Motion points out that the title
'Next, Please' is a phrase which Larkin dreaded hearing as a child whenever he reached the head of a queue at school or in a shops: at school it meant that he would shortly have to answer some question which would be difficult for him to answer because of his stammer. Thus the poem begins with a memory of that fear, though it ends with an image which is frightening not only for Larkin himself but for us also. After describing the ways in which we hope that our "sparking armada of promises" would soon unload its cargo for us, the poem starkly tells us that we are mistaken in our hope because there is only one ship, namely, death, which is seeking us. Later in his life, when Larkin fell seriously ill, the terror which he experienced represented the climax of a life time's fear of death. This tear he had expressed twenty six years earlier in the poem, 'Next, Pease'. The poem has a symbolist conclusion which confirms the death-obsessed bleakness of the five preceding stanzas. The conclusion illustrates W.B. Yeats's view that symbols intensify a poem's emotional content. Although a metaphor of ships and sailing is developed throughout the poem, it is only in the last stanza that the tone of rational argument and the structure of logical connections ("always"..."Yet"... "But"...) are exchanged for the more bizarre concentrations of symbolism proper (a ship towing silence). The effect is movingly to confirm the fact and fear of death. There is, however, a sense in which the lines contain a saving grace. In spite of their denial of any chance of actual salvation, they remove the speaker to a position outside the familiar, familiarly threatening time because they release him from the world of ordinary events. As they do so, their expression of fear and awe is mitigated by a sense of the marvellous. The lines communicate an imaginative excitement which is in conflict with
the meaning they contain. Larkin’s exploitation of symbolist techniques in this poem does not guarantee him absolute freedom from time and its ravages.

Actually, in ‘Next, Please’, two parallel lines of things are at work, namely the notion of time passing as we are waiting for the future and the armada of promises in the sea that keeps on appearing and then disappearing. This is brought out in the poem by a balanced handling of the media of metre and rhyme. Through a looser form of rhymed couplets, a sense of continuity of discourse has been maintained of that kind which the transmutation of this experience seeks for Roger Bower calls this:

an example of what becomes one of Larkin’s particular skills, the run-on not only from one stanza to the next but from one level of experience to another.

(‘Poet in Transition’, Iowa Review, no.8 {1977}, p.91)

The long line creates a feeling analogous to that sense which is associated with waiting for the long-desired ships that give rewards whereas the short lines that concludes each stanza takes the role of an outlet for the conflicting desires, within ourselves during the waiting process. According to Salem K. Hassan, “they are the spasmodic eruption of these suppressed expectations under the pressure of our impatience with the future which is ‘Refusing to make haste’, as well as our disappointment with it’. Larkin’s view—nothing is promising in life and the only certainty is death—has been established in his early years.
‘Church Going,’ written on the 28th July in 1954, is masterpiece of Philip Larkin. It is a poem in which the speaker discusses the futility and the utility of going to a church. The discussion is half-mocking and half-serious. The speaker scoffs at the church and its equipment; and he scoffs at church-going, though at the end of the poem he finds that the churches, or at least some of them, would continue to render some service to the people even after they have ceased to be place of worship. Larkin himself said:

Of course the poem is about going to church – I tried to suggest this by the title-and the union of the important stages of human life-birth, marriage and death- that going to church represents; and my own feeling that when they are dispersed in to registry office and the crematorium chapel life will become thinner in consequence.


According to the speaker in the poem, a time is coming when people would stop going to churches, because they would have lost their faith. A time is also coming when people’s disbelief in god and their superstitions would come to an end too. In spite of all these, some people would go there out of some inner compulsion or to derive some wisdom from the sight of the many graves in the churchyard.

The poem begins with a comic picture of the speaker (Undoubtedly the poet) getting off his bicycle to stop and look
round an empty church like an intruder or interloper. He was bored but impressed, vaguely reverential but conscious of his ignorance as he notices “brass and stuff/Up at the holy end.” When he enters the church, he makes short, impressionistic and slightly contemptuous assessment of its contents. He says that it is just ‘Andother church’:

...matting, seats, and stone,

And little books; sprawlings of flowers cut
For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff
Up at the holy end;

(‘Church Going’, from The Less Deceived, C P, 97)

David Timms says, “the description is deliberately inexact, telling us more about him than the church. ‘Church Going’ is like ‘I Remember, I Remember’ in being about a person’s feelings, thoughts and emotions in a particular situation, not just about what he can see and hear. The poem is not about churches directly, but about a certain man, with a certain disposition, visiting a church at a certain time” [David Timms, Philip Larkin, Oliver & Boyd, Edinburgh, 84]

The speaker moves forward to the font, looks at large Bible, and parodies the manner of the vicar or lay reader. Again he finds himself unsatisfied. He misses something without understanding what it is. He wonders about the cause of his stopping.

Yet stop I did: in fact I often do,
And always end much at a loss like this,
Wondering what to look for; (C P, 97)
He does not stop for its visible contents like shabby flowers, hymn books, the big Bible etc. They contrast with its real history: births marriages and deaths which has been 'held unspilt' for so long by the church.

The speaker is at a loss. He does not realise what will happen 'When churches fall completely out of use'. In a jocular mood he says that they may be kept on show. The alliteration of 'Parchment, plate and pyx' shows that he is phrase-making.

His moving of mood through satire to apprehensiveness is shown in the fourth stanza in the use of the words like 'Simples', 'Advised' 'Cancer' and 'a dead one'. He is no longer in humorous mood:

And what remains when disbelief has gone?
Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky
A shape less recognisable each week,
A purpose more obscure

He wonders –

.... Who will be the last, the very last, to seek
This place for what it was;

Will it be –

Some ruin-bibber, randy for antique,
Or Christmas-addict, counting on a whiff
Of gowns-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh?
Here lies the clue of the cause of his stopping. In Philip Larkin, David Timms says, "Those ‘randy, for antique’ will be looking for incidentals, objects, having no more to do with the true significance of the church than the faded flowers: they are seekers and purveyors of the ‘Culture in the abstract’ that Larkin abhors".

The last stanza is a solution to the problem Larkin poses at the beginning. The speaker stops at a church while travelling by a bicycle and goes in to look round. He mocks at what the church connotes for him. But wonders about his stopping. He finally realizes that 'a hunger to be serious', which is satisfied by the church building and what it truly represents is something that compelled him to stop.

Lawrence Lerner in Philip Larkin (Northcote House, 18) commented that "this poem carries further than any other, the demythologizing that is so central to Larkin--- the deliberate reduction of belief and ritual to social activities with no intrinsic meaning." Larkin disliked "tradition" or a common myth-kitty' as material for poetry. Yet, the demythologizer always faces the question, why do the rituals and beliefs mean so much to other people? The last part of Church Going confronts this question with honesty and eloquence:

For though I've no idea
What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth,
It pleases me to stand in silence here;
A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognised, and robed as destinies.
And that much never can be obsolete,
Since someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious.

The word 'serious' is a very crucial word. In the nineteenth century, it possessed the meaning 'religious'. This meaning fits the poem beautifully and it draws attention to the fact that a word which describes a human state of mind has shifted to having a religious meaning and it suggests that religion is human in its origins. Remythologizing comes after de-mythologizing. Remythologizing in the sense, not the claim that the beliefs were true but a kind of understanding of what has led people to devise them. The 'compulsions' lie in the fact that people have believed in God as a way of organizing their secular and human compulsions. People first feels 'hunger', the need for reverence. After that, we build a barn to satisfy it and construct beliefs to authorize the accoutrements. That need will remain for what the church is. No Christian is comfortable with this view, or comfortable with the assurance that our compulsions 'are recognised and robed as destinies', because it says that our beautiful beliefs are fictions. So the conclusion:

And gravitating with it to this ground/Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in/If only that so many dead lie round.

The words 'He once heard' suggest that he heard about how people constructed beliefs because they needed them. They
accoultred the barn. There must have been a point to it. We see the point when we are serious. The seriousness is wholly secular and pagan.

The subtle movement from the first person singular to the first person plural in the last stanza (we or our) is a characteristic device in Larkin’s poetry, and one which is predicted upon the assent of its readers. In this way, the poem is able to accommodate both a sceptical view of religious rituals (‘robed as destinies’ suggests an act of make-believe) and an assertion of the continuing value and significance of these rituals. Even so, the question of “what remains when disbelief is gone” is an indication of how radical and unsettling the agnosticism in Larkin’s poems can be. An essential aspect of the social context of this poem (Written in 1954) is the marked and general decline in religious attendance at churches after 1945 (the year of the end of World War II). At the beginning of 1950, less than ten percent of the population were church goers. The poem ‘Church Going’ embodies what may be called secular Anglicanism which concedes that belief must die but which also insists that the spirit of tradition represented by the English church can not die.

‘Arrivals, Departures’ written on 24 January, 1953 is a poem that deals with anxieties of love. The juxtaposed concept in the title is mirrored in the tripartite structure of the poem. The first stanza describes the traveller’s arrival—

This town has docks where channel boats come sidling;
Tame water lanes, tall sheds, the traveller sees
The third stanza describes the traveller’s departure-

Calling the travellers now, the outward bound

Between the first and the third stanza, the middle one acts as a meditative transition. Coming and going is the natural condition of things. Boats that arrive in the docks awake the lovers in the morning; outward bound at night. The boats’ hooting is unsettling for lovers. They can never know ‘How safely we may disregard their blowing, / Or if, this night, happiness too is going’, The future is beyond knowledge and security, even in love, illusory. As Andrew Swarbrick in his ‘out of Reach, The poetry of Philip Larkin’ (Macmillan, 47) puts – “All is transition (the setting of the poem is in a port) and the motif of travellers arriving and departing blends with the poem’s anxiety not only about the permanence of love but the illusoriness of all our expectations”. The arrivals ‘lowing in a doleful distance’ awake the lovers to ‘Horny dilemmas’ (with the sexual pun): ‘come and choose wrong, they cry, come and choose wrong’. It is echoed by the horns of the outward bound boats. The boats seem to cry to the traveller, ‘O not for long’.

For the traveller, like the couple in bed, the condition is of impermanence. Wrong choices are there to wait for us and nothing will last.

‘Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album’ written on September in 1953 has an antecedent in C. Day Lewis’s ‘The..."
Album’. The poems originate from the experience of looking at the photographs in an album. The poems are addressed to the subject of the photographs. Both the poems reflect on how the past affects us in the present. There is no other similarity. Larkin’s poem has no detailed description as there is in ‘The Album’. There is no attempt to imitate the photograph in words. Larkin recreates the experience of looking at the photographs in front of the lady. (The lady was Winifred Arnot, one of Larkin’s friends). Constant shifting of tone and mood in the poem proves that it is a dramatic poem. The experience actively shapes the poet’s mood here. The album, through which Larkin looks, shows Winifred in various poses, and at the various stages of her life – childhood, girlhood, youth, and maturity and the photographs show her on different occasions in the course of her life.

In the first stanza, the speaker is light. He jokes with the lady and protests in the manner of the courtly lover. He says that the photographs are:

Too much confectionery, too rich:
I choke on such nutritious images.

(\(C_P, T1\))

The picture of the girl in a trilby hat shakes the speaker’s self-control and he comments, in a sexual innuendo- ‘Faintly disturbing, that, in several ways.’ Again his disguised envy comes out when the notices some young men in certain of the photos-

Not quite your class, I’d say, dear on the whole.

(\(C_P, T1\))

There is an echo in ‘sweet girl graduate’ from Tennyson’s ‘medley’, ‘The Princes’, where Lilia, a vociferous and pretty supporter of women’s emancipation, describes the college she
would establish if she is given the chance. A man with patronising and indulgent bent of mind lightly replies that with ‘sweet girl graduate in their golden hair’ academic processions might turn to fashion parades. Addressing the art as muse, Larkin apostrophises photography:

But O, photography! as no art is,
Faithful and disappointing!

Photography is disappointing because it is faithful. Photograph holds past moment with all its imperfections and faults:

And will not censor blemishes
Like washing- lines, and Hall’s – Distemper boards.

But the prosaic actuality and the elevated language of the address do not match and it seems to pull the speaker up short. David Timms says that “As if taken by surprise, he stops turning the pages of the album, and reflects that the photographs are really affecting. He asks why. Is it because of their very actuality… ‘Or is it just the past?’ By means of the question, and the ‘Yes, true,’ in the next stanza, the movement of the speaker’s mind recreated”.

Now the poem holds a constant and serious tone. It becomes a serious reflection on the past’s effect on present. By being simply past, it is affecting. There is mortality in all actions and their memories. Though ‘Life is slow dying’, as Larkin
viewed, but these photographs would perpetually remind that time is passing constantly:

Those flowers, that gate,
These misty parks and motors lacerate
Simply by being over; (c,p, ?2)

Those images of the past are moving because they generate a kind of grief without questioning it. Things that engage our emotions in the present have some kind of consequences. But past is unreachable and 'no one now can share'. He can 'condense'... a past no one now can share.

No matter whose your future. (c,p, ?2)

The album holds her like a heaven and now he has the feeling that she is becoming smaller but more distinct with the passing of the years.

'I Remember, I Remember', written on the 8th January, 1954, works in a similar way to 'Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album'. Besides, the poem illustrates his superb craftsmanship.

'I Remember, I Remember' has a literary antecedent including their different experiences. Hood's poem of the same name contrasts an idyllic world of childhood with a miserable maturity. In Hood's childhood, there always prevailed summer; the sun always shone, though not fiercely. There was a breeze to prevent the heat to become oppressive. Larkin's sentimentality lurks in making his childhood seem so dismal. We must keep in mind in this regard that Larkin's poem is not about his childhood.
in the same sense as Hood’s is. Larkin’s poem is about just remembering. Here, the poem is about the experience of looking back on a particular occasion. There is no evocation of what happened. Even there is no hint at what his childhood home looked like. The poet remembers what did not happen during his childhood at the moment when the train, in which he was travelling, takes a diversion and stops at Coventry, his birth-place.

We stopped, and, watching man with number-plate
Sprint down the platform to familiar gates,
‘Why, Coventry!’ I exclaimed. ‘I was born here’.

(I Remember, I Remember) C P, 81)

His childhood had no unusual formative incidents which could be usually found in autobiographies or autobiographical novels. With detest, he says in the poem about his birth-place:

... Only where my childhood was unspent.

(C P, 81)

His friend with whom Larkin is travelling takes the note of bitterness in his face when he thinks of his ‘unspent’ childhood:

You look as if you wished the place in Hell,
My friend said, ‘judging from your face’. ‘Oh well,
‘Nothing, like something, happens anywhere’.

(C P, 82)

With its felicitous phrasing and honesty, the last line of the poem shows its immense power. David Timms in his Philip Larkin (P-80) says:
How often have we heard someone derides his birth-place? Larkin will not flatter himself by settling the shortcomings of his childhood on the place. Where it was spent.

(Philip Larkin, 80)

The final line completes a complex, large scale of rhyme scheme. It breaks across the seven-line stanzas. By rhyme, the poem is in four units. Each unit has three rhymes... abccbaabc. By joining stanza to stanza, the rhyme scheme unifies the poem. No point is there where the end of a rhyme unit and the end of a stanza coincide.

Larkin used the tone of the poem as straightforwardly conversational. He can report convincing dialogue. Wordsworth’s theory is present in Larkin’s poem. In his preface to Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth argued for a poetic diction which should be drawn from the spoken language of the day.

Larkin achieves an idiom which is living and contemporary. Last line proves it marvellously without lapsing into flatness.

Larkin’s theme of the problem of time compels him to resort to alternatives rather than final solutions. The solidity and convincing nature of arguments give strength to the poems of this book. Where ‘Next Please’ is constructed round a descriptive meditation, ‘Toads’ is an example of meditative dialogue. The speaker, in the vein of argument, complains against ‘toad work’ as an obvious attempt ‘at self-persuasion’:

Why should I let the toad work
Squat on my life?
Can’t I use my wit as a pitch fork
And drive the brute off?

(‘Toads’, C P, 89)

This complaint refers to a recurrent theme in Larkin; the gap between desire and reality; between dream and actual state of affairs.

The external need to work arises from one’s desire to preserve one’s life; but one’s conscience also urges one to work. The poet would like to lead an idle life and to enjoy his leisure; but he cannot adopt this course of life because work brings money, and because money is essential for living. Still he would like to follow the example of many people who do not perform any kind of labour, and who yet manage to preserve their lives:

Lots of folk live up lanes
With fires in a bucket,
Eat windfalls and tinned sardines---
They seem to like it.

(‘Toads’ C P, 89)

But there is another consideration. Inside the poet , dwells another urge : that is the urge to work :

For something sufficiently toad-like
Squats in me, too;

(‘Toads’, C P, 89)
Janice Rossen, in his *Philip Larkin: His Life's Work* says that this poem is concerned with the relationship between the burden of work and the "something sufficiently toad-like" which lurks in the poet himself.

The conflict of selves within the individual does not arrive at a clear-cut-solution to his predicament. A semi-notion that working and not working are more or less the same, prevails:

I don’t say, one bodies the other
One’s spiritual truth;
But I do say it’s hard to lose either,
When you have both.

("Toads", *CP*, 90)

The immorality of idleness makes it hard for him to choose either. This is an example of the poetry of compromise and reconciliation with time and life.

This poem has an autobiographical touch because Larkin had to work very hard as a university librarian. He often used to experience moods of depression on account of the heavy burden of his official duties. At the same time, he knew that he could not live as an idler or as a parasite. His conscience urged him to continue working. Larkin choose to settle to what he has.

"Poetry of Departures" suggests that the recognition of our miseries in life does not necessarily make a sure solution for them:

We all hate home
And having to be there:
I detest my room,
Its specially-chosen junk
The good books, the good bed,
And my life, in perfect order:
So to hear it said

*He walked out on the whole crowd*
Leaves me flushed and stirred,
Like then *she undid her dress*
Or *take that you bastard;*
Surely I can, if he did?

(‘Poetry of Departures’, *C.P.* 85)

But he will never cut-and-run because that will be ... artificial. People’s disappointment with their life-style is conveyed through the blend of colloquial language and argumentative discourse. The uncertainty of life brings about impotence. As the time passes, choices become even harder and then impossible at that obscure age that claims the end of choice. The theme of time and time passing is not ostensible but real. Francis Berry in his *Poet’s Grammar: Person, Time and Mood in Poetry* (London 1958, 40) says:

It is of all themes the one likely to force a writer’s uneasy and disturbing contemplation —necessarily uneasy and disturbing—of past, present and future; of a present time which will become the
past, of a Future which will become first Present
and then Past.

(From Grammar: Person, Time and Mood
in Poetry, 40)

Larkin's so-called love-poems are often disappointed
reflections on failure, impotence and helplessness. Although the
sexual act is generally believed to bring about fulfillment and
relief, a sexual act in Larkin's poems is deceptive, and its promise
proves to be empty or false. In the poem 'Places, Loved Ones', for
instance, the speaker admits with a mixture of disappointment and
relief:

Nor met that special one
Who has an instant claim
On everything I own.

('Places, Loved Ones', C.P., 99)

Similarly, the speaker in the poem 'If, My Darling' insists
upon his own realistic judgement of life's deficiencies, and
carefully avoids any idealization.

Larkin's 'Dry-Point' deals with the subject matter of sexual
desire. Here the physical experience is presented as struggle
accompanied by fear and panic; and the aftermath is one of
disappointment and disillusionment.

The poem 'Myxomatosis' is an animal fable. It was prompted
by the out break of a rabbit disease in certain parts of Britain in
1953. This poem has its allegorical significance. Here the rabbit
asks—
What trap is this? Where were its teeth concealed?

('Myxomatosis', CP, 100)

The reflections of the speaker in this poem suggest that poem is seeking to establish a parallel between the fate of the diseased animal and a certain aspect of human life. The words ‘caught’, ‘trap’, and ‘jaws’ suggest that the common experience being described is one of suffering and helplessness. The final statement records a profoundly sceptical outlook through its allegorical implication:

You may have thought things would come right again
If you could only keep quite still and wait.

('Myxomatosis', CP, 100)

The war had inflicted severe damages on traditional religious ceremonies and rituals in Britain, and Larkin's poems of the immediate post-war period express an uneasy agnosticism. The poem ‘Going’ is about death, but it also raises existential problems and constitutes, in fact, an ontological riddle. It offers a negative image of being.

Larkin's agnostic attitude even shaped his attitude to sexual relationships. The poem ‘Wedding-Wind’ is a clear example of this. The Wedding-night is depicted in the poem as a time of unique happiness; but the anxious questions of the second stanza of the poem imply a certain degree of doubt about whether such happiness
can endure. The happiness of the newly-married woman offers hope, but the poem ends with a question mark.

Larkin’s most lively picture of vicissitude and transience of life occurs in ‘Coming’. It celebrates time passing to make despair beautiful. The tale of rebirth is told by nature in the death of winter. It is told by the light bathing the ‘Forehead of houses’ and by the ‘fresh-peeled voice’ of a thrush ‘In the deep bare garden’, singing:

It will be spring soon,
It will be spring soon...
And I, whose childhood
Is a forgotten boredom,
Feel like a child
Who comes on a scene
Of adult reconciling,
And can understand nothing...

(‘Coming’, C.P. 33)

The context of the child and his feelings with quarrelling adults is not nostalgic because Larkin’s view of childhood is not romantic. It hints at the hostility of the world we inhabit. It also shows our ignorance of the way things change in life in spite of our awareness of their change. This kind of awareness reduces the world to mere shadows of reality and the rebirth in nature to an illusion because they are connected to the inevitability of change and decay.
Finally, the book shows a strong impulse to reject the conventional view of the personal past as a time of happiness. Larkin accepts the real world of everyday life as the land where his poetry is rooted. Preoccupation with death which increases with the passing years is also noticeable. In Required Writing (279), Larkin said:

What one looks for in any writer of stature: the individual note or theme by and with which he or she will henceforth be identified.

(Required Writing, 279)

The poems have the tone of pessimism and seriousness. But they are occasionally balanced by ironic humour. We sense a formal truthfulness and a peculiar profundity of feelings of what he misses in life. Fulfilment in this sinister world is deception. This is conveyed by the clarity of expression and the mastery of rhythmic organisation. That is why he wrote to George Hartley about giving the title to this volume that “The Less Deceived would however give a certain amount of sad-eyed (and clear-eyed) realism.” (Philip Larkin 1922-1985: A Tribute, P-299)

As a matter of fact, Larkin showed in The Less Deceived that he wrote movingly and memorably about aspects of life which were of great importance to his readers as well as to himself. He was a witty poet with immense verbal felicity, subtle modulations of tone, speaking a language with the idiom we speak.
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